Akshardhara Research Journal
Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed International Research Journal
E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

07

At the Crossroads of Civilizations: A Comparative Study of the Three Ancient Trade Routes of North-East India

Dr. Nandita Moitra
Assistant Professor
Guru Nanak College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous), Mumbai
Email- nandita@gncasc.org

DOI. https://doi-ds.org/doilink/10.2026-18835691/ARJ/2026/V1/SI05/101026A007

Abstract

This study investigates the three principal trade routes of North-East India as dynamic agents of social, cultural, and religious transformation rather than mere channels of commerce. By connecting the region with Tibet, China, mainland India, and Southeast Asia, these routes facilitated not only the movement of goods—such as silk, salt, spices, and forest products -but also the transmission of ideas, artistic practices, and belief systems. The analysis demonstrates how the overland route to Tibet reinforced economic interdependence between hill and plain tribal communities. The Southeast Asian corridor, in turn, embedded local communities within wider trans-Asian networks, fostering hybrid cultural and religious practices. By analyzing the economic, cultural, religious, and political dimensions of these trade routes, the study highlights the enduring impact of commerce on identity formation, religious development, social cohesion and historical development in the region. The research underscores that trade is not merely a transactional activity but a subtle, transformative force shaping societies across time and space.

***Keywords**: Civilization, Movement, Goods, Overland route, tribal Communities*

Introduction

In north-eastern India there are hills and valleys covered with dense forests which in ancient times at least served as an impregnable barrier for the free entrance of the Tibeto-Burman tribes. For traversing these forests and hills there was a track between Manipur and China from which some trade trickled through China to India and vice versa. In the second century B.C. when the Chinese ambassador Chang-kien reached Bactria, he was surprised to see their bamboos imported from China. In reality the bamboos from Yunnan reached the Middle Country through Assam and from there they were transported to Bactria through the Grand Route. But in spite of this sporadic trade the north-eastern route did not have much importance because it was not easy to traverse it (Chandra 1977: 2).

The Himalayan ranges shut off the country from other parts of Asia. But because of the passes, India could maintain its commercial relationship with the rest of Asia. There are several passes in the north Himalayan region which may be divided into three groups, i.e. the Shipki group, the Almora group and the Darjeeling-Sikkim group. Through all these passes trade routes were established between India and Tibet. Similar passes also allowed trade between India and Burma through the north-eastern corner of Assam, Manipur and the Arakans. But the most important trade routes connecting India and the west, since the proto-historic times, however, flourished through the passes in the north-western ranges of the Himalayas (Chandra 1977: 2).

The Eastern Himalayas are one of the important geomorphological units of the larger Himalayas. It covers the regions of Sikkim, Bhutan, eastern Nepal and south eastern Tibet. The socio-cultural tradition that has evolved through the ages indicates that the region has a special significance among the Himalayan belt. Politically, the Eastern Himalayas incorporate the kingdoms of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim, a connotation that became particularly relevant during the colonial period in the nineteenth century (Shrivastava 1968: 3).

The term ‘trade-route’ does not necessarily connote a well-made road. The tracks along which trade moved were often extremely rough and difficult. Yet, the perseverance of baggage

©Copyright 2025 *ADRJ*. All Rights Reserved

animals—such as yak, donkey, mule, or sheep—made such movement possible. The small, stocky Tibetan mule, for instance, could easily climb up and down the mountain slopes (Spengen, Wim van 1995). The Silk Route, an ancient network of trade routes formally established during the Han Dynasty, served as a link between distant regions. It was not a single road but a complex network of routes which, over time, facilitated not only the movement of goods but also the transmission of ideas, institutions, and beliefs. It was through these routes that Buddhism spread from India to China and East Asia. Thus, these routes functioned as carriers of cultural exchange as much as of commerce (Khan 2005: 80).

During the ancient and medieval period, the economy of the Eastern Himalayas was centred largely on trade. Tibet formed the nucleus of this highly structured commercial system from around the mid-seventh century, particularly during the reign of Song-Tsen Gampo to Ral-pa-Chen (620–820 AD). The influence of Tibet extended far beyond its immediate political boundaries. Across the Himalayan regions—Ladakh, Lahul, Spiti, Garhwal, Kumaon, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Assam—as well as parts of Burma and western China, there existed populations with strong cultural and religious ties to Tibet (Shrivastava 1968: 110–111). Commercial interactions between Tibet and its neighbouring regions had existed since ancient times. Trade relations between India and Tibet continued up to the Islamic conquest of North India, while connections with Bengal became more pronounced under the Pala Dynasty, largely through religious exchanges (Shrivastava 1968: 110–111).

