

Political and Economic Geographies across the Eastern Himalayas: The Cost of Cross-Border Transportation in the 1940s-50s Kalimpong

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Human mind is wired for categorisations, so much so that our perception of the outside world cannot but reflect the innate structure of our brain. This is evident in the way we process our surroundings through spatial and temporal differentiations – this is *here*, that is *there*, this is *now*, that was *then*. Such mental distinctions are further applied to social relations, as we position *ourselves* against the *other*. Yet, no human entity exists in isolation. Regardless of the essential indivisibility of specific places, cultures, and people, each of them is in turn connected to another, to the extent that “the character of a particular region, or the ‘regionality’ of a place ... stands ... at the intersection of an interlocking whole of locational-physical, political-economic, and socio-cultural universes.”¹

From this perspective, it is easy to grasp the fascination exerted by borderland regions, located as they are “in-between,” neither *here* nor *there*, but suspended in an everlasting *now*, seemingly immune to past and future. However, at a closer examination the same concepts of “centre” and “periphery” around which such a discourse on borderlands revolves prove inconsistent, as the frame of references changes with the perspective adopted: who is peripheral to whom when no centre is mutually recognised? In talking about the eastern Tibetan area of Kham – one of such borderland regions – Stéphane Gros (2019) proposes the notion of “frontier dynamics,” thus embracing the idea expressed by the anthropologists Lars Rodseth and Bradley Parker of “frontiers (as) the quintessential matrices of change.”² Far from being immutable places, borderland regions are constantly *in fieri*, their motion paced by the rhythm of fluxes – of people, commodities, and ideas. These dynamics of exchange and interaction are present in a lesser or greater degree in all those locales

¹ Spengen (2000: 52).

² Rodseth and Parker (2005), as quoted in Gros (2019: 44).

that are, geographically or culturally, amidst other, often more centralised units. In the present article, I will examine some of the socio-economic developments that occurred in one of such places, namely the area of Kalimpong, West Bengal, between the outbreak of WWII in Asia in 1937 and the Sino-Indian Trade Agreement of 1954. The choice of the timeframe is not casual, as it encompasses what can only be described, for lack of better words, as the region's swansong: from the economic boom of the 1940s with the wool slump in the early 1950s and the brief growth spell that followed the Sino-Indian Trade Agreement in 1954 to the closure of the borders in the aftermath of Sino-Indian War of 1962. By the early 1960s, the financial and social decline of Kalimpong, once the major trade hub of the Indo-Tibetan route, was completed. After setting the geo-historical backdrop against which my discourse will be carried out, I will introduce the social actors through whose eyes such border regions will be seen – the ones, in other words, whose perspective will be adopted in observing the borderlands, in a fascinating alternation of *foreign* and *familiar*, *peripheral* and *central*. These will be the point of view of muleteers and porters, Tibetan settlers and transients, as well as of British and Indian officials, who in different ways navigated through the transculturality of that “contact zone” that was mid-twentieth century Kalimpong.³ Particular attention will be paid to the economics of cross-border transport and the sensitivity of the latter to market fluctuation and volatility. To do so, I will avail myself of local newspapers, traders' memoirs, and archival documents, in an effort to shed some light on the financial weight and logistical power of a category so far understudied.

1. *The gateway to India: the emergence of Kalimpong as trade hub*

Evocative of bustling bazaars and multi-ethnic crowds, the Kalimpong of common imagery is a multifaceted, nebulous entity, set somewhere between a far-gone past of colonial splendour and a brief, post-Independence spell brimming with a too early thwarted economic potential. A borderland, in other words, stuck into chronological immobility, a vague *then* that does not care to acknowledge the dynamics that created the place. That image, shrouded in a nostalgic halo, was in fact the outcome of a process that, in less than a century, transformed a backwater Lepcha hamlet, no more than a gathering of huts, into a hill station renowned for its boarding schools, medical centres, and shops.⁴ The driving force behind such progresses was

³ Viehbeck (2017).

⁴ Rennie (1866: 21), Majumdar (1993: 574).

Rev. William Macfarlane (1840-87), a missionary of the Church of Scotland, who, almost single-handedly, altered the social and cultural geography of the area in a permanent way. Originally situated in Bhutanese territory, Kalimpong was part of those territories annexed to British India in 1865; included in the Darjeeling district in 1866, the Lepcha inhabitants of the hamlet soon attracted the attention of the few foreign missionaries stationed in the area. Macfarlane in particular had noticed their “child-like simplicity in receiving the teaching of Christ,”⁵ and, eager to expedite the diffusion of the Gospel among them, he settled in Kalimpong in 1873, opening a small school and kickstarting a process that gradually transformed the centre into a beacon of Western education and modernity.⁶ In a few years’ time, the construction of new establishments – churches, boarding schools, hospitals – modified the outlook of Kalimpong, setting the foundations for its municipal development. As extra building areas were identified to accommodate newcomers, mostly Anglo-Indians, Bengalis, Europeans, but also wealthy Tibetans eager to rent housing and business spaces, the original inhabitants – Lepchas, Bhotias, and Nepalese – were progressively resettled outside of the main urban agglomerate. By the 1920s, the process of urbanisation was completed, and Kalimpong, recognised as town in 1931, became a municipality fourteen years later, in 1945.⁷

The opening of Tibet in the aftermath of the Younghusband Expedition (1903-04) quickly transformed the hill station into a place of encounters, where identities were continuously challenged and negotiated. Trade became a centripetal force that made of Kalimpong a local centre of gravity: due to its strategical location, close to both the Jelep La and Nathu La passes, the town became a natural node in the land route connecting the ports and markets of West Bengal to the urban areas of Tibet, and, from there, to China and Central Asia. With goods and money came traders and workers: new housing and storing facilities were built, and heterogenous communities found themselves at close quarters, all ensnared in the same network of socio-cultural and economic entanglements, power dynamics, and contact.⁸ Kalimpong became the gateway to India for all those Tibetans who, in growing numbers, travelled south of the Himalayas for both business and pleasure;⁹ although most were transients, a few settled down, either temporary or permanently, and opened retail shops and

⁵ Gilmour (1914), as quoted in McKay (2007: 70).

⁶ McKay (2007: 69-70).

⁷ Viehbeck (2017: 5). For an in-depth analysis of the urban development of Kalimpong as a hill station, see, among others, Majumdar (1993; 2006).

⁸ Viehbeck (2017: 7-13).

⁹ Huber (2008), Galli (2020).

guesthouses, or hired their services as contractors. In the wake of Chinese military engagement with Japan in 1937, trade along the Indo-Tibetan route grew exponentially, as the Nationalist government struggled to cope with the inner demand for basic supplies. The escalation of the conflict at a global level in 1939 generated a ripple effect that reverberated through all the markets: the borderland regions, by their nature sensitive to supranational changes, reacted accordingly, with a rapid decrease in commodity transit across the border. In the first phase of the war – roughly from 1939 to late 1941-early 1942 – military factors tipped the scale between the contenders, with the power of the Axis essentially dwarfing the Allies in terms of strategy and fighting power. In the second phase, which began in 1942, the nitty-gritty of economic fundamentals reasserted themselves. When the war turned into a stalemate, sheer population size trumped military superiority: the Anglo-French alliance alone counted, with the respective colonial empires, nearly 700 million people, and China boasted thrice the population of Japan and its colonies in the Far East. By adopting a proactive policy of resource mobilisation, the Allies tapped into the reserves of their colonies, thus moving the GDP balance in their favour. Such economic mobilisation came at a hefty price though: the disruptions of trade, both internally and externally, heavily affected those economies that much relied on agriculture, with China and the U.S.S.R. being the first to show the weakness of a low-income states.¹⁰ India did not fare much better: despite an impressive increase in the output of certain industries, mostly connected with the war efforts, the overall expansion of the industrial sector was trivial, with production growth mainly obtained through fuller employment of manpower. As previously mentioned, the expansion and escalation of the conflict affected the volume, value, composition, and direction of India's foreign trade. Both imports and exports declined, due to an acute shortage of shipping, which in turn raised the incidence of freight and war-risk insurance. While the purchasing power of the rupee increased, it did so by limiting the quantity of goods available to the civilian population. The composition of foreign trade itself changed, with exports of manufactured articles, especially cotton piece-goods, rising from 30 percent in 1938-39 to 46 percent in 1945-46, and imports of raw materials increasing from 21.7 percent to 48.4 percent over the same period.¹¹ The halt imposed on shipping boosted trade with neighbouring states, including Tibet: between the late 1930s up to 1950, commodity transit via Kalimpong rose exponentially.

¹⁰ Harrison (1998: 1-9).

¹¹ *International Reference Service* (1946: 3).

2. The southbound route: the wool trade

Among Tibetan exports, raw wool figured prominently, the latter a trend started as early as the first decade of the 1900s: over the 1914-15–1915-16 period, the value of wool imports registered a 10 percent annual increment, growing from Rs. 1,177,183 to Rs. 1,284,693.¹² The profits generated by the wool trade led to rapid and radical economic transformations in Central Tibet, with the affirmation of new social sectors whose financial power tipped the scales of political balance and offered a chance, however limited, of mobility in an otherwise crystallised society. Consisting mainly of professional groups, these wealthy and educated “elite commoners”¹³ were situated between the upper and lower classes, that is to say between aristocrats and high clergy on one end and farmers and nomads on the other – they occupied, in other words, intermediate social niches that clustered at the margins of traditional hierarchical divisions. The influence wielded by these new classes, in their majority formed by Eastern Tibetan trading firms and their associates, has been examined elsewhere and need not to be reiterated here.¹⁴ Suffice to say that, in the wake of the Younghusband Expedition (1904), the proactive opening policy fostered by British India translated into an increase of transit along the land route connecting Lhasa to Calcutta via Kalimpong. Regulated by several informal institutions, the trans-frontier trade thus generated involved local entities at all levels, which in turn stimulated various forms of inter- and intra-group collaboration and competition. The preference accorded to the Jelep La pass, and therefore to Kalimpong, by the British India government may be traced back to the Lhasa Convention (1904) and had in Captain William Frederick O’Connor its most stalwart supporter. Contrary to the views of the Deputy Commissioner John Claude White, who argued for an improvement of the already existing Nathu La pass, O’Connor pushed for a realignment of the traditional route through Jelep La, hence prioritising Kalimpong – at the time still a poorly connected hamlet near Darjeeling – over Gangtok. In 1906, the proposal advanced by the Captain was ratified and traffic began to be re-oriented along the new route, an event that became a leading factor in the gradual decline of transit that was later registered along the traditional passages in the eastern (Tibet-Bhutan-Bengal) and western (Tibet-Nepal) Himalayas.¹⁵ The sharp increase in commodity flows,

¹² Sherpa (2019: 400).

