



ANGLO-TIBETAN TRADE: Transaction of wool from 1904- 1947

Speaker: Ms. Diki Sherpa

Chair: Mr. Ashok K. Kantha

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The speaker basically delved into the Anglo-Tibetan Trade relation from 1904-1947 through Eastern Himalayas, where focus remains on Tibetan wool. The presentation was divided into two parts – in the first part political imperatives of the trade was discussed whereas in the second the economic importance of trade.

The speaker argued that the commerce across the Himalayas was resisted and nurtured by British Government simultaneously and alternatively. As the Commerce across the Himalayas had political imperatives, British Govt. was not very optimistic about this trade as such and it had not been of a major significance to the economy of British India and categorized it as “political purchase”. However, they nurtured it not only due to the fact that it allowed them to enjoy undue privileges in the region. But this trade became absolute monopoly of British govt. and in later years it helped them to earn trade revenues in American dollars.

The British policy towards Tibet received immense boost during the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon. The main part of Curzon's “Forward Policy” of Tibet constituted establishing direct communication with Tibet. With the shifting Geo-Politics of “Great Game” at this time, the Tibet policy received further importance. At the same time, the waning Manchu power over Tibet and China’s inability to exercise any form of restraint over Tibet policy prompted the urgency to define British India’s northern borders hence young husband’s expedition was led

to Tibet in 1904. The Lhasa convention that was contracted thereafter allowed establishment of British Trade Agency in Chumbi Valley.

On why wool became dominant imported commodity to British India, Speaker argued the sheer shortage of wool suitable garment in British India and world war created the situation for wool import. The raw wool arrived from Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa by sea routes, the same imports from Tibet and Afghanistan reached mills in Punjab and the United Province by land routes. During war period British Govt. put an embargo and heavily monopolised Tibetan wool with fixed rate at Kalimpong market. On the contrary, during the early years of WWII, the high American prices for wool led British India to keep only Tibetan wool open for trade. In 1939, the price of wool at Kalimpong increased from Rupees 30 to 55 per maund and to rupees 60 later on. The price was double the amount of British, which was just rupees 34. The export of wool during the year from 1st March 1936 to 28th February 1937 amounted to 1,15,073 maunds as against 96,973 maunds of the previous year. In 1939, practically the entire clip of white wool was dispatched to America for carpet manufacture, but the demand for light and dark grey wool was very meager. Hence, an embargo was placed only on grey and black which accounted 20 percent of wool (1,60,000 blankets) and the 80 percent white was still subject to export to America. However, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor (1942) and America's entry into the war transformed the prevailing situation and the wool market slumped.

Afterwards, British India purchased all the Tibetan wool primarily to keep the wool market in Kalimpong and to prevent the consequences. If the market in Kalimpong slumps, consequences can be first, Tibetan merchants might not import wool into Kalimpong as there will be no market. Unless there is a market for wool, trade with Tibet is bound to collapse and if wool is not saleable at Kalimpong, the grave danger is it might seek a market in western China. Second, if the Chinese markets were to become well established the results both commercial and political would be serious. However, this eventually happened after the transference of power in India.

Report prepared by Diki Sherpa, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Diki Sherpa is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi. She has recently completed her MPhil from the Department of History, University of Delhi. Her

MPhil topic was titled '*India-Tibet trade in the first-half of twentieth century*'. She completed her post-graduation from the Department of History, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

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