Although trade was conducted across both the western and eastern Himalayas, the structure and nature of trade differed significantly between the two. The western Himalayan trade was oriented towards Central Asian centres such as Bukhara, Kokand, and Turkestan through Kashmir and Ladakh. In contrast, the eastern Himalayan trade involved Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim as key participants (Khan 2005: 80).

This trade was connected to various mountain passes which served as a vital conduits for trade. This trade was carried out not only by state officials and monastic institutions but also, and more importantly, by indigenous trading communities. These communities, accustomed to the harsh terrain and climatic conditions, formed the backbone of the trading system and sustained the flow of goods across the region (Khan 2005: 80).

In the trans Himalayan trade organised religion, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, played a central role. Monasteries were not merely religious centres; they actively contributed to economic life by facilitating the growth of settlements, organising trade fairs, and even influencing processes of state formation. Through these activities, monasteries played a significant role in shaping patterns of trade and interaction across the region (Shrivastava 1968: 110–111). The Himalayan population was connected by a shared religious framework, namely Lamaism, a form of Mahayana Buddhism. Trade and religion were closely interlinked, as monasteries frequently engaged in commercial activities, and pilgrims often carried goods to and from Tibetan markets (Shrivastava 1968: 110–111).

Role of Tibetan Monasteries

Tibetan monasteries also acted as important economic institutions. They employed peddlers who led caravans and conducted trade on their behalf. These peddlers, often bound to monasteries or aristocratic establishments, played a crucial role in sustaining long-distance trade. Monasteries themselves possessed considerable resources, including livestock, grain, and valuable goods, which further strengthened their economic role. By the nineteenth century, Tibet had thus emerged as a dynamic centre of cultural and commercial activity in the Himalayan region (Lamb 1960).

The geographical proximity of the Himalayan kingdoms contributed to the development of a shared Buddhist cultural identity. Trade and Buddhism maintained a symbiotic relationship, reinforcing each other over time. This cultural cohesion facilitated the movement of merchants, pilgrims, and missionaries across Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Bengal. In this process, a wide network of mercantile and entrepreneurial

activity evolved across the region (Khan 2005: 80).

Trade through Assam

The first trade contact was through Assam, since time immemorial there had been trade relations between the people of Assam, Tibet and Burma. Before the interior parts of the district were opened up by road communications, there were certain trade centres located along the foothills where traders from the hills and the plains met and exchanged their goods. In the absence of money as a medium of exchange, these trade relations were primarily based on barter, and commodities were exchanged according to the basic needs of individuals, families, or villages (Burman 1963: 368).

Regular trade relations between the East India Company (EIC) and Assam were established in 1771. The EIC government, through its agents, collected detailed information regarding the resources of Assam and Bhutan. Hugh Baillie pointed out to the Company that there existed immense potential for profit in trade with Assam and Bhutan. He observed that the Company could obtain lac of various kinds, muga silk, black pepper, and spices from Assam in exchange for woollen cloth and salt (Lamb 1960: 85).

Following this, he was sent to Goalpara with a license to conduct trade in salt. Trade extended deep into Bhutan from Kamrup through the duars or mountain passes, and there is evidence to suggest that these routes did not terminate at Kamrup. In fact, Kamrup formed part of a larger trade route connecting South-West China with India. The Bhutias played a crucial intermediary role in this system, exchanging goods such as lac, woollens, yak tails, salt, and Chinese silk for products like Assam muga silk and dried fish. In this way, the Bhutias acted as middlemen in the Assam–Tibetan trade network (Burman 1963: 368).

Another significant trade route in the eastern Himalayan region was the Silk Route through Sikkim. The Silk Road, also referred to as the Sikkim Silk Route in this context, connected China's Yunnan province with Tibet and north-eastern India. This route, though relatively less studied, was one of the earliest and most difficult overland routes linking India's eastern regions with southern China. It formed a part of the wider Silk Road network and existed even prior to the emergence of the Central Asian routes (Indian Culture Portal n.d.).

Trade through Sikkim

The snow-covered mountainous route connecting Lhasa in Tibet to India through the Jelep La Pass. This route was not only used for the exchange of goods but also served as a channel for the movement of knowledge, art, and culture. Silk, among other commodities, was traded along this route, contributing to its historical importance (Sandberg 1901).