¹³ Travers (2013: 144).

¹⁴ See, among others, Goldstein (1989a), McGranahan (2002), Harris (2013), Travers (2013; 2018).

¹⁵ Sherpa (2019: 396-97).

until then managed by Dromowas or Monpas, attracted the attention of other groups, such as the Marwaris and Tibetans, who fiercely competed over the monopoly of transport through Dromo (Chumbi Valley) and the Jelep La pass.¹⁶ The disruptions caused by the war heavily affected the budding wool trade, which had in the United States its largest market. The temporary halt in overseas exports caused a substantial drop in the commodity prices in Kalimpong, with a 63 percent loss over an eleven-month period (July 1937 to June 1938).¹⁷ When British India entered the conflict in September 1939, wool prices settled at an average of Rs. 28-30 per maund,¹⁸ a figure that slowly increased with the progression of the war and the affirmation of the Allies over the power of the Axis.¹⁹ By December 1945, two months after the official surrender of Japan (September 2, 1945), raw wool was priced at Rs. 54 per maund in the Kalimpong market.²⁰ On the wave of the post-war economic expansion, the value of the commodity grew at a steady pace, rising from Rs. 60 per maund (September 1947) to Rs. 70-75 per maund (July 1949).²¹ This positive trend, set at a respectable 25 percent increase, underwent a dramatic growth spurt starting from October 1949, when the price of a maund of wool soared from Rs. 95 to Rs. 140-150 (August 1950).²² This growth spell continued at an even faster pace over following months, with the price curve reaching its spike at the end of 1950. By the early 1951, this positive trend stalled and inverted its course, with wool quotations dropping from Rs. 260 per maund (December 1950-January 1951) to Rs. 130-140 (July 1951) – a harrowing 46-50 percent loss.²³

Such a fall in prices was the local response to global events: the issuing of the Foreign Assets Control Regulations by the U.S. Treasury

¹⁶ Spengen (2000: 117).

¹⁷ According to the figures reported in the *Tibet Mirror* (1937: 4; 1938: 2), the price of a maund of raw wool dropped from Rs. 54 (July 1937) to Rs. 20 (June 1938).

¹⁸ Unit of weight used in India and other parts of Asia. Its value varied greatly according to locality; in India, a maund went from 25 to 82.286 pounds (11 to 37.4 kg), the latter being the standard *mondo* (*mon do*) adopted by the Tibetans.

¹⁹ The onset of WWII flared up the global demand for wool to be used in military apparel, and by 1940, the U.S. had emerged as a main buyer and strong competitor of British India. In the attempt to oust the latter from the market, the American government purposely doubled the market offer, causing the wool price to jump from Rs. 20-40 to Rs. 30-60 per maund (Sherpa 2019: 401) and triggering an increase in wool exports (+43 percent in a year) (Travers 2018: 172). As the conflict progressed though, the disruption of supply routes cut off overseas markets, thus causing a slump of Tibetan wool exports, to such an extent that the commodity still stored in Kalimpong began to rot (Grunfeld 1996: 88; Spengen 2000: 86; Travers 2018: 176).

²⁰ *Tibet Mirror* (1945: 8).

²¹ *Tibet Mirror* (1947b: 8; 1949a: 8).

²² *Tibet Mirror* (1949b: 4; 1950: 6).

²³ *Tibet Mirror* (1950-51: 24; 1951a: 6).

Department on December 17, 1950 came as a blow, as it prohibited the unlicensed importation into the United States of goods of Chinese origin.²⁴ The CCP's encroachment on Tibet in October 1949 and the consequent relocation of the Tibetan government in Yatung had created much uncertainty among the traders – anxieties that were scarcely put to rest by the Dalai Lama's return to Lhasa in late July 1951 and his ratification of the controversial Seventeen-Point Agreement on October 24 of the same year, an act that sanctioned Tibet's annexation to the People's Republic of China and its de facto inclusion into the Communist bloc. The Dalai Lama's endorsement of the Sino-Tibetan treaty followed by a few months the U.S. government's enforcement of sections 5 and 11 of the Trade Agreement Extension Act, 1951, which stipulated the withdrawal of the benefits of trade-agreement concessions "to imports from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and to imports from any nation or area dominated or controlled by the foreign government or foreign organization controlling the world Communist movement."²⁵ As communicated by Harry S. Truman himself in a letter addressed to the Secretary of the Treasury John W. Snyder,

the suspension provided for therein (i.e., sections 5 and 11 of the Trade Agreement Extension Act, 1951) shall be applicable with respect to imports from the following nations and areas which are entered, or withdrawn from warehouse, for consumption after the close of business August 31, 1951: ... *Any part of China which may be under Communist domination or control.*²⁶

The implementation of sections 5 and 11 represented the muscular reaction of America to the Chinese by-passing of 1950 Regulations: despite the prohibition of entry the United States, goods originating in the PRC found avenues of evasion through other countries, where they were exported for processing prior to their shipment overseas. This maneuver technically changed the country of origin of the goods, thus granting China an indirect profit; yet, according to the Trade Agreement Extension Act,

processing in other countries of goods originating in China does not change the "country of origin" for the purpose of the Foreign Assets Control Regulations and, accordingly, these goods, even though processed outside of China, will not be admitted by Customs.²⁷

²⁴ "U.S. Treasury Department Report" (1952: 460).

²⁵ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1951a: 21).

²⁶ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1951: 21, my italics).

²⁷ "U.S. Treasury Department Report" (1952: 460).

The measures taken by the U.S. government clearly affected Tibetan products as well, including wool: regardless of any processing that the commodity underwent in Kalimpong, its country of origin remained, for all intents and purposes, Tibet – “a part of China under Communist control,” as the Americans saw it.

The ban essentially meant the loss of Tibet's main foreign buyer, a fact that burst the wool price bubble: when the U.S. declared their availability to accept shipment until February 29, 1952 at the latest, sellers released great quantities of raw wool in the attempt to save some of their assets. The decline in demand, coupled with the rapid saturation of the market, removed any price cap the traders had managed to preserve in the previous months – over a seven-month period, the value of the commodity fell by 44-54 percent, depending on the quality taken into consideration.²⁸ By April 1952, no more wool was traded in Kalimpong, with all transactions forcibly suspended until further notice. The situation was dire, as almost 2,000 tons (ca. 53,585 maunds) of wool were left to rot in the godowns of the Himalayan trade hub.²⁹ Already in March 1952, some of the representatives of the largest Tibetan trading firms had approached the PRC's leadership, requesting a strong intervention on their part. As reported in the *Tibet Mirror*, a Tibetan-language newspaper published in Kalimpong, issue dated April 1952,

Tibetan wool is the primary choice for Americans, who see it as a vital commodity, yet among the many clauses contained in a bulletin issued by the Foreign Department at Washington on January 31, 1952 was the decision that hereafter no goods whatsoever coming from Communist countries should be bought. Due to China's incorporation of Tibet, this meant a great loss for Tibetan traders, who were forced to reduce the price of the wool to the Indian factories as much as they could, to the point of being unable to make up for the costs. In December of last year, the head of the (Tibetan) Traders' Association, the Governor of Dromo and fourth rank (in the Tibetan aristocratic system) Pangdatsang (sPang mda' tshang),³⁰ together with the various representatives (of the Association), asked the representative of the People's Republic of

²⁸ Tibetan raw wool was divided in two varieties, according to the place from which the loads were despatched, namely Lhasa (higher, more expensive quality, known as “white” wool) and Tsang (lower, cheaper quality, known as “black” wool). On the Kalimpong market, the difference in price between the two was around 15-20 percent.

²⁹ Harris (2013: 39).

³⁰ Pangdatsang Lobsang Yampel (sPang mda' tshang Blo bzang yar 'phel (1900?-72/73) was granted the fourth rank in the Tibetan government (*rim bzhi*), an appointment that included the post of Tibetan Trade Agent in Yatung as well as the title of Governor of Dromo (*gro mo spyi khyab*).

China in Calcutta Mr. Xiling³¹ to inquire about his government's interest in purchasing the wool already in Kalimpong. Taking such responsibility upon himself, Mr. Xiling, together with the China Bank, entered into negotiations with the Russian government. When a special trade deputy from Moscow – TRADE AGENT OF U.S.S.R, IN INDIA – arrived at the Russian trade bureau in Calcutta, Reting (Rwa sgreng), Pangdatsang, and Sadutsang (Sa 'du tshang) arranged (a group of) about seven delegates, plus the deputy secretary of the Association Mr. Tsenam (Tshe rnam); on March 21, they met in Calcutta with the Chinese representative Mr. Xiling, the Russian agent, and the manager of China Bank. At the meeting, they discussed in detail the factors contributing to the current situation. A decision was taken concerning the way in which to buy and sell wool, and the manner of payment – “TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS.” As for the price, the Russians requested to first examine the quality of the Tibetan wool, since they have never traded in this commodity before. The agent from Moscow has already left with the samples and the promise to send a telegram with a buying offer, eagerly awaited by the Tibetan traders. Such news will certainly help Tibetan trade in general, even though it has not been decided yet how much wool should be separated into black and white and made into bundles in Kalimpong.³²

³¹ Physicist, playwright, and Vice-Minister for Culture, Ding Xiling (丁西林, 1893-1974) led the first Chinese cultural delegation to India in the late 1951 in his role of President of the China-India Friendship Association (CIFA) (Ghosh 2017: 705).

