

Nepalese Thakali at Gyantse (1905-1938)

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Nepal and Tibet have a chequered history of relations extending back to several centuries. Till the opening of the present century, Tibet the "Roof of the World", was virtually a 'Forbidden Land' or 'Land of Mystery' for the outside world. But the case was entirely different with regard to Nepal as the two countries were closely connected due to geographical proximity. It is generally assumed that Nepal had some sort of Socio-religious and economic connection with Tibet even before the latter was recognized as a political power.¹ However, the formal relations between the two countries was inaugurated only in the early part of the seventh century. Nepal-Tibet relation entered into a new phase during the mid-seventeenth century when a

commercial treaty was signed between the two nations. The Kathmandu King, Pratap Malla, had compelled Tibet to sign this dictated treaty after waging a war against her.² The treaty in many ways facilitated Kathmandu to extend its influence, specially the commercial one, in the land of the Lamas. The Newari merchant community was permitted to establish thirty-two trading marts at Tibet and the treaty empowered the Kathmandu King to station his agent (Naya) in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. The treaty further forced Tibet to exempt all kinds of duties on commercial goods of the Newari traders. The greatest achievement of this treaty was that Nepal obtained the right to mint coins for Tibet.³ The treaty was proved very beneficial to Nepal because the

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- 1) Very little is known of the early history of Tibet. According to the Chinese records during the period of Chou dynasty (1122-256 B. C.) the Tibetan plateau was inhabited by the barbarian tribes called Ch'iang. At the beginning of the seventh century a strong tribal leader Lung tsen emerged in Tibet. He conquered other tribes and founded a Kingdom. After his death song tsen Gampo ascended the throne. Gregorio F. Zaide, *History of the Asian Nations*, Phillipinesa, National Book Store : 1969, pp. 170-74.
 - 2) Chitaranjan Nepali, "Nepal Ra Tibet Ko Sambandha : *Pragati*, No. 10 (2014 B. S.) pp. 105-6.
 - 3) *Ibid.*

Newari merchants not only virtually monopolised the bulky trade between India and Tibet but also provided Kathmandu a huge profit by minting the coins. As time rolled on, other two principalities of the Kathmandu valley, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur were also involved in the lucrative trade. In this way Nepalese trade gained momentum in Tibet resulting the settlements of the Newari traders in the different parts of the plateau. It is said the government started a tradition of appointing *Thakali* in the various parts of the commercial centre. The government used to nominate one of the merchants as *Thakali* with a view to protect and promote the commercial interest in Tibet. After the unification of Nepal the same situation continued as the Shah Kings did not like to change it. Nepal got upper hand in the Tibetan affairs through the treaty of 1789, which, however, proved short lived. Nepal had to sign a humiliating treaty with China in 1792 and had to loose the minting rights. However, the Nepalese trader's commercial dominance was not affected adversely.

The 1856 treaty of Thapathali once again guaranteed the Nepalese right of extra-territoriality⁴ and the Nepalese traders could utilise Tibet as a 'traders paradise'. The Nepalese *Vakil* (the status of Nayo was upgraded by this treaty) at Lhasa and *Thakalis* of the different places naturally become more responsible and powerful. Unlike the *Vakils*, the *Thakalis* were not the government officials. As focussed earlier, the Nepalese government used to nominate one

of the local traders in the post of *Thakali* in the different trade centres like Shigatse, Gyantse, Kuti and Kerroung. (It is assumed that the government used to entertain the *Vakil's* recommendation in appointing the *Thakalis*). The *Thakalis* were the sole medium of communication between the Nepalese traders and *Vakils* at Lhasa. They were also a main source of communication for the Home government.