After crossing Jelep La in eastern Sikkim, the route descended rapidly into the Chumbi Valley of Tibet. During the nineteenth century, the East India Company reached an understanding with the Chogyal of Sikkim to utilise this route for the tea trade. However, over time, the importance of this route declined, particularly with the rise of large-scale tea plantations in Bengal and Assam, which reduced dependence on long-distance trade routes (Roy Chowdhury 2021).

Trade through Arunachal Pradesh

Along the trade routes, it was the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh who maintained extensive trade relations with Tibetans and the Chinese. Several tribes acted as intermediaries, facilitating the exchange of goods between Tibet and the plains of Assam. The Mishmis, for instance, maintained regular trade relations with Tibetan traders, from whom they obtained goods such as lama swords, gongs, flint and steel, copper utensils, woollen caps, woollen cloth, beads, Tibetan masks, salt, musk deer skins, and various kinds of livestock (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 181–182).

The Kamans and the Terons also participated actively in cross-border trade. They travelled in groups across the Indo-Tibetan border and exchanged goods such as masks, pots, aconite (a form of poison), hides, skins, furs, Mishmi coats, and roots used for dyes and medicines. In return, they brought back brass pipes, cattle, gongs, woollen goods, copper vessels, and beads from Tibet (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 181–182).

The Idus, like other Mishmi groups such as the Taraons and Kamans, were also deeply involved in trade. Large groups of Idus regularly travelled to Tibet for commercial purposes. When unable to travel themselves, they sometimes sent their wives to conduct trade on their behalf. Prior to their journeys, they collected goods such as skins, hides, Mishmi teeta, musk, and roots for dyes from local villagers, promising to repay them through barter. From Tibet, they brought back woollen goods, raw wool, brass gongs, and ornamental beads. In some cases, money was also used, and Tibetan coins were brought back either for further trade or for use as ornaments (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 181–182).

Among the Mishmis, the *mithun* held immense value. It was not only used for meat, hide, and horn but also functioned as a measure of wealth and a medium of exchange. The possession of *mithuns* indicated economic status, and they were often used in transactions such as bride-price as payment. The Khamptis, on the other hand, were skilled elephant tamers and engaged in trade involving elephants (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988).

The Mishmi and other tribes exchange various wildlife and forest products including musk, musk deer skins, ivory, and vegetable poisons such as *Bisa*, which was used for poisoning arrows. These goods were exchanged for items like glass beads, cattle, and other necessities. Musk, in particular, was a highly valued commodity, although it was sometimes adulterated for trade purposes (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 181).

Trade between the Mishmis and Tibetans also included items such as bih (poison), guthewan (an aromatic root), manjeet (madder), and teethah (a medicinal root). In exchange, they received cattle, brass pipes, gongs, and copper vessels. Tibetan traders themselves travelled across difficult terrain into Mishmi regions in search of valuable goods like teeta and musk (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 181–182). The medicinal plant Coptis teeta, known as *Mishmi teeta*, was particularly valued and cultivated on a semi-domesticated scale for trade purposes (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988).

To promote trade, the British East India Company deployed various missions to Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim in order to assess the commercial viability of the region and to expand trade prospects. The establishment of commercial relations with the Himalayan region was seen as an important strategic and economic objective, based largely on the accounts provided by Company explorers. These missions aimed not only at opening trade and communication routes but also at countering potential rivals such as Russia and China (Lamb 1960: 85).

British Intervention in Trade

Despite limited initial understanding of the complexities of Tibetan trade, the British gradually extended official support to these efforts. Sir John Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, explored the possibilities of expanding trade in the early 1870s. Following a favourable report by R.B. Shaw, who had considerable knowledge of the northern frontiers, the British showed greater interest in the Ladakh route compared to routes through Darjeeling or Nepal, recognising its strategic importance (Lamb 1960: 85).

Trade remained central to British policy. By 1869, Tibet was consuming approximately 6,000,000 pounds of brick tea, a market that the British sought to penetrate by promoting Darjeeling tea as a superior alternative. In 1873, John Ware Edgar was deputed to explore the feasibility of constructing roads through Sikkim. He surveyed important passes such as Nathu La and Jelep La, where he encountered Tibetan traders. Subsequently, a road was constructed from Darjeeling to Jelep La with the cooperation of the Sikkim authorities. As a result, improving transportation links between Calcutta, Darjeeling, Siliguri, and Gangtok became a priority for facilitating trade (Lamb 1960: 85).

Trade Fairs

To promote trade, fairs were organised by the colonial Government, for instance, An annual fair, or mela, was held at Sadiya around the time of the full moon in late January or early February. This fair brought together various hill tribes and frontier communities for trade, distribution of government subsidies (posa), and settlement of disputes under the supervision of political officers. The Deputy Commissioner of the district attended

the fair, which also coincided with annual race meetings and athletic events involving both plains and hill communities (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 188).