³² *bod kyi bal rnams a mi ri kar ngo gnad [*dgos gnas] che ba 'i bal phal che ba a mi ri ka bas nyo mus kyang 'das lo 1952 zla ba dang po ta rig 31 nyin a mi ri ka wa shing kron Treasury Department, Foreign Assets Control, Washington, 25, D.C. nas btang ba 'i rtsa tshig (ANNOUNCED) 'drem [*'grem] spel byas gsal bod rgya gmar [*dmar] khongs su song gshis da cha dmar po 'i yul nas thon pa 'i dngos zog gang yang nyo rgyu min pa thag chod pa sogs don tshan mang tsam 'khod par btan [*brten] rgya gar khul gyi bzo 'phrul khag sogs nas kyang bal gong gcog gang thub kyi bod kyi tshong pa rnams la gyong gun ci che 'i 'gro sdod dang | sprod len kyang mi thub pa 'i gnas su gyur bzhin pa 'i skabs su bod tshong e so se shan gyi dbu bzhugs mi rje gro spyi rim bzhi spom mda' ba mchog dang 'thus mi khag bcas snga lo zla ba 12 pa 'i nang ka tar rgya nag mi dmangs srid gzhung rgyal khab kyi sku tshab kling si brgyud bod kyi bal ka phag [*ka sbug] khul 'byor zin pa rnams srid bzhung rang nas spus gzigs mdzad rogs zhes snyan 'bul zhus 'dug par kling si mchog dang | ci na sbeng (China Bank) bcas nas thugs 'khar che bzhes kyi u ru su 'i rgyal khab tu bka' mol gnang ste ka ta u ru su ' tshong don las khungs TRADE AGENT OF U.S.S.R., IN INDIA, yod mus khar nye char ma se ko (MOSCOW) nas dmigs gsal tshong don sku tshab zhig ka tar ched 'byor zin pa 'i brda lan byung 'phral rwa spom sa gsum gyi [*gyis] gcos [*bcos] e so se shan gyi sku tshab seg re kre ri sku zhabs tse rnam lhan rgyas bcas 'thus mi bdun tsam spyi zla 3 tshes 21 nyin ka tar ched bcar kyi srid gzhung sku tshab kling si mchog dang | ru su 'i sku tshab lhan rgyas ci na sbeng gi ma ni 'jer (Manager of China Bank) bcas ngo mjal thog gnas lugs yong rkyen bka' mol zhib phra zhus pa 'i snying por | bal nyo tshong gtong phyogs rin dngul sprod len byed stang sogs kyi chod don TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS, zhes pa gtan 'bebs zin pa dang | bal gong thad u ru sus de snga bod kyi bal nyo tshong byed myong med stabs bal gyi spus tshad blta zhib nan gtan byas te ring min tar thog rin 'di tsam sprod thub zhes*

The vacuum left by the American market forced Tibetan traders to turn towards new potential buyers: in spite of Russians and Czechs' mild interest,³³ the Chinese government provided ample support, willingly collaborating with the Traders' Associations, who had in Pangdatsang Lobsang Yampel their spokesman. Throughout April 1952, negotiations continued at a fast pace and an agreement was reached in the second part of the month; once again, the *Tibet Mirror* functioned as a broadcasting platform. From the joint issue date May-June 1952,

As was recorded in last month's newspaper (i.e., the April issue), following previous talks with the Chinese representative in Calcutta, the head of the Tibetan Traders' Association together with the honourable Governor of Dromo and fourth rank (of the Tibetan nobility) Pangdatsang and a few other delegates met with an agent of the U.S.S.R.. The wool was examined for quality, and a quick response with an offer was anticipated via telegram. The lack of an answer by the deadline left the Tibetan petty traders in a state of uncertainty. A few sold at a loss; it is said that, after selling at around Rs. 56 (per maund), they went bankrupt ... Recently, on April 22, 1952, a telegram was sent to the Tibet Traders' Association in Kalimpong from Lhasa. It was received on the twenty-sixth of the same month at 6pm; this is a true reproduction in English script ... TRUE COPY OF TELEGRAM RECEIVED FROM TIBET TRADERS ASSOCIATION LHASA. LHASA.22.4.52 KALIMPONG.26.4.52. At 6P.M. Tibetan Traders Association, Kalimpong. "For the improvement of Tibetan trade Chinese Govt. helped us in settling to sell all Tibetan wools to the factory of China; they also offered good price so don't intend to sell whatever wool reached there. AAA Inform all Tibetan traders accordingly. AAA Detailed letter posted continued. Tibetan Traders." ... Although it is said that a maund of white wool will fetch Rs. 185, at the moment no one is buying or selling.³⁴

pa'i (Offer) o phar gtong rgyu bcas gnyis mos kyis ma se ko nas phebs pa'i sku tshab de bzhin bal gyi spus tshad dang bcas phyir phebs zin 'dug par bod tshong rnams ring min (Offer) o phar 'byor rgyu 'i re ba ci che 'i ngang du bzhugs 'dug pa'i gnas tshul go thos byung | ka sbug tu bal dkar nag dbyer 'byed dang sgam khri rgyag rgyu sogs ji byed da lta gtan 'khel mi 'dug kyang bod tshong spyir phan pa'i thabs shes gnang gi yod bsha' red | | *Tibet Mirror* (1952a: 7).

³³ Russia's delay to answer the plea of Tibetan wool traders was by some ascribed to the country's decision to await the evaluation of the Economic Conference, scheduled to be held in Moscow in 1952; see *Himalayan Times* (1952: 6, 8).

³⁴ snga zla 'i gsar shog tu bkod gsal bod tshong e so se shan gyi dbu bzhugs mi rje gro spyi sku ngo spom mda' mchog dang 'thus mi khag nas ka tar rgya gzhung sku tshab dang bka' mol gnang rjes u ru su 'i sku tshab dang bka' mol thog bal gyi spus tshad blta zhib kyis ring min tar thog rin 'di tsam sprod thub ces pa 'i lan gsal byed rgyu bcas 'dug rung | lan gsal dus thog 'byor min bod kyi tshong chung rnams 'gro 'dod [*sdod] ma shes tsam du lus te kha shas nas 'pham tshong brgyab ste sgor lnga bcu drug cu tsam la btsongs nas log skad | da lam gnas tshul 'byor gsal | nye sngon spyi zla bzhi pa 'i tshes nyer gnyis nyin Lhasa

The quotation reported above proved to be correct, as 80,000 maunds (ca. 3,000 tons) of unsold wool, still stored at the Calcutta docks, were purchased by the PRC at the fixed price of Rs. 184 per maund.³⁵ By directly liaising with the Tibetan Traders' Association in Kalimpong, the Chinese government re-oriented the flow of wool from India to mainland China. By April 1953, the commodity was once again quoted in Kalimpong at Rs. 140 per maund. The lack of competitors flattened the market, with fluctuations in the order of Rs. 5 per maund – over a seventeen-month period (April 1953–September 1954), the price registered a 7 percent increment on an average, with the highest quotation recorded in January 1954 at Rs. 160 per maund (Lhasa variety).³⁶ The signing of the Sino-Indian treaty on April 29, 1954 definitely closed the door to any hope for bilateral trade agreements with India that might have been still harboured by Tibetan traders. Cut off from the global market and unable to halt the progressive encroachment on its territory by Chinese construction workers and settlers, Tibet saw its exports increasingly deviate from the Himalayas to mainland China. In the following months, the wool flow across the Jelep La pass came to a virtual end, and in 1955 the reduced volume of trade prompted the Indian Railway Board to terminate the working arrangements on the Kalimpong Gielle Khola Ropeway: the slump of cross-border transit and the lack of modernisation made it impossible for the line to cope with the competition of road traffic.³⁷ The Sino-Indian war in 1962 and the subsequent closure of the border brought the trade flows to a complete halt.

nas ka sbug bod tshong e so se shan la lcags'phrin btang ba 'dir tshes nyer drug gong [**dgong*] *thag tshod drug par 'byor ba 'i dbyin yig 'dra shus* [**bshus*] *ngo ma* [...] TRUE COPY OF TELEGRAM RECEIVED FROM TIBET TRADERS ASSOCIATION LHASA. LHASA. 22.04.52 KALIMPONG. 26.04.52 At 6 P.M. TIBETAN TRADERS ASSOCIATION, KALIMPONG. "For the improvement of Tibetan trade Chinese Govt. helped us in settling to sell all Tibetan wools to the factory of China they also offered good price so don't intend to sell whatever wool reached there AAA Inform all Tibetan traders accordingly AAA Detailed letter posted continued. Tibetan Traders." [...] *bal dkar rkyang mon dor sgor 185 tsam re sprod kyi yod skad kyang da lta nyo tshong byed mkhan ni mi 'dug* || *Tibet Mirror* (1952b: 7)

³⁵ Figures as reported in *Tibet Mirror* (1952b: 7).

³⁶ Figures as reported in the *Tibet Mirror*, issues dated from April 1953 to September 1954. See *Tibet Mirror* (1953a: 6; 1953b: 4; 1953c: 8; 1953d: 4; 1953e: 8; 1953f: 6; 1953g: 6; 1953h: 6; 1954a: 6; 1954b: 6; 1954c: 6; 1954d: 8; 1954e: 4; 1954f: 16).

³⁷ Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company Limited and DHR Extensions Co. Ltd. were nationalised on October 20, 1948; the operation cost the Indian Government only Rs. 15 lakhs (1.5 million) (Sherpa 2019: 402). For an in-depth study of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and its socio-economic impact on Darjeeling, see Rai (2014).

3. *Talking business: freightage fares along the route*

The few figures presented above attest to the importance that the wool trade had on the Tibetan economy – at both general and individual levels. Numerous studies have been dedicated to the rapid rise of Khampa trading families in the socio-political fabric of twentieth-century Lhasa and the modernising influence that cross-border encounters had on many sectors (e.g., economics, education, military organisation, urban architecture, transport) in Tibet.³⁸ Wool trade undoubtedly played a major role in these events as hundreds of thousands of maunds in wool loads transited along the Indo-Tibet land route – a several millions of rupees worth flow that cascaded from retailers to wholesalers, porters, middlemen, and nomads, diminishing the closer each stage was to the origin of the commodity chain. It was the network process itself that fostered inequality as the different stages of the commodity chain unrolled according to a pyramid scheme well-known in the contemporary financial world. At the base (first stage / origin) were the producers (i.e., the nomads), who sold their basic product (i.e., sheared wool) at low-profit rate to either independent contractors or private buyers (second stage). Given the unsophisticated nature of pre-modern Tibetan economy, at this stage transactions were generally conducted on a barter level, as wool was exchanged for grains, cotton cloth or other basic supplies not available in the pasture lands. Contractors were keen to keep the price low, as to cushion any fluctuations in quality that may adversely affect their own profit at the time of delivering the product. The sheared wool, roughly packed in bundles by the nomads, was then shipped on mules to the urban areas of Central Tibet, the most part of it being distributed to agents of middle and large trading firms (third stage), with only a fraction reserved to retailers. Temporarily stored in Lhasa or Gyantse, the bundles were then delivered, via yaks, mules or porters (fourth stage), to Phari in Dromo, and, from there, to Kalimpong through the Jelep-La pass. In the trade hub, the loads were shifted to the storing facilities of individual traders (fifth stage), where they were unpacked, cleaned, and re-bundled, ready to be sold to the best bidder. At each stage of the chain, the commodity changed hands, passing from an

³⁸ In addition to the references provided in note 14, see also FitzHerbert and Travers (2020) for an introduction to the foreign influences on the Tibetan military apparatus, Travers on the military identity of early twentieth-century Tibetan aristocracy (2011) and on the private schooling in pre-1951 Tibet (2016), Stoddard (1985) and McGranahan (2005) on the socio-political role of progressive Tibetan intellectuals, van Spengen (2000) on the changes brought to local economy by long-distance trade, and Alexander (2013) for a study of twentieth-century urban changes in Lhasa.

intermediary to the other, in a constant inflation of its nominal value: among those who gained the most from this process were, ironically, the ones who did not possess the commodity, but simply arranged for its transport, whereas those whose survival most relied on wool ended up gaining the least from the business.