Establishment of Gyantse Adda

The Lhasa convention of 1904 authorised the British Indian Government to appoint Trade agent at Gyantse.⁵ The convention also channelized the Indo-Tibet trade through Chumbi hitherto not officially opened for the trade and commercial traffic. In this changed context Chandra Shumshere thought the extreme necessity to take some measures to ward off the vital Nepalese interests through out in Tibet in general and at Gyantse in particular. In realisation of Nepalese aspirations the Nepalese Maharaja ventured to strengthen the status of the *Thakali* at Gyantse with the following motives :

- (i) After the conclusion of the Lhasa convention, the Nepalese government naturally worried and positively doubted about the prospects of loosing its interests in Tibet. The traditional *Thakali* (Head man) of Gyantse seemed quite incompetent to preserve the Nepalese interest at Gyantse after the physical presence of the British Trade Agent in that place.
- (ii) Secondly a capable government official was thought necessary in undertaking

4) Prem R. Uprety, *Nepal-Tibet Relations 1850-1930*, Kathmandu, Puga Nara : 1980, pp. 77-78.

5) *Ibid*, Appendix 'E'

negotiation with the British Trade Agent and local Tibetan and Chinese authorities with a view to protect Nepalese interest without antagonizing any country.

- (iii) Thirdly a trusted government employee was thought necessary, who could constantly watch the Britishers' policy and activities at Gyantse and could report perfectly to the Home government.
- (iv) As Gyantse was situated in enroute to Chumbi valley, (the newly opened trade route linking Tibet and India) Nepal assumed that the flow of the Tibetan trade would diverted from the recently introduced route. The Nepalese government therefore naturally alarmed as her assertive position in the Tibetan trade would receive injury if the same situation continued at Gyantse. With this consideration Chandra Shumshere fully realized that the traditional *Thakali* were unable to act in consistence with the Nepalese paramount motive.
- (v) Chandra Shumshere thought it equally urgent to appoint a reasonable officer to appease the Britishers with a ulterior motive to gain a favour.

Aftermath the Lhasa convention,

Chandra Shumshere, the Nepalese Maharaja, instructed Jeet Bahadur Khatri Chhetry, the Nepalese *Vakil* at Lhasa to obtain the permission of the Tibetan government to authorise Nepal to appoint Nepalese official at Gyantse as *Thakali*.⁶ Accordingly, Jeet Bahadur approached the *Kasyal* (Tibetan Cabinet). The Tibetan government accepted the Nepalese proposal as an ad hoc arrangement. Chandra Shumshere at once ordered the *Ditha* of Nepalese *Vakils* office to take the charge of the *Thakali* at Gyantse.⁷ Similarly, Nepal had also appointed her official as *Thakali* at Shigatse. The British Resident reported that "Two Nepalese official have been sent to take up the duties of *Thakali* at Shigatse and Gyantse".⁸ The British Indian government thanked Chandra Shumshere for his prompt action in appointing a Nepali officer at Gyantse.⁹

As mentioned before, the Tibetan government agreed to appoint a Nepalese official at Gyantse in an ad hoc basis and a *Ditha* of Nepalese legation was entrusted for the post of *Thakali*. Soon, the Tibetan government granted permanent approval for the Gyantse *Adda* and Chandra Shumshere appointed Lieutenant Shanker Das as the first *Thakali* to the Gyantse *Adda* in 1962 B.S. Poush 28 Roj 5 (January 1906) and the office was formally opened in 1963 Asar 11.¹⁰ The

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- 6) Chandra Shumshere to J. Manners-Smith, 4th of October 1905, Foreign Department Notes, External-B, November 1905, No. 120, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
 - 7) *ibid*.
 - 8) J. Manners-Smith to Assistant Secretary of India, Foreign Department, 15th of June 1906, Foreign Department, Secret 'E', August 1906, Nos. 317-29, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
 - 9) Under secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department to J. Manners-Smith, 17th of November 1905, Foreign Department Notes, External-B, November 1905, No. 121, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
 - 10) Kamandari Kitap Khana, Records, (Pahad, Purba, Pachhim). 1962 B. S., p. 290, National Archives of Nepal, Kathmandu.

