

# Warren Hastings at the Himalayan Crossroads: Political and Economic Shifts

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explains how the colonial intervention in the Eastern Himalayas was initiated in the late eighteenth century through British Missions, which sought to renew the ancient Indian commercial ties with the Himalayan kingdom in its northern frontiers. Official missions were not only commercial, but also diplomatic and military. Such missions were deployed to Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim to identify political situation and ascertain prospects for commercial ventures. British Missions were organized which lasted for about one hundred and thirty years starting from George Bogle in 1774 to Francis Younghusband in 1904. The initiation of these missions were sanctioned under the stewardship of Lord Warren Hastings Governor of the Presidency of Fort William (Bengal, 1772) and later the Governor General of Bengal (1774-1785) which led to a series of events ultimately resulting in the socio-political and economic change of seismic proportion. The decisions made by Hastings propelled the Imperial engine in the highlands of the Himalayas.

**Keywords:** Warren Hastings, East India Company, Regulating Act 1773, British Mission, Tibet Trade, Eastern Himalayas.

## **Introduction:**

The eighteenth century ushered the onset of the industrial revolution in England, which brought great changes to its economic life. The boom in technology and scientific invention saw the utilization of power and increase of production. The inventions of Hargreaves, Arkwright, Crompton, John Kay, Wyatt, Hawksley and Wright and others revolutionized the English textile and steel industries and brought about a phenomenal increase in its volume of production. All these great inventions and technology on one hand, increased production, but on the other hand also necessitated the need for raw materials and markets for their finished products. The solution lay in the colonies and the Indian subcontinent could provide them both. However, the English East India Company in Bengal was not doing so well in terms of finance. After 1765, the disastrous Dual System of governance in Bengal was exacting a heavy toll on the Company and to add to it, the Bengal famine of 1770 precipitated the crisis. The Company soon realized that Bengal had become a desolate province and its treasury on the verge of bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup>

## **I**

After 1765, the Company was no longer an international trading firm dealing with silks and spices, it had transformed into an aggressive colonial power. In less than forty years, it had managed to garner 200,000

men that was twice the size of the British army. This helped to establish the East India Company's paramountcy over the entire subcontinent.<sup>2</sup>

It was the Great Bengal Famine of 1770, which necessitated a search for a new commercial venture in the hitherto unexplored region of the Eastern Himalayas. The famine had caused massive fiscal loss, especially the export of grain and cotton industry, which was the plinth of Bengal's economy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Court of Directors had ordered an investigation on the possibility of northern trade for which explorers were dispatched to the Himalayan kingdom.<sup>4</sup> It was the rising Gurkha power in the eighteenth century which had blocked all the trading routes of Nepal with the adjoining kingdoms especially Tibet. Seeing this, the East India Company sought alternative course of action to establish commercial relations sometimes through a policy of conciliation and sometimes through belligerence.

The Regulating Act of 1773 was the British Parliament's first major legislative intervention to control the administration of the East India Company (EIC) in India. Hastings initially saw the Act as restricting his authority due to the council's interference. However, he adapted by using diplomacy, military strength, and trade alliances to expand British influence. He believed that British control was necessary to bring stability to India while securing economic benefits for Britain. His policies reflected pragmatic expansionism, balancing commerce with military assertion. The Act formalized British diplomatic strategies, evident in Hastings' efforts to establish commercial ties with Bhutan, Tibet, and Nepal to counterbalance French and Indian powers. Hastings, despite opposition from his council, sought to increase the militarization of the East India Company and continued an aggressive policy towards the Eastern Himalayas, Mysore, and Marathas, expanding British influence.<sup>5</sup>

## II

Warren Hastings (1732–1818) was the first Governor-General of Bengal (1772–1785) and a pivotal figure in the consolidation of British rule in India. He was definitely an architect of British Colonial expansion in the Indian subcontinent. His tenure marked the transformation of the East India Company from a mercantile enterprise to an aggressive colonial power. Hastings played a crucial role in administrative, judicial, and economic reforms, laying the foundation for British governance in India. Hastings joined the East India Company at age 17 as a clerk and steadily rose through its ranks. As Governor of Bengal, he undertook key administrative measures, including revenue reorganization and judicial reforms. Hastings viewed British expansion as both a commercial necessity and a civilizational mission. Unlike later British administrators who adopted a more overtly exploitative stance, Hastings sought to blend Indian traditions with British governance. However, he did not hesitate to use military force and strategic alliances to further British economic and political interests. Hastings' Himalayan ambition was instrumental in launching British missions to the Eastern Himalayas, particularly Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, and Sikkim. His primary goal was to establish commercial relations and expand British influence. The 1774 mission led by George Bogle to Tibet under Hastings' directive aimed at securing trade routes and fostering diplomatic ties with the Panchen Lama. This marked the beginning of British geopolitical interest in the Himalayan region.<sup>6</sup>

A.M Davies, the biographer of Lord Warren Hastings, lamented for the fact that Tibet even by mid Eighteenth century was unknown and unexplored by the Englishmen.<sup>7</sup> A host of explorers with secular and non-secular intent challenged this statement of Davies in the coming years.