In a recent study of the Tibetan “bourgeoisie,” Alice Travers (2018) presents a much-needed quantitative analysis of wool trade exports from 1907 to 1947 that supports a more concrete evaluation of the commodity impact on local economies, especially on the induced sectors (e.g., transport). Although only the first ten years of the period under examination in the present paper (1937-54) are covered by the data set compiled by Travers, the figures extrapolated from the exports over the years 1942-47 may be used to plot the corresponding trend in the transport fees along the southbound route and hence calculate, by approximation, the income generated by the wool trade in the ancillary activities of muleteers and porters. The adoption of such a restricted time frame is made necessary by the paucity of information on the local transport sector prior to September 1942, when freightage fares began to be regularly published in the pages of the *Tibet Mirror*.³⁹ Aside from providing the reader with practical figures, the quotes reported in the newspaper depict the mental maps – the “geographical imaginings”⁴⁰ – that flanked, and often replaced, the “official” cartographic representations of the itinerary that unravelled through the eastern passages of the Himalayas. As customary among its users, the land route was in fact divided into several segments, priced differently in consideration of the direction of the flow – southbound (Lhasa-Kalimpong) or northbound (Kalimpong-Lhasa) – and length of the leg taken into consideration (Kalimpong-Phari / Phari-Kalimpong, Kalimpong-Lhasa). Freight shipment rates fluctuated according to the market trends: in adherence to basic tenets of economics, an increase in demand determined a correspondent rise in transport fees along the commodity flow direction. In September 1942, for instance, the price for the dispatch of a backload (equal to a maund) was Rs. 4-5 on the southbound route (Phari-Kalimpong) and Rs. 13 on the northbound route (Kalimpong-Phari).⁴¹ Such a staggering difference (about +200 percent) was largely due to global economic conditions: the slump of the wool market following the disruption of overseas shipments had caused a drop in Tibetan exports and a consequent growth in imports,

³⁹ Transport fees were also reported in the issues dated October 1933 (Phari-Kalimpong: Rs. 5-6; Kalimpong-Phari: Rs. 8), January 1934 (Kalimpong-Phari: Rs. 5-6) and February-March 1934 (Phari-Kalimpong: Rs. 10-12; Kalimpong-Phari: Rs. 4-5). See *Tibet Mirror* (1933: 2; 1934a: 8; 1934b: 8).

⁴⁰ Harris (2013: 2).

⁴¹ *Tibet Mirror* (1942: 2).

as basic supplies were funnelled to China, at the time engaged against Japan on the Far Eastern front.⁴² The price fluctuations in transport rates reflect the general trends of local economy, in turn affected by supranational events; the interweaving of geo-political and financial dynamics during WWII and in the post-war immediacy is a well-known consequence of conflicts fought at a global level. The tens, often hundreds, of thousands of maunds in commodity loads transiting annually along the Indo-Tibetan route generated a corresponding income, worth millions of rupees, in freightage. In the following pages, I will attempt a more detailed analysis of the actual value, in transport rates, generated by two commodities, namely wool and cotton-pieces, which represented the most quantitative relevant items respectively exported from and imported to Tibet via Kalimpong between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s. For the sake of convenience, I have divided my analysis into two sections: the first, presented hereafter, will deal with the export of wool along the southbound route over the period 1942-54, while the second section will examine the northbound transit of cotton-pieces between 1942 and 1954, with a brief diversion on transport fares that the Tibetan government accorded at a special rate to Indian officials.

3.1 *The price of going south: wool loads and transport fees*

Before delving any deeper into the nitty-gritty of freightage fares, a *caveat* is necessary: the figures produced below are projections extrapolated from incomplete data sets and must therefore be understood as indicative and approximate. This is particularly true for the years 1942-46, as only a few issues of the *Tibet Mirror* are currently available for the period,⁴³ even the export data compiled by Travers, and here used as source of reference, present inherent lacunae and “artificial” adjustments, a fact remarked by the author herself.⁴⁴ It is worth recalling at this point that, despite their titles, British Trade Agencies were not, to all intents and purposes, *trade* posts, rather they functioned as intelligence stations, collecting precious information on the socio-political developments in Lhasa, and their interest in

⁴² The shortage of overseas shipping, and the consequent halt of exports to the United States, forced the traders to cut themselves a niche in the local market: in 1942, the Indian mills turned their purchases to Tibetan raw wool, thus providing a release for the accumulated stocks in Kalimpong. See the *Himalayan Times* (1952: 6).

⁴³ The following is a list of issues per volume printed in the 1942-1946 period and currently available for consultation: v. 11, no. 1-3, 7 (August to October 1942, February 1943); v. 12, no. 10 (May 1944); v. 13, no. 1, 9 (August-September 1944, May-June 1945); v. 14, no. 3, 5-7 (December 1945, March to April-May 1946). No issues are available for the months between May 1946 and July 1947.

⁴⁴ Travers (2018: 168 fn. 19).

economic matters was therefore marginal.⁴⁵ In the light of that, the transport fees presented below (Table 1) represent the yearly average, calculated on the basis of the quotations recorded in the issues of the *Tibet Mirror* available to me at the time of writing. These figures, referring to the cost of a loaded mule (ca. 1 maund per pack animal), will be multiplied for the corresponding annual exports as presented in Travers to provide a gross estimate of the income generated by wool trade in the transport sector.⁴⁶ The leg examined is the Phari-Kalimpong, the most relevant in the present discussion as the export data refer to the transit through Dromo (Chumbi Valley).⁴⁷

| | Wool transit (Volume in maunds) | Transport fees (Rs. per maund) | Total annual freightage income (Rs.) |
|---------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1942-43 | 56,994 | ~ 16 | ~ 896,000 |
| 1943-44 | 33,022 | ~ 28 | ~ 896,000 |
| 1944-45 | 57,150 | ~ 28 | ~1,568,000 |
| 1945-46 | 62,345 | ~ 24 | ~ 1,488,000 |
| 1946-47 | 116,307 | ~ 28 | ~ 2,976,540 |

Table 1 — Total annual freightage fares for the period March 1942- March 1947

Starting from the year 1946-47, the reliability of data in terms of transport fees positively increases, as more issues of the *Tibet Mirror* become available. Regrettably, the same cannot be said for the volume of wool transiting across the border: statistics relative to the post-Independence period were in fact collected at selected Railway Stations, hence they are just indicative of the inner movement of the commodity from the ports of entry (e.g., Kalimpong) to those of exit (e.g., Calcutta), a trend mostly dependent on external demand. These figures, referring to the fiscal period 1946-49, are contained in a statement presented to the Parliament by the Minister of the

⁴⁵ McKay (1992).

⁴⁶ Travers (2018: 169). The British reports were generally dispatched in March, yet there were instances where only ten or eleven months were accounted for; in consideration of that, Travers adjusts the figures, corroborating them with the statistics collected at Calcutta concerning the transit of wool through Bengal. Similarly, the transport fees have been, wherever possible, calculated over a March-to-March period. The lack of quotations available for certain months made necessary the adoption of an artificial mean value; the order of approximation is indicated in the tables by the following symbols: ~ (zeroth order of approximation), ≈ (first order of approximation), ≅ (second order of approximation). The higher the order, the more reliable the figure is.

⁴⁷ The data set in Travers contains statistics mostly compiled by the British Trade Agency in Yatung (2018: 168).

Commerce Kshitish Chandra Neogy on February 27, 1950.⁴⁸ The statistics, reported below (Table 2) and to be treated as approximate only, appear to be rather conservative in their estimates, the latter a fact largely ascribable to the reasons given above. A point in question is represented by the fiscal year 1946-47: the volume in maunds provided by Travers in her data set (i.e., 116,307) appears slightly higher than the figures (i.e., 106,615) advanced by Harris⁴⁹ for the period April 1, 1946 to March 31, 1947, both of which amply overhaul the statistics compiled by the Ministry of Commerce for the year in question.⁵⁰

| | 1946-47 | 1947-48 | 1948-49 | 1949 (April to October) |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| Wool transit (volume in maunds) | 71,187 | 70,008 | 85,387 | 33,169 |

Table 2 — Total annual freightage fares for the period April 1946 to October 1949

The accuracy of wool transit figures for the financial years 1947-48 and 1948-49 finds corroboration in the statistics reported in the *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, a publication edited by the Office of International Trade, U.S. Department of Commerce. From the issue dated May 15, 1948,

Kalimpong stocks were estimated at about 8,000 to 9,000 bales⁵¹ at the end of February. Total supplies of Tibetan wool will be about 8,000,000 pounds (ca. 90,000 maunds) this season as compared with 5,000,000 pounds (ca. 57,000 maunds) last season.⁵²

The difference in value between the statistics provided by K. C. Neogy and those distributed by the U.S. Office of International Trade for the financial year 1947-48 may be once again ascribable to the system used by the Indian Ministry of Commerce to gauge the volume of the

⁴⁸ "Provisional Parliamentary Debates (First Session)" (1950: 504).

⁴⁹ Harris (2008: 207).

⁵⁰ The statistics are given in tons. For sake of consistency, the figures shown in Table 2 have been converted to maunds; the original volumes communicated by the Minister of Commerce are as follows: 2,657 tons (F.Y.: 1946-47), 2,613 tons (F.Y.: 1947-48), 3,187 tons (F.Y.: 1948-49), and 1,238 (for the 7-month period: April to October 1949). See Provisional Parliament Debate (1950: 504).

⁵¹ Unit of weight equal to 218 kg (ca. 5.8 maunds).

