

Review Article¹

Kirkpatrick's An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal

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A. The raison d'être of the Mission.

Colonel Kirkpatrick's mission to Nepal was undertaken in early 1793. His itinerary lasted less than seven weeks, from February 13 till April 3. As the preface of the book states and as is common knowledge now, the cause of the mission lay, as far as Nepal was concerned, in the danger that was looming large in the north just before the start of the Nepal - Tibet war of 1792 A.D. Nepal wanted military help from the English government of Bengal to repulse the Chinese attack in the event of such a situation arising and accordingly wrote an urgent appeal to Calcutta. The Government of Bengal during all these years was very keen to negotiate friendly relations with Nepal. It was motivated by a desire to further English trade with Nepal and Tibet. A little before the mission at the time of Prithvinarayan Shah, the English, out of impatience, even tried a military intervention in Nepal, which resulted in Kinloch's mounting an abortive expedition against the valley of Nepal in 1767. The British interest in the trade with Tibet was comprehensive. This is spelled out in detail in No. L of Appendix II of Kirkpatrick's book in a memorandum submitted to the Governor General of Bengal. It begins as follows: "There is good reason to believe, that, the woollen staples of Great Britain might be disposed of to the inhabitants of the latter country to a very considerable amount." Two Himalayan States were regarded ideal for conducting this trade.

Nepal was considered a better approach or access route to Tibet than Bhutan because of the latter's discouraging attitude to the conduct of Bengal's trade with Tibet through Bhutan.² Although the English had succeeded in sending Bogles's Tibetan mission in 1774 via Bhutan this turned out no better in essence than the treaty of commerce concluded with Nepal some years later. The age old entrepot trade between India and Tibet used to be conducted via Nepal. But the emergence of Gorkha in Nepal at this time and the unsettled state of politics, which ensued, had stopped the use of this route, and trade conducted by Indian traders along this route came to a grinding halt. In the memorandum mentioned earlier the maintenance of four trading outposts was suggested in Nepal at Listee, Phullak, Rasuwa and Chhinachhin by the English with the concurrence of Nepal government so as to enable it to cover the trade with eastern, middle and western Tibet. It was also suggested that attempts to open the route from Bhutan must

continue in order to gain a more direct access to Lhasa, which, however would not have diminished Nepal's role in the trade with western Tibet. Because trading caravans to western Tibet from Bengal were regarded to fare better via Nepal Valley than even via Almora in Kumaun, which was also under Nepal at that time. But all this far ranging planning must have proved highly frustrating to the British as the trade could neither be operated from the Nepal side, nor from Bhutan,³ as the latter was also extremely suspicious of the English in Bengal. Thus the route to Tibet never worked out successfully until the end of the 19th century A.D.

To return to our issue, the long endeavours of the English seemed to produce results at last on the sudden turn of events affecting Nepal's relations with Tibet and China in the wake of the war. A treaty of commerce between Nepal and Bengal government was concluded in March 1792. But matters did not markedly improve in actual practice. In the summer of 1792, China launched its offensive by attacking Nepal's post in Kukurghat. The menace grew bigger and bigger as the Chinese penetrated deep inside the Nepalese boundary via Kerung and Rasuwa and came as far down as Dhaibung.⁴ In order to avoid total defeat and save the capital, Nepal turned to the English in Bengal for assistance. It was a golden opportunity for the English to put their men inside the Nepalese boundary, a long cherished dream. The English had depended before this, for every bit of information on Nepal, which was then a terra incognita, on individual accounts of such men as mendicants, pilgrims and merchants. But this opportunity also created no small dilemma to the English. As Kirkpatrick writes, the company government would not have felt easy about the idea of the Chinese overrunning Nepal and occupying it permanently. A hasty step on the other hand might have heavily damaged the English commercial interests in China. The Dalai Lama wrote from Tibet at the same time to the Governor General, who was then William Cornwallis, holding Nepal responsible for the situation and asking him not to go to the aid of Nepal. He pointed out that in this event the English would risk worse treatment of their trade interests in China from the Chinese Emperor. Ultimately, the English decided not to ruin their trading prospects in China and thus in Tibet, as the latter was a dependency of China. So they compromised and offered instead to assume a mediatory role in the conflict between Nepal and Tibet. The Governor General wrote similar letters to the court of Nepal, to the Dalai Lama and to the Chinese Vizier saying that his government would try to maintain friendly relations with all the powers in India, especially with its contiguous neighbours, as long as its own security was not threatened. Although, this news may have pleased Tibet, it was a very distressing reply for Nepal at this critical hour. The