Gyantse *Adda's Thakali* was staffed with a small number of personnel totalling six to seven persons. They were one *Mukhiya* and *Dobhase*, (interpreter), one *Hudda* and three sepoys.¹¹ Later on the number of *Dobhase* and sepoys were increased.¹² Sankar Das was remunerated Rs. 1200 annually (Rs. 800 salary and 400 allowance) while *Mukhiya, Dobhase, Hudda* and sepoy used to receive Rs. 300, 150, 150 and 120 respectively.¹³ Unlike the *Vakils* of Lhasa, the annual salary and allowance of the Head of the Gyantse *Adda* was not inconsistent. The *Thakalis* like Sanker Das (1962 B. S.) and Lal Bahadur (1969 B. S.) used to receive 1200 (salary+allowance) and Kul Prasad (1975 B. S.) were given 1800 per annum. The *Thakali* Lok Bahadur Pande was sanctioned Rs. 3200 in the year 1995 B.S.¹⁴ Besides, the *Thakali* used to receive two Kala Mohars as *Saalami* from the Nepalese traders arriving from Lhasa for commercial purpose.

The *Thakalis* were not appointed for a fixed tenure of office and varied one to another. The Nepalese government was free to appoint anybody and no Tibetan official approval was necessary. The Nepalese government had a tradition of appointing Lieutenant in the post of *Thakali*. In a short absence of the *Thakali* from his office, the *Mukhiya*, second in rank, used to officiate the *Thakali*.

Power and Functions

Immediately after receiving adhoc approval from the *Kasyal*, Chandra Shumshere

issued a seventeen point instructions¹⁵ to the Head of the Gyantse office, which in fact served guidelines to all the successive *Thakalis*. Besides these formal instructions on many occasions special orders were issued to the *Thakalis* by the Nepalese legation at Lhasa and Home government. The first point of the instruction was :

You shall ordinarily reside at Gyantse and exercise the powers and authority that shall be vested in you by virtue of this "sanad" and others that may issued from time to time over such of the subjects of this Government as are and shall be residing at Gyantse engaged in trade or other vocations, as well as subjects of this Government as shall pass through Gyantse, and you shall always bear in mind that the manner in which you shall exercise such powers shall be in harmony and not inconsistent with the established laws of this country and the prevailing manners, customs, and usages and the provisions of the treaty existing between the Governments of Nepal and Tibet.¹⁶

On many instances there occurred many differences between Nepal and Tibet regarding the customs, usages and existing treaty. The Tibetan authorities repeatedly attempted to impose duties on the goods of the Nepalese traders at Gyantse, specially in transit to

11) *Ibid*.

12) *Ibid*, 1995 B. S., p. 137.

13) Kamandari Kitap Khana Records, *op. cit.* f. n. 10.

14) *Ibid.*, 1995 B. S., p. 137.

15) Major J. Manners-Smith to the secretary to the Government of India, 16th of October, 1905, Encl, Pro. no. 120, *op. cit.* f. n. 6.

16) *Ibid*, Translation of a set of rules and directions for the guidance of the officer appoint for Gyantse.

India through Phari route. The two governments entered into an endless debate on the question but without any concrete results.¹⁷ Nepal's *Sama Danda Niti* and *Veda* policy was not rewarded with success in this trifling issue and ultimately the Nepalese had to pay duties to their goods in route to India.¹⁸

The Gyantse office was also armed with judicial powers in the cases over all the Nepalese and Kasmiri traders residing at Gyantse. The *Thakali* was also authorised to administer justice, through a joint court in the cases where the Nepalese and Tibetans were involved.¹⁹ The Lieutenant was, however, clearly instructed not to decide the cases where the Nepalese and British nationals were involved. Regarding this case he was instructed as :

Instructions enabling you to deal with cases when Nepali and British subjects are concerned shall be issued to you separately. In the meantime should any such cases arise, you shall refer, setting forth the particulars of them in detail, to the headquarters of this Government. In such cases should the offence committed be such as to require the accused to be detained in custody, you shall in the case of the subjects of this Government keep them in your custody, and in the case of British subjects request the British officer there to do the same

pending the receipt of orders from the head-quarters of the respective governments with respect to the final disposal of the cases.²⁰