⁵² *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1948: 32)

commodity transiting from Tibet to India. The drop in sales at the end of 1946 determined a surplus of stocks in Kalimpong, which in turn may account for the lower volume of maunds registered by the Indian Minister of Commerce compared to the statistics compiled by the British Trade Agency in Yatung. Triggered by post-war demand, the beginning of the season (October-November 1946) saw a surge in the quantity of wool transiting across the border, as Tibetan traders were eager to sell fresh clips to the best bidder. With the revival of overseas communications however, already existing Empire stocks were suddenly released:⁵³ the temporary saturation of the global market led to a drop in Tibetan wool exports, as reflected in the statistics collected at the Railway Stations by the Ministry of Commerce. Likewise, the discrepancy between the figures reported for the financial year 1947-48 in Table 2 and the ones broadcasted by the U.S. Office of International Trade is due to the different sources used to compile the statistics: the first one records the movement of wool maunds from stocking places (e.g., Kalimpong) to ports of exit (e.g., Calcutta), while the other registers the actual commodity transit across the border. Between February 1947 and February 1948, the number of bales shipped from Calcutta to the United States alone jumped from 125 to 2,446 bales, a mind-boggling 1,956.8 percent increment. Since the depots in Kalimpong were well-stocked, it is likely that most of these bales were remains from the previous season: in an effort to clear out old stocks, the import of fresh clips was therefore reduced, passing from the 8,000,000 pounds (ca. 106,000 maunds) of 1946-47 to 5,000,000 pounds (ca. 60,750 maunds) of 1947-48.⁵⁴ In the following years (1948-49 and 1949-50), the volume of wool crossing the border grew again, settling at an average of 7,000,000 pounds per financial year, as confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Commerce Dattatraya

⁵³ "... on reasonably optimistic assumption, the period required to dispose of existing Empire stocks alongside new clips would be on average 13 years from June 30th, 1945" (*Report and Recommendation of the London Wool Conference*, as quoted in Blau 1946, 180). To avoid a disorganisation of the market, the governments of four Commonwealth countries – the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa – established a "Joint Disposal Organisation" (J.O.) in 1945, the aim of which was to buy, hold, and sell the surplus wool accumulated by its members. Despite the estimates advanced at the London Wool Conference, J.O. stocks had almost disappeared by the 1949-50, and at the opening of the 1950-51 season the world wool stocks had reached their minimum levels ("World Wool Situation" 1952: 2-3).

⁵⁴ In the years prior to Partition, about 5,000,000 pounds of Tibetan wool were annually re-exported from Calcutta docks. These figures, reported in the *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, issue dated July 25, 1949, are in line with the statistics in Table 1. See *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1949: 6).

Parasuram Karmarkar at the Parliamentary session on November 23, 1950.⁵⁵

As the statistics provided in Table 2 do not extend beyond October 1949, I will supplement those data with figures on exports of Tibetan raw wool as recorded in other official sources. Regrettably, at the time of writing I could access only a restricted portion of the trade statistics compiled by the Indian Trade Agency in Yatung in the years 1940-54, a fact that forced me to rely on the information provided by the Office of International Trade of the United States; due to the lack of detailed, month-by-month registers, the numbers presented below are therefore to be understood as indicative only (Table 3). The statistics provided by the Indian Ministry of Commerce accounts for the first seven months of the financial year 1949-50 (April-October 1949). In the effort to reconstruct the whole annual trend, those numbers have been integrated with the figures on exports of Tibetan wool as recorded in *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, issue dated July 10, 1950: according to the latter, approximately 75 percent of the season's wool supply⁵⁷ in Tibet had been baled and shipped by the end of April 1950.⁵⁸ Between January and April 1950, exports of Tibetan wool to the United States alone amounted to 1,543,961 pounds, to which should be added those shipped to other foreign countries during February-April 1950, for a total of 1,856,529 pounds.⁵⁹ If we consider the figures registered by the British Trade Agency, Yatung for the period April-October 1949 (Table 2) and add them to the exports registered in *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, the volume of wool loads that transited across the border between April 1949 and April 1950 should have been in the order of 4,585,866 pounds. As the latter represented 75 percent of the total supply available in Tibet, the exports of wool in the financial year 1949-50 may be rounded up at a lump-sum of 6,200,000 pounds (ca. 75,347 maunds). These estimates are confirmed by the statistics provided in *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, issue dated January 8, 1951; therein, the total supply of Tibetan wool for the year 1949-50 is given at 20,000 bales (ca.

⁵⁵ "Provisional Parliamentary Debates (Third Session)" (1950b: 295). In mid-summer 1949, the U.S. Ministry of Commerce actually estimated that the Tibetan wool production in the year 1949-50 would not exceed 5,250,000 pounds (ca. 63,800 maunds) (*Foreign Commerce Weekly* 1949: 6), a projection that did not take into account the reduction of surplus stocks and the consequent price spike ("World Wool Situation" 1952: 3), that led to an increase in the volume of cross-border transit.

⁵⁷ The wool trading season begins at the end of the wet monsoon in October or November, when the first caravans cross the Himalayan passes towards India (Metcalf 1954: 7).

⁵⁸ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1950: 35).

⁵⁹ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1950: 35).

6,000,000 pounds / 72,917 maunds).⁶⁰ Although more on the conservative side, such figures appear in line with the statistics presented by D. P. Karmarkar and will therefore be used as acceptable estimates to calculate the approximate income from freightage fares in the financial year 1949-50.

Despite estimates prospecting a 10 percent increase in Tibet's wool production for the year 1950-51 (ca. 6,820,000 pounds), the Chinese encroachment effectively halted shipments of raw wool from Calcutta. At the end of October 1950, no more than 1,000 bales (ca. 300,000 pounds) of the new clips had been received in Kalimpong, and by November the bulk of Tibet's trade in wool had been diverted to southwest China.⁶¹ Wool trade resumed eagerly in the first months of 1951, and by February 12, 1951 no less than 20,000 bales (ca. 6,000,000 pounds / 72,917 maunds) were expected to be available for export from Calcutta.⁶² The global demand for wool inflated the price: it was only a matter of time before the bubble burst. The commodity, flowing in millions of pounds across the border, began to accumulate in the godowns and storing facilities of Kalimpong and Calcutta, where it remained largely unsold due to the enforcement of the ban by the U.S. government. In mid-1951, the American embargo depressed the local market, with the commodity depreciating by more than 50 percent.⁶³ It is to be noted that the values given for the financial year 1951-52 are indicative of the drop of volume consequent to the U.S. embargo, the effects of which dragged on into the following year. With most of the stocks accumulated between December 17, 1951 and February 29, 1952 (ca. 80,000 maunds / 6,600,000 pounds) bought at a fixed rate by the Chinese government, shipment across the border resumed, as the balance of 1951 clips and the unsold 1952 production were re-directed towards China via Calcutta. While in Kalimpong stock quotations were suspended for months, and the volume of wool transiting through the Chumbi Valley was considerably downsized,⁶⁴ the transport fees showed minimal variation, as the flow remained consistent for the most part of the year.⁶⁵ Starting from April 1953,

⁶⁰ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1951a: 21).

⁶¹ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1951a: 21).

⁶² *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1951b: 24).

⁶³ Metcalf (1954: 7)

⁶⁴ According to Metcalf (1954: 7), arrivals of Tibetan wool in Kalimpong during the 1952-53 trading season totalled approximately 5,000,000 pounds (ca. 60,764 maunds).

⁶⁵ The annual report compiled by the Indian Trade Agency, Yatung for the year 1952 (January-December) accounts for 62,229 maunds (ca. 5,696,562 pounds). The trend shows a marked slump in volume transiting across the Jelep La and Nathu La passes in mid-summer (July-September), with a virtual halt (only 33 maunds) in September. The trade resumed in earnest in November, reaching a peak (12,836

wool was once again priced, yet fluctuations throughout the financial year 1953-54 were limited and mostly regulated by China's demand, which was by then the main buyer;⁶⁶ such a trend remained virtually unaltered up to the closure of the border in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

| | Wool transit in (Volume in maunds) | Transport fees (Rs. per maund) | Total annual freightage income (Rs.) |
|---------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1946-47 | 106,000 | ~ 28 | 2,968,000 |
| 1947-48 | 60,750 | ~ 22 | 1,336,500 |
| 1948-49 | 85,387 | ≈ 22 | 1,878,514 |
| 1949-50 | 75,347 | ≈ 39 | 2,938,533 |
| 1950-51 | 72,917 | ≈ 50 | 3,645,850 |
| 1951-52 | 80,000 | ≈ 26 | 2,080,000 |
| 1952-53 | ~ 60,764 | ~ 20 | 1,215,280 |
| 1953-54 | ~ 48,611 | ≈ 30 | 1,458,330 |

Table 3 — Total annual freightage fares for the period April 1946 to April 1954

maunds) in December (National Archives of India, External Affairs, North Eastern Frontier, File No. N/52/2411/1201, "Trade Statistics Between India and Tibet"). The latter tendency would justify the larger volume registered for 1952-53 in Table 3, as the Indian financial year run from April 1, 1952 to March 31, 1953.

⁶⁶ The Chinese policy of purchasing large quantities of Tibetan raw wool in India at a premium price had stabilised the market, de facto hindering any speculative fluctuations (Metcalf 1954: 7). No detailed statistics concerning the quantity of raw wool transit through Kalimpong is available to me for the financial year 1953-54, yet according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1955 a decline in re-exports Tibetan wool clips from Calcutta was registered, a fact ascribed to the increase in purchases by China and other Communist countries. In 1955, the re-exports amounted to 3,400,000 pounds; in consideration of the trend registered in 1952-53, it seems likely to place the total volume of wool for the financial year 1953-54 in the order of 4,000,000 pounds (ca. 48,611 maunds) ("Foreign Agricultural Circular FW 4-56" 1956: 2), especially since imports of wool from Tibet were reported to still be very low in late June 1954 (see *Himalayan Times* 1954: 4).