Nepalese court had turned to the English for help not without reluctance. There was a strong and considerable group in this court, which was deeply opposed to befriending the English in Bengal. This anti-British group appears to have been greatly influenced by Prithvinarayan Shah's thinking on the subject. Prithvinarayan Shah had said in his Divya Upadesa: "This kingdom is like a yam, sandwiched between two stones. Maintain very friendly relations with the Chinese emperor. Also maintain friendly relations with the emperor of the sea of the south. But he is very shrewd ----- one day (his) army will come (to attack)."⁵ In the face of the English indifference, the anti English clique in the Nepalese court seems to have got the upper hand in resisting further contacts with the British. It is likely that peace with the Chinese army was concluded hastily without telling the English anything about it owing to the pressure of this very group. The Chinese army itself was in a state of near exhaustion from scarcity and sickness and was only too glad to settle the whole thing quickly and return. When the Chinese army left Nepal in October 1792, Nepal showed unwillingness to receive the English mission in its capital and this upset the plan of the English completely. In fact, Cronwallis had named Kirkpatrick as the head of the mission and despatched him at once to Nepal. When Kirkpatrick arrived in Patna on his way to Nepal, he was detained for several months there because Nepal did not want him to go to Nepal any longer. It was only on the great insistence of the English that the Nepalese finally agreed to receive Kirkpatrick and his team.

The mission was a complete failure as far as achieving any concrete political or commercial settlement between the two governments was concerned. The interests and pre-occupations of the two governments were at cross-purposes. The British were moved solely by commercial interest in Tibet. The Nepalese court, on the other hand, did not attach much value to opening up trade through its territory for the benefit of the Indians or the English in India. This was considered harmful to Nepal's task of political consolidation. Prithvinarayan himself had laid the foundations of this policy. He says in another place in his Divya Upadesa: "Do not permit Indian traders to go beyond God Prasad. If they come to our country they will definitely make our subjects paupers."⁶ Any occasional overture of Nepal towards the English used to be made in the context of a good and equitable bargain; but to admit Indians or the representatives of the English into Nepal at this hour was beyond any consideration. Nepal, in fact, wanted to conduct the intermediary trade between India and Tibet herself through her own traders.⁷

Prithvinarayan Shah predicted that greater danger would come to Nepal from the south rather than from the north. This view was not given up even at the time of the actual Chinese invasion of

Nepal. The Gorkhalis were not unaware that their own excessive greed in Tibet had caused the Chinese intervention. Otherwise China was a distant neighbour concerned with its own affairs. This thinking seems to have prevailed even while signing the peace treaty with the Chinese army.

The subsequent political events in the south, which climaxed in the Anglo - Nepal war of 1814 - 1816 and the consequent stabilisation of the border between Nepal and the Company government removed the old atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion. But the trade and commerce through Nepal was never restored as of old days. The trade dwindled. The failure to respond to the English offer by Nepal at that time no doubt proved great loss to Nepal's revenue earning. But who knows what new tensions might not have arisen from the application of the treaty of commerce for Nepal ? The English interventions in Nepal might well have been far more frequent, and widespread, and even a total annexation might have been possible under the cover of safeguarding English trade interests. Trade was thus by-passed. However, it did not prevent the English from intervening in Nepal, later, under a more open political pretext. But as the Anglo - Nepal war was fought under different circumstances, this at least saved Nepal's autonomy in running its state affairs and enabled it to retain its independent existence afterwards.

B. The Book.

Let us now take the book itself and evaluate its contents. Every word in the book is motivated by the one supreme consideration of increasing the prospects of trade and commerce with Nepal, keeping always Tibet in the background. The author says: "(Nepal) owing to its situation with regard to Tibet appears highly interesting to us in a commercial view." Although no immediate gain emerged from the mission, Kirkpatrick wrote to Cornwallis from Kathmandu saying that to send an Englishman for the first time across the jealously guarded frontiers of Nepal, thus enabling the team to form a far more accurate idea of the face of the country, had itself been no small achievement. He hoped that some day in the future the insolence and jealousy of the courtiers would end, making them more accomodating towards the English. Being aware of his limitations as well as his objectives, Kirkpatrick collected information on his journey with great avidity. His account is as good and accurate as possible in the circumstances. Anyone who has travelled to Kathmandu from Bhimphedi on foot or from Kathmandu to Trisuli will not miss the fascinating details of the journey. The conditions of these tracks have little changed even now after nearly two centuries. There are many wise observations in the book which have been validated by later developments.