But the British Trade Agent of Gyantse attempted to interfere in the cases where Nepalese employees in the British agency and the domiciled Nepalese in India, and the Tibetans were involved. To cite a case—On Bhadra 6, 1966 B.S. (August 1909) a quarrel took place in Gyantse between two Nepalese Sherpa serving in the British agency and a Tibetan national. In accordance with the tradition the case was referred to the Nepal-Tibet joint court for decision.²¹ The British official tried to interfere in the joint court on the ground that the Sherpas were under the service of their agency. The official was, however, prevented to interfere the court by both the Nepalese and the Tibetan officials. Later on, the British Trade agent asserted that the case should not be decided as he has already referred the issue to the Home government for instruction.²² Thus the court was prevented to take up the case and to deliver justice. Similarly the trade agent claimed the right to be heard in the cases where one of the parties were domiciled Nepalese in the British territory. As the British assertion was contrary to the prevalent usages, the Nepalese *Thakali* of Gyantse referred the

17) Tirtha Prasad Mishra— "Political Relations between Nepal and Tibet", (1901-1929) Ph. D. Thesis, submitted to Patna University, 1986, pp. 288-300.

18) *Ibid.*

19) Translation of a set of rules..... *op. cit.*, f. n. 16.

20) *Ibid.*

21) Mukhiya Rama Nath's petition to the Nepalese Maharaja, 1966 B. S., Bhadra 11 Roj 5, Poka no. 206, Foreign Ministry Archives of Nepal.

22) *Ibid.*, British Trade Agent to Mukhiya Rama Nath.

case to the Home government through the Nepalese legation at Lhasa.²³ The Nepalese Maharaja thereafter made a humble request to the British authorities reminding them to acknowledge the existing treaty, usages and tradition which Nepal had been enjoying in Tibet.²⁴ Chandra Shumshere also requested them to send timely intructions to the British Trade Agent at Gyantse about his dealings in such vital issues. Part of the letter is as follows:

The introduction of a distinction between Nepalese born in British territory and other Nepalese and the transference of jurisdiction over the former would go to curtail the right so long enjoyed by Nepal without let or hinderance . . . We are particularly solitious that no thing should occur which may lead the Tibetan government to think that those right can be easily flouted or interfered with and thus encourage them to move on in that direction . . . on the other hand I am inclined to think it would introduce confusion and delay proceedings by rising of controversy about the jurisdiction. The present usage which is a simple one has been working quite smooth for ever such a very long time and a change is not desirable when there is hardly any advantage."²⁵

It can be assumed that the Nepalese protest

bore fruitful result as such cases were not resurfaced this time onwards.

The Nepalese agent at Gyantse was strictly warned not to interfere with or exercise judicial function over cases in which both parties were exclusively the Tibetans.²⁶ But the Tibetan authorities lodged complains, against the Nepalese officials' unnecessary interference, in the judicial cases where only the Tibetans were involved. On the other hand the Nepalese officials reported that in cases where only the Nepalese were involved, were arbitrarily decided by the Tibetans even without bothering to consult local *Thakali*. Geru Lal, a Marwari of India, charged a Nepalese and a Tibetan with theft and the Chinese officials interfered in the trial though they had no jurisdiction. So was the case in the issue of captain Kennedy's servant.²⁷ Thus the growing power of China and British India in Tibet placed Nepal in a critical position and the Nepalese traditional rights were curtailed in due course. In such a situation the *Thakali* of Gyantse encountered many difficulties to safeguard the Nepalese interests.

The Gyantse *Thakali* was not entitled to inflict capital punishment to any Nepalese citizen. In such cases he was supposed to submit his judgement to the Home government through the Nepalese representative at Lhasa and had to act according to given order.²⁸

It was the primary duty of the *Thakali* to

23) *Ibid.*

24) Chandra Shumshere to Bayley, 17th of September 1916, Records of the correspondence between the Nepalese Maharaja and the British Residents in the court of Nepal, Register No. 3, Foreign Ministry Archives of Nepal.

25) *Ibid.*

26) Translation of a set, *op. cit.*, f. n. 16.

27) Mishra, *op. cit.*, f. n. 17, p. 159.