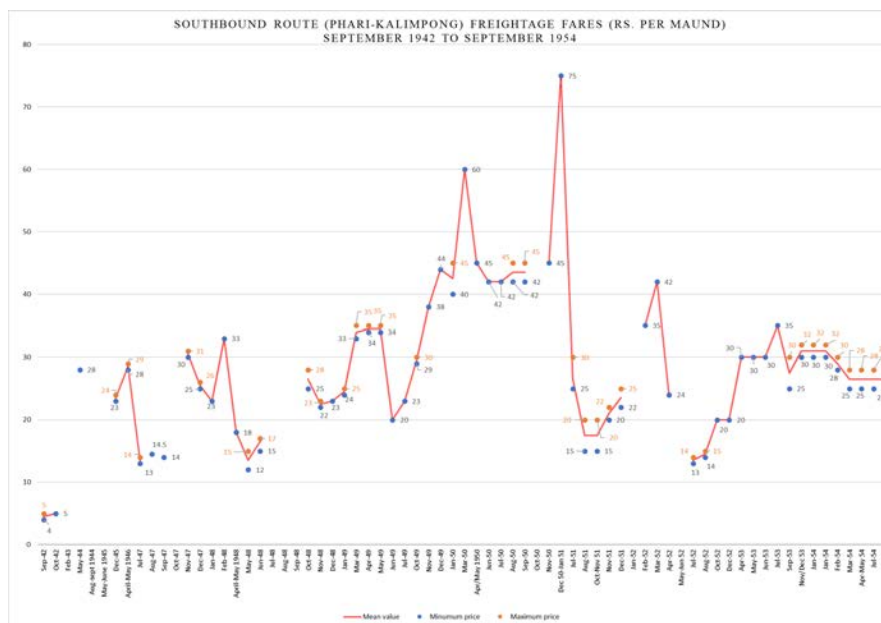


Table 4 — Freightage fares on the southbound route (Phari-Kalimpong) from September 1942 to September 1954. Maximum and minimum prices in Rs. per maund

3.2 Hiking the passes, hiking the fares: cotton-pieces and the northbound route

The data presented so far illustrate the impact that the wool trade had on a quantitative level on the induced transport sector: although different commodities found their way south on the backs of mules, raw wool admittedly trumped in sheer volume any other item, its market value virtually ruling the freightage fares on the southbound route. A similar situation, yet opposite in both direction flux and peak-times, occurred on the northbound route (Kalimpong-Phari): here the trade was dominated by cotton piece-goods and yarn – millions of pounds in bundles funnelled from Kalimpong to Tibet via the Nathu La and Jelep La passes. Contrary to wool, the circulation and distribution of which remained largely free and unhindered,⁶⁷ cotton, be it raw or in manufactured or semi-manufactured forms, remained a contested ground for most of the 1940s and 1950s. When WWII broke out in Europe in 1939, the Government of Britain introduced control on almost all the essential commodities. The adverse impact that the

⁶⁷ Regardless of the devastating impact that the 1950 U.S. ban had on the local trade, Tibetan wool was never a controlled commodity, and its price and transiting volume were regulated by basic demand and supply principles.

imposition of quotas and price ceilings had on the general populace was mitigated by a well-functioning distribution network and administrative structure, which ensured constant availability of essential supplies. In British India the adoption of similar measures occurred rather late, in 1941, and mostly at the urging of Provincial Governors, the first to feel the pressure that inflation and limited provisions had on consumers. The reluctance showed by British administrators in enforcing restrictions in the colonies reflected the imperialistic stance of His Majesty's Government, as national demand collided with war needs. If controls were introduced, the commodities which were required for war purposes would have been mostly consumed by the people of India. Restrictions were eventually adopted in 1942, but their implementation was half-hearted and mainly relied on price ceilings, the supervision of which was entrusted to largely understaffed and unprepared District Collectors.⁶⁸ Now considered an essential supply, cotton was restricted under the Cotton Control Act, 1942, and quota and licensing systems were introduced to ensure domestic needs. The relaxation of restrictions in early 1943, when inner stocks were still below demand, led to an inflationary spiral, quickly curbed through the reintroduction of control measures and the tightening of distribution and exports in the first part of the year.⁶⁹ By 1944, Tibetan traders who wished to export cotton piece-goods were required to obtain a permit, the latter a condition which some found more difficult than others to oblige. From the pages of the *Tibet Mirror*, joint-issue dated August-September 1944,

Starting from July, all loads of cotton cloth exported to Tibet without a permit have been blocked by the Pedong Police Office regardless of their owner. If one goes there right away and asks to have the goods back, they will be returned, but sending them to Tibet will not be permitted. Unclaimed items will be taken and then sold in the public market if not retrieved promptly.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ "The Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates" (1947: 1289).

⁶⁹ By the end of March 1944, the Government of India imposed restrictions on the cotton market in order to avoid speculative fluctuations; for such reason, the price was to be maintained between a floor of 400 rupees and a ceiling of 550 rupees per candy (784 pounds). In the event of cotton reaching the ceiling price, the Government had the right to requisite such cotton as required by the Indian mills, at a price either equal or 5 percent below the price ceiling ("*Foreign Commerce Weekly*" 1944: 21).

⁷⁰ *bod tshong rnam la phan pa'i gtam → da lam dbyin 7 zla pa'i tshe shar nas lag khyer med par bod phyogs btang ba'i ras cha do po mang tsam spos sdong pu li si'i las khungs nas bkag sdom byas yod 'dug pa'i do bdag su su yin rung lam sang phebs nas do po rtsis len zhu na bod phyogs gtong ma thub rung phyir log thob nges | gal srid mgyogs po rtsis len ma ghang tshe gzhung bzhes thog khroms dmangs kyi sar tshong rgyu yin 'dug pa'i gnas tshul || Tibet Mirror (1944: 4).*

The situation did not ease in the following years. In the aftermath of WWII, while the world hungered for basic supplies, the Government of India tightened control over essential commodities in an attempt to rectify the national balance. As outlined in the pages of the *Indian Information*,⁷¹ issue dated February 1, 1947,

1946 saw a progressive relaxation of wartime controls on many commodities. ... Similarly, the Anti-Hoarding and Profiteering Prevention Ordinance, in operation since 1943, and the Consumer Goods (Control or Distribution) Order, 1944 also ceased. ... A few essential commodities which are in short supply, like foodstuffs and textiles, coal and iron, however, continued to be controlled, not by wartime measures but by an Act of the Central Legislature passed in November 1946. This Act, called the "Essential Supplies (Temporary Powers) Act of 1946", was passed under the provision of a Parliamentary legislation enabling the Central Government for a period of one to five years after the cessation of the war to control production, supply and distribution of and trade and commerce in eight essential commodities.⁷² The case for continuance of controls even after the war emergency is over rests on the fact that inflation is still unabated and there is an acute shortage of goods in the country. ... India is not in a fortunate position to increase the supply of goods all at once ... (n)or India is able to increase supplies by imports as there are not enough surpluses abroad.⁷³

The general post-war dearth of supplies, especially cotton cloth, saw Tibetan traders became increasingly dependent on the quota system introduced by their southern neighbour. From the *Tibet Mirror*, joint-issue April-May 1946,

"On Textile" – The World War is over, yet nowadays there is a scarcity of global foodstuffs, textiles, and the like. Furthermore, there are concerning rumours that the workers of the mill factories had to suspend their work and that the materials are scarce. Due to that, and in consideration of the low quantity of textile exported, the Government of India has no choice but to produce less than 10 percent of all of the existing quota of textile and to block the export of textile from India for three months starting from the first days of June.

⁷¹ Magazine edited by A. S. Iyengar, Principal Information Officer, with the aim to provide a condensed record of the main activities of the Government of India.

⁷² "'Essential commodity' means any of the following classes of commodities: (i) foodstuffs, (ii) cotton and woollen textiles, (iii) paper, (iv) petroleum and petroleum products, (v) spare parts of mechanically propelled vehicles, (vi) coal, (vii) iron and steel, (viii) mica" (Essential Supplies (Temporary Powers), Act XXI 1946).

⁷³ *Indian Information* (1947: 102).

Discussions are allegedly ongoing between India and neighbouring countries regarding trading textiles for grains. The news suggests that despite being a neighbouring country, Tibet won't receive textiles unless grains are sent from Tibetan estates to India. Even so, there are dialogues underway with the Indian authorities, facilitated by the Political Officer in Sikkim, who has been a vital advocate for Tibet and persists in offering assistance. It seems like he has a plan for Tibet to secure the same textile quota as before, rather than a reduced one.⁷⁴

Starting from January 1947, monthly lists of authorised cloth exporters began to be reproduced in the pages of the *Tibet Mirror*, thus freeing any interested party from presenting themselves to the Textile Office in Kalimpong to consult them. The newspaper provided local officials with an invaluable broadcasting platform through which to reach highly mobile individuals: as most certified traders were either contractors or transient agents, it was not unusual for quota calls to go unattended. These lists, known in Tibetan as *mingto* (*ming tho*), represent a precious source of historical and socio-economic information for scholars, as they contain not only the name of the various traders but also their place of origin (*pha yul*), their Kalimpong address, and the amount (in maund) of cotton cloth they had been allocated. In the light of the present impossibility of accessing the statistics compiled by the Indian Trade Agency, Yatung, these lists will therefore be used as main source from which to extrapolate the financial spillovers in the transport sector on the southbound route during the years 1948 and 1951. These data will be supplemented with the export figures of cotton piece-goods from India to Tibet over the years (July-June) 1944-45, 1945-46, 1946-47 (Table 5).⁷⁵

| Months/Years | 1944-45 (maunds) | 1945-46 (maunds) | 1946-47 (maunds) |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| July | 3,744 | 199 | 3,419 |

⁷⁴ *ras chas skor* → 'dzam gling dmag thag chod tsam byung rung | da dung 'dzam gling yongs su lto gos ras cha sogs shin tu dkon ba'i khar 'thag 'phrul khang las byed rnam nas las ka bshol rgyu'i 'jigs gtam dang rgyu chas dkon stabs sogs kyi ras cha'i 'thon 'bor je zhan byung rkyen rgya gar gzhuung nas dbyin zla 6 tshes shar nas bzhung ras cha'i thob thang ji yod kyi brgya nas bcu tham pa nyung bar mi byed ka med ma zad zla yun gsum ring rgya gar nas phyi la ras cha gtong rgyur bkag bsdom byed dgos kyang | rgya gar gyi phyi yul su sus rgya gar du 'bru rigs gtong bar khas len byas pa'i yul ljongs khag la ras cha sprod gtong chog pa'i bka' mol gnang ba'i gnas tshul thos | gong gsal gnas tshul la bltas na bod kyang rgya gar gyi phyi yul yin gshis bod nas rgya gar du 'bru rigs ma btang na ras cha mi thob pa ltar mthong rung dpal ldan 'bras spyi blon chen mchog nas bod la gzhan dang mi 'dra ba'i phan thog chen po gnang dang gnang mus su mchis na da dung yang rgya gar gzhuung dang bka' mol gnang nas lngar rgyun ras cha'i thob thang ji yod kyi grags 'bor las ma nyung ba'i thabs shes gnang yong snyam || *Tibet Mirror* (1946: 7).