The Court of Directors in 10<sup>th</sup> April 1771, instructed Lord Warren Hastings, the Governor of Fort William in Bengal Presidency to enquire into the possibilities of maximizing the “vend of the company's

staples and other European commodities by sending proper personages to reside at Rangpore and to explore the interior parts of Bhutan, Assam and other adjacent countries.”<sup>8</sup>

Following this suit, the Bengal Government instructed the President of the Comptrolling Committee of Commerce to enquire into the subject and the committee referred the Court’s letter to Charles Purling, the Collector of Rangpur. He was instructed to prepare a report that would suggest measures through which British goods could be promoted in the kingdom of the Eastern Himalayas. Purling made some enquiries and came up with the conclusion that the region did not offer feasibility for a thriving trade, as they did not have a regulated commerce. He asserted that the locals were not accustomed to trade with foreigners, and their transaction was mostly local and cross border. They bartered for articles, which was detrimental to the Company.<sup>9</sup>

Lord Warren Hasting, the Governor General of Bengal despite of the Purling’s report, decided to take effective steps for the establishment of commercial contact with Bhutan and Tibet. He decided to pursue a policy of leniency and patience towards the Himalayan countries in order to achieve his goal of renewing the Eastern Himalayan trade. The letter which he had received from Palden Yeshe (the Third Panchen Lama)<sup>10</sup> after the defeat of the Druk Desi<sup>11</sup> Shidariva/Sonam Lhundup in the Battle of Cooch Behar (1772-1774), the East India Company was provide with an opportunity to send a mission to Tibet.<sup>12</sup> In his minute dated 9<sup>th</sup> May 1774, Hastings remarked:

A Treaty with Tibet has been a favourite object with our masters. They have repeatedly recommended the establishment of an intercourse with that country. The present juncture is the most favourable for pursuing these views; the letter from the Lama invites us to friendship and communication. The occasion is too favourable for the attempt to be neglected.<sup>13</sup>

Warren Hastings sought to renew the old association between Tibet and Bengal by establishing friendly commercial relationship so it may access to Central Asia via Tibet.<sup>14</sup> The first instance of official contact of the East India Company with the kingdom of the Eastern Himalayas came in 1772 when the Deb Raja of Bhutan defeated King Khagendra Naryan of Cooch Behar.

Commemorating the feat of British enterprise one hundred and thirty three years later Sir Francis Younghusband wrote:

In the year 1772, they [Bhutanese] descended into the plains of Bengal and overran Kuch Behar, carried off the Raja as a prisoner, seized his country and offered such a menace to the British province of Bengal, now only separated from them by a small stream, that when the people of Kuch Behar asked the British Governor for help he granted their request, and resolved to drive the mountaineers back to their fastness.<sup>15</sup>

Nazir Deo (commander of troops) of Cooch Behar later re-attacked Bhutan and subsequently won the battle with the help of the British soldiers. Bhutanese troops were being defeated on every angle at Chichattakotta to Buxa *Duar*.<sup>16</sup> The Bhutanese king now sought help from Tibet and the intervention came with a letter of mediation from Panchen Lama of Tibet to Warren Hastings. He sent two emissaries with a letter of mediation asking the Company Government to stop the assault. Ultimately, an agreement was struck where treaty was concluded between the Deb Raja of Bhutan and the East India Company on April 1774. Based on this mediation, the English agreed to relinquish all the lands, which belonged to the Deb Raja before the commencement of the war with the Raja of Cooch Behar. Thus, the area in North Bengal under British was extended up to the *Duars* in the North-east India.<sup>17</sup>

This event necessitated urgent consideration to undertake new policy by the East India Company that subsequently brought about a complete change in the region’s geo political situation. The Directors of

the Company in London thought to explore the possibility of trade with the Himalayan kingdom. The officials of the company in Calcutta were directed from London to obtain all relevant information on the question whether trade could be opened with these Himalayan States.<sup>18</sup>

The second development came about when the Directors of the Company in London suggested in 1768, to the Governor in Bengal to investigate the possibility of entering into China through Tibet.<sup>19</sup> It was this decision that led the company to think of sending James Logan, a surgeon in the Company's service towards the end of 1769 to Nepal. Logan was instructed to establish trade links with Tibet and the Western province in China by way of Nepal.<sup>20</sup> The possibility of entering into China through Tibet had prospect of several additional advantages.