28) Translation of a set.....*op. cit.*, f. n. 16.

preserve and promote the Nepalese commercial interest and to look after the security of the Nepalese merchants. The *Thakali* was expected to take all action for the prompt recovery and restoration of Nepalese traders' property in case of plunder and loot.²⁹ But on many occasions the *Thakali* failed to protect the Nepalese traders from the Tibetan atrocities, plunder and loot. The property of a Nepalese merchant was looted by the Tibetans and despite the sincere efforts of the *Thakali* the looted goods were failed to be restored.³⁰ So much so that at a sepoy working at the Gyantse *Adda* was brutally murdered by a Tibetan national. The Nepalese repeated attempts of both *Vakil* and *Thakali* was ignored by the Tibetans.^{30a} Finally this thorny issue also became responsible for the origin of the misunderstanding between the two uneasy partners which flared up during 1928-30. This type of unwanted practices were frequently recorded up to 1930s. Likewise the Tibetan authorities charged the Nepalese traders with ignoring the traditional belief and religions sentiments of the local people. They also protested the *Thakali's* constant support to the Nepalese for such undertakings. It is true that the Nepalese with the weapon of extra-territoriality did not hesitate to disregard the law of the land.³¹ In the long run such undesirable actions by both the Nepalese and Tibetans stepped up animosities paving

the way for an adverse impact in the Nepalese mercantile activities.

The Gyantse Head was instructed to submit a report to the government, through the Nepalese *Vakil* at Lhasa, on murder, forcible seizures, plunder and loot affecting the security of the life and property of the Nepalese subjects.³² The agent also expected to maintain friendly relations with all the governments with whom he may have business relations.³³ Accordingly all the *Thakalis* cultivated friendship with the British Trade agent and tried to keep Chinese officials in good humour. But the Nepalese government never tolerated the intimate relations of the Nepalese officials with the foreign dignitaries specially the British personnels. So the Gyantse *Adda* officials' were strictly forbidden to accept any kind of gifts from the foreign diplomats and agents. It will desirable here to produce a case which would help to understand the Nepalese government's attitude towards her employees at Gyantse. The British Trade agent had once presented a vinacular to *Mukhiya* Rama Nath Upadhyaya and the latter reported the matter to the Home government. The Nepalese Maharaja reprimanded the *Mukhiya* for accepting the gift without seeking his approval.^{33b} The incident clearly divulged that the Ranas did not prefer close contacts between the Nepalese officials and the English officer with a ulterior

29) *Ibid*,

30) Mishra, *op. cit.*, f. n. 17, p. 159.

30a) Rahul Sankrityan- *Tibet Me Sawa Baras* (Delhi : 1990 B. S.) p. 251.

31) Charles Bell- *Tibet : Past and Present*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1924, p. 236.

32) Translation of a set... *op. cit.* f. n. 16.

33) *Ibid*.

33b) Sri Teen Maharaja to Rama Nath Upadhyaya, 1969 B. S., Chaitra 15 Roj 3, Poka no. 64, Foreign Ministry Archives of Nepal.

motive of preventing British influence over the Nepalese employees.

The *Thakalis* of Gyantse had performed and discharged most commendable works to strengthen the security measures for the safety of the Nepalese traders during the emergency period. During the Sino-Tibetan turmoil (1910-1912), Gyantse, like the other parts of Tibet, had been turned into a fierce battle field challenging seriously the security of Nepalese traders. In this crisis the Nepalese *Thakali* Lal Bahadur Basnet took much precaution and successfully pleaded the genuine case of the Nepalese traders before both the Tibetan and Chinese official.³⁴ Due to such ample efforts the Nepalese traders, unlike the other part of the Kingdom, were less suffered.

Another *Thakali* Loka Bahadur Pande paid much attention to maintain peace and tranquility among the Nepalese traders and tried to protect the Nepalese community from any adversaries when a war seemed imminent in 1928-30.³⁵ During this hour of crisis the passages to Nepal were blockaded by the Tibetans and thus the Nepalese had to stay at Gyantse at the state of uncertainty and agony. At this critical juncture the *Thakali* accumulated food grains enough for six months with a view to provide all the Nepalese stationed at Gyantse.³⁶ Though the trouble did not prolong the precautionary measure which the *Thakali* took proved his capability to be a shrewed strategist.