⁷⁵ Stats published in the *Tibet Mirror* (1947c: 4-5).

| | | | |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|
| August | 4,017 | 198 | 3,229 |
| September | 1,699 | 117 | 2,861 |
| October | 1,569 | 424 | 2,266 |
| November | 716 | 210 | 1,398 |
| December | 1,066 | 1,573 | 1,848 |
| January | 531 | 3,300 | 1,044 |
| February | 631 | 3,061 | 2,516 |
| March | 2,865 | 2,294 | 1,828 |
| April | 1,403 | 1,722 | 1,118 |
| May | 2,027 | 5,125 | 1,266 |
| June | 549 | 3,450 | 1,838 |
| TOTAL | 20,817 | 21,583 | 24,631 |

Table 5 — Statistics of cotton cloth exported from India to Tibet in the years 1944-45, 1945-46, 1946-47

Prior statistics covering the period from June 1944 to June 1947 confirm a negative trend in quantity of cloth allotted to Tibet each month, following the re-enforcement of control policies.⁷⁶ The monthly quota of 4,200 maund, registered up to December 1944, decreased drastically in 1945, settling on an average of 866 maund per month (January-December 1945), a situation mainly due to the block imposed on imports by the Tibetan government. In 1946, the curve of the exports picked up, totalling an average of 2,576 maunds per month (January-December 1946). Starting from June 1947, the system was changed, and a fixed quota of 280 tons (ca. 7,502 maunds) was allocated on a six-month basis to avoid marked fluctuations. Such a measure did not last long however, and, as early as September 1947, the share was recalibrated to 265 tons (ca. 7,100 maunds) due to domestic shortage,⁷⁷ for a monthly average of 1,183 maunds, confirmed in the year 1948. At the time, the whole quota allotted to Tibet was entrusted to eighteen Indian wholesalers, the only ones authorised to sell it at retail level. When control – and therefore price ceilings – was removed on December 31, 1947, the quantity of unsold stocks accounted for 836 *gentri* (*'gan khri*) (3,344 maunds), a surplus that was carried over into 1948 and added to the monthly quota of 270 *gentri* (1,080 maunds).⁷⁸

Discontent over the imposition of a filtered access to the quotas allotted to Tibet increased throughout the year,⁷⁹ fomented by rumours of a price cartel and consequent inflationary spiral caused by the wholesalers.⁸⁰ In early March 1949, following a series of intense

⁷⁶ Stats published in the *Tibet Mirror* (1947a: 3).

⁷⁷ *Tibet Mirror* (1947d: 5).

⁷⁸ *Tibet Mirror* (1948a: 7).

⁷⁹ *Tibet Mirror* (1948b: 10).

⁸⁰ *Tibet Mirror* (1948c: 6).

negotiations with representatives of the Tibet Traders' Association, the Government of India relented, and the management and distribution of the whole textile quota were delegated to the Tibet Cotton Cloth and Yarn Syndicate based in Kalimpong. The issue was far from being solved however, as the syndicate was run by Indian merchants on the orders of the Government of India and under the supervision of a specially appointed official, the Tibet Liaison Officer.⁸¹ In an interview released to the *Himalayan Times* on August 28, 1950 and printed in the issue dated September 3, the leader of the Tibetan delegation Tsepon Wangchuk Deden Shakabpa (*rtsis dpon* dBang phuyg bde ldan zhwa sgab pa, 1907-89) conveyed the frustration of a category who felt to have been robbed of freedom of purchase and choice, and blamed the syndicate of purposely keeping low stocks in order to force the sale of the least sought-after textile varieties at a high price.⁸²

By November 1949, economic frictions within the Kalimpong mercantile sector were temporarily set aside as more concerning news reached the trade hub from the other side of the Himalayas: rumours of Chinese encroachment on Tibetan territory led to a significant, although transitory reduction in transborder transit. While wool trade picked up fairly quickly, a general dearth of textile characterised most of 1950, and quotas lay below the limit fixed in 1948. By 1951, the situation improved,⁸³ and in the financial year 1951-52 the number of bales (1 bale = 480 pounds / 5.8 maunds) exported to Tibet totalled 2,566 (ca. 14,910 maunds), a volume in line with pre-1950 standards.⁸⁴ The statistics compiled by the Indian Trade Agency, Yatung for the year 1952 (January-December) confirm a volume of cloth imports to Tibet of 12,570 maunds.⁸⁵ Prior to the decontrol of cloth distribution, export limitations were in terms of quantity, as no more than 600 tons (ca. 16,075 maunds) per year could be allotted to Tibet. The lifting of restrictions allowed to noticeably increase the quantity available to licenced traders, and by 1953 the whole quota administered by the Political Officer in Sikkim was in the order of 1,000 tons (ca. 26,792

⁸¹ "Parliamentary Debates" (1950: 658).

⁸² *Himalayan Times* (1950: 7). The situation improved only at the end of July 1951, when the Political Officer in Sikkim agreed to the setting up of an advisory committee formed by various representatives of Tibetan trading community in Kalimpong with the aim of assisting the Tibet Liaison Officer in his functions (*Himalayan Times* 1951: 9; *Tibet Mirror* 1951b: 8).

⁸³ On July 30, 1951, the Political Officer in Sikkim yielded to the requests advanced by both members of the Tibet Traders' Association and representatives of petty merchants and allowed the establishment of an advisory board to assist the Tibet Liaison Officer in revising the old registers (*ming deb*) listing the authorised traders to ensure a fairer distribution of individual quotas (*Himalayan Times* 1951: 9).

⁸⁴ "Parliamentary Debates" (1951: 719).

⁸⁵ National Archives of India, External Affairs, North Eastern Frontier, File No. N/52/2411/1201, "Trade Statistics Between India and Tibet."

maunds) per year.⁸⁶ In 1954, the quota fell to 800 tons (ca. 21,434 maunds) a year.⁸⁷

Due to limited access to precise export statistics, especially for the financial years 1952-53 and 1953-54, any estimate of annual income on northbound freightage fares presented hereafter (Table 6) must be considered as merely indicative of a trend the magnitude of which has been extrapolated from a series of incomplete data.

| | Cloth transit (Volume maunds) | in | Transport fees (Rs. per maund) | Total annual freightage income (Rs.) |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1945-46 | 15,265 | | ~ 52 | ~ 793,780 |
| 1946-47 | 30,706 | | ~ 30 | ~ 921,180 |
| 1947-48 | 10,435 | | ~ 39 | ~ 406,965 |
| 1948-49 | 12,960 | | 26 | 336,960 |
| 1949-50 | 12,960 | | 24 | 311,040 |
| 1950-51 | < 12,960 | | 18 | < 233,280 |
| 1951-52 | 14,968 | | 25 | 374,200 |
| 1952 (April-Dec) | 10,269 | | 50 | 513,450 |

Table 6 — Total annual freightage fares for the period April 1945 to December 1952

Regardless of such inevitable gross approximations, the order of the figures, both in maunds and rupees, is accurate enough to support quantitative comparisons with contemporary wages as raised on the southbound route (Table 7). Although the annual volume of cotton piece-goods transiting on the northbound route was on average five times less than the maunds of wool bundles headed south, the higher freightage fares exacted on the Kalimpong-Phari tract more than amortised the costs of inbound trips, especially between July 1952 and July 1953, when the rates rose steadily, reaching a spike over the period December 1952 and April 1953, with quotes at Rs.130 per maund (Table 7).

⁸⁶ "Parliamentary Debates" (1953: 2882-83).

⁸⁷ "Parliamentary Debates" (1954: 978). It should be stressed that availability does not necessarily reflect actual export volumes, as the latter were regulated by the economics of demand.

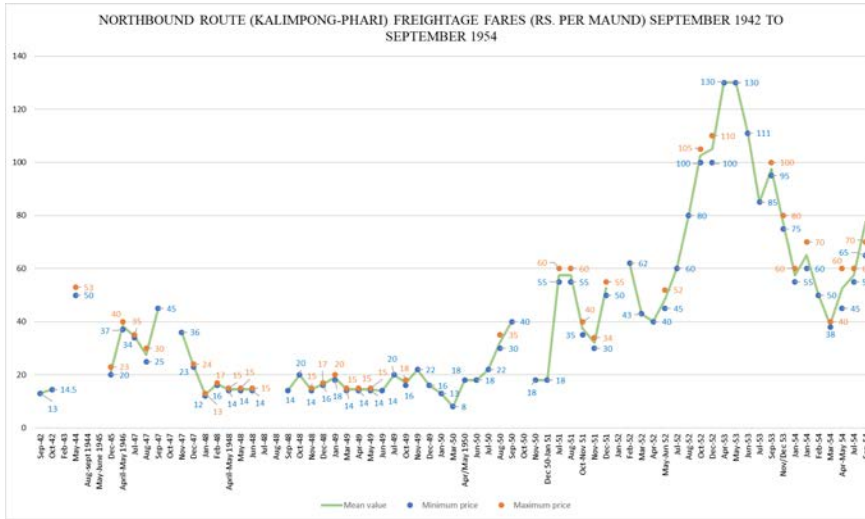


Table 7 — Freightage fares on the northbound route (Kalimpong-Phari) from September 1942 to September 1954. Maximum and minimum prices in Rs. per maund

As a matter of fact, exports to Tibet in the Indian fiscal year April 1, 1953-March 31, 1954 exceeded the value of imports, rising from 10 tons (268 maunds) of commodities a day to an average of 20 tons (536 maunds). Total value of exports in 1952-53 was Rs. 22,600,000 and in the ten-month period of 1953-54, or up to February 1, Rs. 18,580,000.⁸⁸ Whereas these statistics reflect a general trend and included all the sundry items exported and imported, they are significant in so far as they provide an explanation to the staggering increase in freightage fares registered over the years 1952-54.

4. Counting pockets: relative wealth and status display

The flow of wool and cotton-pieces loads translated, as the graph below shows (Table 8), into an economic spillover of impressive magnitude, ever more so if we consider that those millions of rupees

⁸⁸ *Foreign Commerce Weekly* (1954: 13). A clearer picture of such a trend emerges when examining the value of total imports from and exports to Tibet between the Indian fiscal years 1950-51 to 1953-54 as provided in the statement given during the Lok Sabha Parliamentary debate dated August 23, 1954. The figures are as follows: 1950-51: Imports Rs. 33,000,000, Exports Rs. 21,200,000; 1951-52: Imports Rs. 8,100,000, Exports Rs. 9,500,000; 1952-53: Imports Rs. 7,100,000, Exports Rs. 22,700,000; 1953-54: Imports Rs. 10,000,000, Exports Rs. 20,100,000 ("Appendix 1, Annexure No. 11" 1954: 16). As we can see, between 1951-52 and 1952-53 the value of exports registered a 239 percent increase against an 88 percent decrease in imports.

that the financial reports spread over the breadth of a year were in fact injected in the local economy over a few months.