Firstly, the establishment of this trade with Tibet would no longer necessitate the export of gold from England to conduct the Chinese trade. As the Indian articles had a remarkable demand in China, the profit generated from the trade would in turn substitute the need for gold.

Secondly, development of a good relation between the British and Panchen Lama of Tibet may help the British enter into China's internal and foreign market by overland route through Tibet. Thirdly, the British aspiration for the cultivation of tea plantation in India was also supplemented by this. It could close down the necessity of importing tea from China. As Western China, contiguous to Tibet, was famous for the cultivation of tea plants where from the seeds could easily be brought to India through Tibet.

Therefore, even before Warren Hastings appointment as the Governor General of Bengal in April 1772, the Company had already thought of establishing diplomatic and commercial relations with Tibet. Hastings desire of opening up the doors of Tibet was intensified by some contemporaneous events that took place in the region.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed earlier the Gorkha conquest of the Kathmandu Valley had closed down the traditional Nepal-Tibet trade, thus sealing off any possibility of India-Tibet trade via Nepal. This forced the Court of Directors to suggest the Company officials in Bengal for the exploration of Assam and Bengal that might open up fresh channel for entrance into Tibet. The Anglo-Bhutan treaty of 1772 created a congenial atmosphere for this venture. Soon this venture proved futile when hostilities were renewed between Bhutan and the English East India Company.<sup>22</sup>

The interference of the Bhutanese Deb Raja Zhidar/Kunga Rinchen, in the internal matters of Cooch Behar forced the royal family to flee. On the request of Khagendra Narayan who was the Nazir Deo, the English East India Company dispatched four companies of soldiers in 1773, for the defence of Cooch Behar under Captain Jones and also to help the Cooch Behar king retrieve the throne. The defeat of Bhutan at the hands of the English East India Company had a definitive statement that the English East India Company was here to stay with a strong political presence. This alarmed the Gurkha King of Nepal as well as Panchen Lama of Tibet who were now contemplating a peaceful solution to the escalating tension in the Eastern Himalayas.<sup>23</sup>

The primary consideration of the East India Company was trade and it was apparently clear to the Company that at least one of the commercial possibilities of Tibet was its borax production since 1644. The Company's attempt to penetrate Tibet had its unique character, the attempts were not only confined amongst the Englishmen, some Indians were also sent when the Company's authority felt it necessary. These English missions maintained diaries, memoirs and journals of the author's day-to-day experience thus making its worth to the posterity. The Servants of the Company at Calcutta were directed from

London on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1768 to obtain all relevant information on the question whether trade could be opened with the Himalayan States.

In the interval between the receipt of the Panchen Lama's letter and the sending of his reply, Warren Hastings took the opportunity to learn more about Tibet from the two men who had come to Calcutta from Tashi lhunpo as the Panchen Lama's messengers. One was a native Tibetan called Pema, while the other was a Hindu Gossain pilgrim named Purangir. Both these men were of great acumen and vast information, and Hastings learned much from them. Warren Hastings was presented with gifts that they had brought from Panchen Lama. These included gilded Russian leather stamped with Czar's double-headed eagle, and Chinese silk (which suggested external commerce) small ingots of gold and silver, purses of gold dust and bags of musk which suggested internal wealth; and Tibetan woollen cloth which together with the well-made chests in which the gifts had come, indicating a knowledge of arts and industries.<sup>24</sup> After seeing these things, Hastings was very much impressed with the prosperity and abundance and then decided to send an Englishmen to Tibet on "justifiable plea of paying a proper tribute of respect in return for the advances which had been made by the Lama."<sup>25</sup>

The Council was convinced by the report of the Governor General of Bengal who pointed out that Tibet offered an excellent field of commerce where gold and silver were the medium of commerce. The pre-existing trade had its centre in Tibet with its neighbouring kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in the Eastern Himalayan region.<sup>26</sup>

However, both Tibet and China actively resisted the British efforts to foster Indo-Tibetan trade. Although Anglo-Chinese talk was going on during the mid-eighteenth century for British access to China's internal trade but it was not successful. As the entry of the English East India Company into the free trade of China by sea was impossible, the Company resolved to explore the route to China through Tibet. A land route to China through Tibet in the exclusive possession of the Company had obvious advantage. Tibet bought more Indian goods than it sold, and the payment was made in gold and silver. Secondly, this would replenish the demand of gold and silver in the China trade and lastly, the route would serve as a way round the restriction of Canton.