Apart from the seventeen point government instructions, the *Thakali* was expected to perform other informal duties which were considered important to the Nepalese legation at Lhasa and the Nepal Durbar. The *Thakali* was to report the unusual happenings and *arcana imperii* to the *Vakil* at Lhasa. With these considerations, the Gyantse *Adda* used to despatch about the internal political situation of Gyantse, British Trade Agent's relation with the Tibetan and the Chinese officials. Once Chandra Prasad Shrestha, an official at Gyantse *Adda*, reported the massive war preparation of Tibetans, such as recall of the Tibetan troops stationed at Gyantse, recruitment of troops, collection of food provisions etc., during the Tibeto-Nepal conflict in 1928-30.³⁷

The *Thakali* of Gyantse had once offered mediation in the dispute between the Tibetans and the celestials. Lal Bahadur Basnet, the *Thakali* of Gyantse, actively mediated during the Sino-Tibetan conflict when the second round peace negotiation between the two conflicting parties was initiated at Gyantse.³⁸ It was Lal Bahadur, later on appointed Nepalese *Vakil* at Lhasa, who finally brought both Tibet and China in a negotiating table and restored peace in the land of the Lamas.³⁹

The Gyantse *Thakali* was also entrusted to transmit the communication between Nepal and Lhasa as the mail used to move through the British trade agency at Gyantse.

34) For detail see, Mishra, *op. cit.*, f. n. 17, pp. 134-96; Uprety, *op. cit.*, f. n. 4, pp. 127-43.

35) Petition of Loka Bahadur to Nepalese Maharaja, 1986 B. S. Kartik 22, Unnumbered Poka, Foreign Ministry Archives of Nepal.

36) *Ibid.*

37) Chandra Prasad's petition to Nepalese Maharaja 1986 Kartik 4, *op. cit.* f. n. 35.

38) Mishra, *op. cit.*, f. n. 17, pp. 155-89; Uprety, *op. cit.*, f. n. 4, pp. 133-43.

39) *Ibid.*

In fact up to 1920s, the Gyantse *Thakali* was the sole medium of communications among the British Trade Agent, local Tibetan and Chinese officials. It was the policy of almost all *Thakali* to solve the misunderstanding between the local Tibetans authorities and British Trade Agent without loosing Nepalese vital interest. But after 1930, the Tibetans become too intimate with the British and the *Thakali* could no more become an intermediary in their transactions.

The Gyantse *Adda* was second in rank among the Nepalese offices established throughout Tibet. It was the customary rule that the head of Gyantse *Adda* was to officiate the Nepalese *Vakil* at Lhasa and many *Thakalis* were promoted to the *Vakils* after their tenure of office from Gyantse. Lal Bahadur and Rana Gambhir Singh were later on promoted in the post of Nepalese *Vakils* at Lhasa.⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

The Gyantse *Adda* was an important Nepalese office established in the Tibetan Kingdom. The Nepalese Maharaja, Chandra Shumsher, changed the status of the post of *Thakali* with a variety of objectives. Prior to

this amendment, the *Thakalis*, who were the merchants themselves, were merely expected to look after the welfare of the Nepali trading community stationed in that place and in preserving Nepal government's commercial interests. But in the innovative system the *Thakalis* were well-equipped with judicial and other powers with a sole objective of maintaining Nepal's historic dominant position in that place. The emergence of British in the Tibetan plateau and the establishment of a British Trade Agency at Gyantse, alerted Nepal and placed the Gyantse *Adda* under a Lieutenant. But the varied objectives of Nepal were not completely materialized due to the growing intimacy between the British and Tibetans. Nepalese traditional rights were rapidly curtailed and the usages and treaty rights produced endless debate and even the British trade agent questioned and attempted to away with the Nepalese privileges. In this changed context, it was beyond the capacity of the *Thakali* to preserve Nepalese trade interest at Gyantse. However, the Gyantse *Adda* served a useful purpose for the welfare of the local Nepalese traders by the Sino-Nepal Treaty relating to Tibet in 1956.

40) Tri Ratna Manandhar, *Some Aspects of Rana Rule in Nepal*, Kathmandu : Purna Devi Manandhar, pp. 5-8.