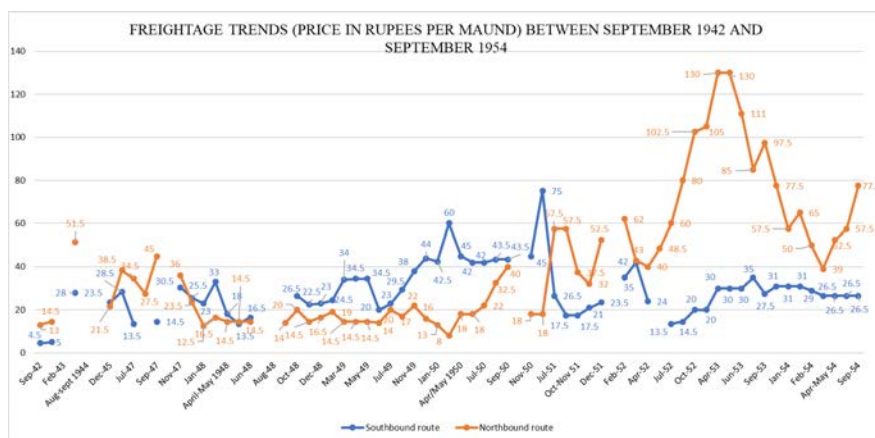


Table 8 — Freightage trends (prices in rupees) between September 1942 and September 1954

As the trade seasons came and went, a constant stream of commodities and money passed from one intermediary to the other – from one hand to another – in a series of channels that, stemming from a main source, branch out to nurture far away fields, their flow rapidly dwindling the more ramified they became. Money, like water, has the tendency to trickle away fast, and just as the farther branches of a river delta eventually become shallow and silted, so too the income generated from the trade did not reach all of those who engaged in it. The inequalities in force throughout the different stages of the commodity chains were present in the induced sectors as well, and the pyramid scheme thus created determined an uneven distribution of wealth among those involved in the transport business. Starting from the late 1930s and early 1940s, with the volume of items transiting on the southbound route increasing at a steady pace, the Himalayan passes became contested ground. Local communities, whose livelihood depended on seasonal transport of commodities across the border, were gradually but relentlessly forced out of the market – what had been until then a traditional right, born out of an ancestral acquaintance to the land, had morphed into a business, ruled by implacable economic principles. Prospective labour force flooded in numbers to the area of Kalimpong and Phari, and competition grew fierce. Trading families from Amdo and Kham moved their firms closer to the border, opening branches in the urban areas of Central Tibet and Kalimpong. Agents and muleteers were recruited and despatched locally: networks of trusted individuals were created to take charge of cargos and secure them against the dangers of both

wilderness and civilisation. Although the roads crossing the plateau (themselves barely tracks) menaced bandits, accidents, and inevitable delays, to cause Tibetan traders real concern were in fact the trappings of bureaucracy. Permits and licences, fees and taxes, random check-point controls – these were the unforeseeable events that could not be entrusted to strangers to solve. Based on a clan-like structure, Khampa trading firms relied on close-knit ties, similar in their essence to kinship bonds, that ensured members' commitment to the welfare of the whole group;⁸⁹ co-regional muleteers could therefore be implicitly trusted to hold the family's interest at heart, and their aggressive attitude made them prone to violence and threatening.⁹⁰ By the mid-1940s, Eastern Tibetan firms monopolised most of the transport market across the border, to the extent that some of their teamsters even worked as contractors, hiring their animals and expertise to the best bidder.

The social repercussions of the economic growth that the border trade brought about were far-reaching and went beyond the inclusion of a few Khampa families into the urban fabric of Lhasa or Shigatse. In an upending of the hierarchical ladder, many nobles found themselves increasingly enticed by the way of living of the mercantile sector and especially by the remunerative aspect of trade, to the extent of investing considerable sums of money into the purchase and equipment of trains of mules, some of which were occasionally hired out to privates. As the figures listed in the tables above show, renting whole caravans was an expensive affair, one not easily escaped by those who could not count on personal conveyances. In recounting his family's business in the wool trade, Sharchen Tashi Tsering (Shar chen bkra shis tshe ring), a trade agent for the monastic establishment of Ganden Chökhörling (dGa' ldan chos 'khor gling) in Shangs, Shigatse district, carefully recalls that, in the latter part of the 1940s, the price charged by locals in Phari for the last leg of the southbound route was around 14-15 silver *sang* (*srang*) per donkey (meaning, per maund).⁹¹ At the time (1946-48), the exchange rate was set at slightly above 2 silver *sang* per rupees, which would place the freightage fare paid by

⁸⁹ See Galli (2021).

⁹⁰ Already on August 26, 1943, in his demi-official letter to Secretary of the Central Board of Revenue Hugh Weightman, the Collector of the Excises and Salt of North-Eastern India R. B. S. Charan Das lamented the "readiness for violence" displayed by Tibetan muleteers when challenged at check-points about the destination of their cargos (National Archives of India, External Affairs, External Branch, File No. 104(2)-X/42, "Foreign Trade Control – Exports to China via Kalimpong. Prevention of without license", missive by the Collector of Central Excises and Salt, North-Eastern India to the Secretary of the Central Board of Revenue, dated August 26, 1943 (C.No. 11-Et/43/17745).

⁹¹ Shar chen bkra shis tshe ring (1996).

the Sharchens in line with the quotations recorded in the *Tibet Mirror* for that period. When we consider the volume traded by Tashi Tsering's family – 3,000 to 4,000 maunds of wool per year – the annual income generated in the induced sector was in the order of 84,000 to 120,000 rupees. Those who could afford to establish and maintain their own trains of mules could increment their total revenue by both reducing costs to external agents and hiring out their surplus animal packs and teamsters during slump periods. Those Central Tibetan aristocrats who, following in the steps of the Khampa trading families, set up a personal system of caravans, thus engaging in seasonal import/export activities, largely drew from their own estates, recruiting *miser* (*mi ser*) as teamsters and loaders. The recourse to *ulak* (*'u lag*), or corvée labour, allowed the principal investor (the lord of the house) to minimise the costs, as he recruited workers who toiled basically for free, as some sort of labour was legally required of them in exchange for protection, shelter, and food. As is well-known, *miser* are a most controversial topic and still a matter of dispute among Tibetan historians and anthropologists alike, as demonstrated by the numerous studies dedicated to them.⁹² I aim not to provide any further addenda, rather I here use the term in its most generic sense to indicate a low-class individual legally bonded to a landowner, by whom basic rights are granted in exchange for a set amount of labour, or *ulak*, the characteristics of which could vary from tilling and harvesting to transport and house chores. The essence of *ulak* ensured the master the maximum capitalisation of the resources, as the employment of personal teamsters cut off many of those intermediaries that formed the various steps of the commodity chain. Teamsters were provided with fodder and supplies for the journey, but the signing of legal agreements, known in Tibetan as *gendzin* (*gan 'dzin*) or *gengya* (*gan rgya*), made them responsible for any delay or mishaps occurring to the commodities en route. As a matter of fact, in a landscape difficult to navigate, mules represented an asset to be fully exploited, as the British and Indian officials came to understand at their own expenses: the increase in transit volume along the Lhasa-Kalimpong route, and the consequent paucity of pack-animals and porters, negatively impacted the movements of governmental personnel across Central Tibet. By the second half of the 1940s, annual lengthy negotiations were customarily carried out between representatives of the two governments to agree on fixed rates. The latter were strictly reserved to official travellers, as clearly stated in the express letter from the British Mission in Lhasa to Arthur John Hopkinson, then acting as

⁹² See, among many, Goldstein (1971a; 1971b; 1986; 1989b), Miller (1987; 1988), Bischoff (2013; 2017).

Political Officer in Sikkim, dated February 18, 1947.⁹³ Fine connoisseur of Tibetan policy towards foreigners, Hopkinson was not surprised by the reticence showed by the Lhasa government towards private adventurers, as he himself elucidated in a demi-official letter to Major Fry, dated April 28, 1947.⁹⁴ An excerpt from the missive is reported hereafter:

After discussions of over fourteen months on the Gyantse Trade Route we have at last got an agreement in respect of transport rates for officials only – private people are left to the mercies of the “market.” In Gartok the British Trade Agent has trouble every year over the same argument. The Tibetans do not want visitors, and are not going to arrange special transport facilities for them: and have already said so definitely in respect of the last application backed by the Government of India ...

The enforcement of fixed rates for foreigner officials was facilitated by the *ulak* system, as the district governors (*rdzon dpon*) could rely on corvée transport provided by the *miser* residing in the governmental estates of which they were in charge. Whereas in an “open” market (although such a definition is here used in a rather loose sense), muleteers, donkey-drivers or porters could make their own prices, thus increasing their chances of profit, in the case of British and Indian personnel in an official mission, transport fares along pre-set legs of the route were firmly set, and no wiggle room was allowed. The analysis offered so far fails to go beyond the mere category of teamsters and porters to grasp the peculiar conditions of the single individual: as is often the case for the “silent voices” of history, theirs is a nameless remembrance, a cypher in a levelling round-up figure. Yet, the sheer numbers – of animals and men – that flatten the identity of caravanners to the point of historical anonymity are the same element that granted them prestige – a status that raised them above fellow farers. On that note, I will conclude with the words of A. D. Moddie, IAS and historian of the Himalayan region, who so describes the socio-economic value local populace still ascribed to large trains of mules as late as 1957,

As there were only two ways, a trader’s or a pilgrim’s permit, I opted for the former. I wrote to our agent in Gangtok, Sikkim, to arrange a mule and a muleteer for me; I would walk. When I arrived in Gangtok and enquired about the mule arrangement, the Agent prevaricated. He shyly disclosed he had arranged twenty mules. He was taking advantage of a sahib-type, who also knew the Political Officer,

⁹³ National Archives of India, File No. 12(34)-NEF/47, Express Letter No. 9(3)-L/47).

⁹⁴ National Archives of India, File No. 12(34)-NEF/47, D.O. No 10(17)-P/46).

Gangtok, to send his mules train in, for greater security, under my leadership. When I met Apa Pant, the P.O. for my permit in English, Hindi and Tibetan, I thought I would amuse him with the story of one mule becoming twenty. Apa Pant saw no humour in it. In serious official style, he advised me to take all twenty mules saying, “*One mule no status, twenty mules status.*”⁹⁵

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⁹⁵ The following quote was part of a private conversation between A. D. Moddie and Rajen Upadhyay (Namchi Government College, South Sikkim), posted on the latter’s blog on October 12, 2010 (my italics). See <http://sikkim-historyhunter.blogspot.com/2010/10/trade-between-india-and-tibet-in.html>

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