From a political perspective, the fair played an important role in bringing together diverse tribal groups who otherwise had limited interaction. It provided an opportunity for these communities to engage with each other and with the colonial administration in a relatively peaceful setting (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 188).

During this period, fairs were also organised to promote better relations with hill tribes. Representatives from various communities—including the Khamptis, Singphos, Mishmis, and Adis—participated in these gatherings, for instance, at the fair held on February 18–19, 1866, groups such as the Idus, Taraons, and Kamans exchanged goods including textiles, daos, musk, ornaments, rubber, and medicinal herbs like Mishmi teeta in return for salt (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 188).

Ivory was one of the most valuable commodities traded by the Singphos, who were skilled hunters. They hunted elephants and rhinoceroses, selling tusks and horns to Marwari merchants. Ivory fetched prices ranging from Rs 10 to Rs 13 per seer, while rhinoceros horn could be sold for as much as Rs 80 to Rs 100 per seer (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988: 188).

Several such fairs were held from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and were attended by large numbers of tribal participants. One of the most important was the fair at Udalguri, which attracted Tibetan Bhutias from Tawang. The Sadiya fair catered to the needs of various tribes such as the Miris, Mishmis, Khamptis, Singphos, and Abors.

To carry on the trade, efforts were made to expand transportation across the hilly terrain of the north-eastern region was extremely difficult. Many routes were challenging even for people travelling on foot and were nearly impossible for loaded elephants. Dense bamboo forests and cane jungles had to be cleared manually to create pathways. Elephants, when used, often suffered from injuries due to rough terrain, including worn-out foot pads and sore backs caused by uneven loads on steep slopes (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988).

Under such conditions, the most effective means of transport were human carriers or hill coolies, who were accustomed to carrying loads on their backs while navigating steep and rugged terrain. Their ability to move freely with their hands and arms made them better suited to these routes than animals (Lohit District Gazetteer 1988).

Conclusion

Thus, trade routes of the Eastern Himalayas were not merely pathways for the movement of goods; they connected even the most remote and inaccessible regions, bringing together people, cultures, and ideas. Through these routes, both everyday necessities and high-value commodities—such as gold, musk, salt, wool, silk, wildlife products like ivory and yak tails, and medicinal herbs like Mishmi teeta—were exchanged, sustaining vibrant local economies and long-distance networks of trade. This system was closely supported by Tibetan Buddhist monks and monasteries, which functioned not only as centres of spiritual life but also as key hubs of trade and organisation. At the same time, various tribal communities of North-East India played a crucial role as intermediaries. Their deep knowledge of the terrain enabled them to facilitate and sustain the trade which was largely dependent on cooperation, trust, and mutual need.

The trade routes were used by a variety of groups like tribal communities, British trading caravans, and Buddhist monks, all of whom contributed to the exchange of goods. The nineteenth century brought a significant shift with British intervention. Among the three major trade routes through the North East, the most preferred by the British was the Sikkim route. They made efforts to develop more accessible routes, establish fairs and trading marts, and encourage the commercialization of both local and imported goods and introduced a new dimension to trade. In this process, several parts of North-East India became more closely integrated into wider economic networks which economically and culturally transformed the region.

References

Chandra, Moti (1977): *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Shrivastava, Balram (1968): *Trade and Commerce in Ancient India from Earliest Times to 300 A.D.*, Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Series Office.

Khan, Nasir Raza (2005): "India's Connection with the Silk Route", *India Quarterly*, Vol 61, No 1, Sage Publications, pp 75–90.

Lamb, Alastair (1960): *British India and Tibet 1766–1910*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Burman, Savitri (1963): "NEFA: Its Land and People", *India Quarterly*, Vol 19, No 4, pp 361–372.

Sandberg, Graham (1901): *An Itinerary from Sikkim to Lhasa*, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press.

Roy Chowdhury, Arunangsu (2021): "The Lost Road", *The Hindu*, 17 November.

Lohit District Gazetteer (1988): *Gazetteer of Arunachal Pradesh: Lohit District*, Itanagar: Government Press.

"Silken Roads of Sikkim" (n.d.): Indian Culture Portal, Government of India.

van Spengen, Wim. "The Geo-History of Long-Distance Trade in Tibet 1850-1950." *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1995, pp. 18–63. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43300530. Accessed 14 Apr. 2026.