### **Conclusion:**

The English East India Company fuelled by its mercantile insatiability and its imperialistic ambition decided to organize a British Official Mission led by George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton, a physician. The Council gave its consent to depute George Bogle,<sup>27</sup> on an embassy to Tibet. He was instructed to proceed via Bhutan (as per the existing route of commerce between Tibet and India, the best was through Bhutan). He learnt that from Nepal to Bhutan it was eight days journey and two of those he had to pass over the mountains, which were very high. The road through Morung was far; so the Buxa *Duar* road was the most preferable to him.<sup>28</sup> Although the main intention of the Company was to secure access and commercial information from the source that was Tibet, its actual official journey began from Bhutan.

The foregoing explains that, the growing demands of the British industries and the dwindling economy of Bengal was a serious concern to the Court of Directors since 1771, which now aspired to extend its colonial market towards its northern borders. It was Warren Hastings who took initiative to renew the old Tibet-Bengal relation that had ceased since the Islamic conquest in the tenth century. To achieve this end British Official Missions were deployed from 1774 to ascertain the prospect of trade, to understand the



geography of the region and its internal politics. This strategy later became a powerful weapon which checked Russian imperialist advancement in Central Asia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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8. File No. 1, Public Consultation, Political Department. A, Government of Bengal, Calcutta, December 1771, National Archives of India (NAI).
9. Shantiswarup Gupta. op. cit. p. 40
10. The Panchen Lama is an important institution of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism with spiritual authority second only to the Dalai Lama. His seat is at the Tashi lhunpo monastery located in Shigatse city one of the important administrative divisions in Tibet. Panchen is an abbreviation of Pandita and Chenpo meaning Great Scholar. The lineage of the Panchen Lama began with Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzen, tutor of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama who received the title Panchen Bogd from Altan Khan and the Dalai Lama in 1645. Traditionally the Panchen Lama is the head of the Tashi lhunpo Monastery and held religious and secular power over the Tsang region centered in Shigatse, independent of the Ganden Podrang authority led by Dalai Lama. From the name of the Tashi lhunpo monastery, the Europeans referred to the Panchen Lama as the Tashi Lama sometimes spelt as Tesho-Lama or even Teshu- Lama.
11. The Druk Desi or the King of Bhutan, was also known as the Deb Raja. It was a title to the secular (administrative) rulers of Bhutan under the Dual system of Governance during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Under this system, the authority was divided into secular and religious administration both unified under the nominal authority of Zhabdrung Rimpochi.
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16. The Duars derived from Sanskrit word Duar meaning doors. There are 18 entry points between the hills of Bhutan and the plains of India. The Duars in India politically constitute the plains of Darjeeling district, the whole of Jalpaiguri district, Alipur district and the Upper region of Cooch Behar district in West Bengal and the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Golpara and Bongaigaon in Assam.
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23. George Bogle. EUR. MSS.E/226 Hamilton to Hastings, Government of India, 30 May, 1776. (I.O.L.),London.
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25. Captain Samuel Turner. "An Account of an Embassy to the Court of Teshoo Lama in Tibet." London: Trubner and Co. Ludgate Hill, 1800. p. xiii.
26. Shantiswarup Gupta. op.cit. p. 23
27. George Bogle was a Scottish, born on 1746. He was educated at Haddington, Glasgow and Edinburg University. He served as a clerk in a counting house for 4 years. Later he entered the East India Company Service in 1769 where he served as an Assistant to the Select Committee and Assistant Secretary to the Board of Revenue. He became a Registrar to the Sadar Dewani Adalat and Secretary to the Select Committee. He was appointed as an envoy to Panchen Lama in 1774. After his return from Tibet he became Commissioner of Law Suits. He was once again appointed as an envoy to Tibet on April 19, 1779 and became a member of the Committee of Revenue at Calcutta in 1781. He died on April 3, 1781 as a result of a fatal illness... For more details see Clement Markham, ed. Narratives of the mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa. London: Trubner and Co. Ludgate Hill, 1876
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