In all there are nine chapters, a table of the itinerary, thirteen relevant dispatches and items arranged in three appendices, one map and fifteen drawings in the book, Chapters I, II, III, and V describe the route of the journey. They are not mere descriptions of the track but contain a host of additional information related to the main theme i.e. commerce. The book describes various tracks leading to the valley of Kathmandu and their relative advantages accompanied by careful notes of distances, the number of days required for the journey, check-posts and hamlets. The road Kirkpatrick took while going into Nepal was not the popularly traversed route. Kirkpatrick went via Bara district over the Chure into the valley of Makawanpur and turned west to join the main road at Hetaura. The main route lay south of Hetaura to Garh Parsa and Alau and on to Sugauli, which was only slightly different from the present day Hetaura - Birganj - Raxaul route. Birganj was established only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Garh-Parsa was situated to the north-west of Birganj just where the forests began. The fort of Alau lay 5 miles to the west of Birganj. Thus the old track passed through Amlekhganj which is called Bechiacori and Simra near Addhabhar and passed slightly to the west of the present route. That people crossed the Nepalese border at Sugauli explains why the neighbouring village of Bettia became a centre of Nepalese of the dissident groups for refuge and political activity. Thus Kirkpatrick foresaw the strategic role of Hetaura in the development of commerce in Nepal, a view which is fully vindicated to-day. He describes another route from the Chitlang valley to Kathmandu which went via Pharping. This route turned south-east just a little before Chitlang and although it was a little longer, was easier to travel and was popular with merchants. Those who wanted to travel fast took the shorter Candragiri track. Many now have forgotten the Pharping road. But even now the Terai traders bring their flocks of goats by this route.

The general lay-out of the land is never missed in the accounts. The team possessed elementary equipment for measuring direction, temperature and for guessing the altitude. Distance was calculated by relying on watches. Elevation, acclivity and declivity were duly noted. One now admires how close their estimates were to the truth. A map of the journey was drawn which is accurate for the parts actually traversed. For more distant places knowledge of which was gained by hearsay, the precision falls wide of the mark. Still they had managed to mention so many places which in itself is remarkable. Kirkpatrick is perhaps the first foreigner to describe the scenery of the mountains and to remark on the view of the Himalayas (Himma-leh). This has become a great tourist attraction now-a-days. He was highly impressed by the resource of the Terai (Turryani) forests in producing timber and elephants. He says, no timber in the world would beat the

timber from these forests. It could be transported by water to Calcutta floating logs down the rivers Bagmati and Gandaki, which, he observes, were quite suitable for this purpose in this area. Timber has been one of the main exports of Nepal throughout, but its cheap transportation by water was not properly developed. His careful description of rivers and streams was always made with the idea of studying their navigability or other uses. Prospects of fishing is one example of this. He mentions the absence of yet another easy and economical mode of transportation, that of wheels. The introduction of wheels in any form in the valley took place only in the present century. One sees push-carts on wheels very commonly in the city of Kathmandu now-a-days. Their popularity derives from the volume of goods which they can transport swiftly and cheaply from one part of the city to another. It is in fact an indispensable companion of improved roads. But their introduction came so late. To return to forests, the book gives a distressing history of the ill use of their resources in Nepal leading to their systematic destruction. Kirkpatrick mentions that forests were let for grazing by the cattle of the bordering villages for a small sum of money annually. Another main income from the forest was elephants which abounded in large numbers in the Makawanpur area. But this resource also dried up with the indiscriminate killing and thinning down of forests.

The book also attempts to present a good account of vegetation, herbs and chemical plants. All the names are given in the Nepali of that time. He describes the qualities and special properties of each type as attributed in local beliefs. Medicinal herbs have also been described. Reference to charas (Cherris) making is not omitted and its cultivation in large quantities in western Nepal (a fact still true nowadays), is duly mentioned. He similarly describes the animals and birds, habitats and places of origin of which are clearly defined.

The study of agriculture and land are his other main interests. He mentions the chief crop varieties, the fertility of the soil, the amount of production etc. He estimates the revenue yield to the government as being very low. This was because a large part of the land was jagir land granted to the serviceman of various categories, army men, nobility and Brahmans from where no revenue was earned. Rice was one of the chief items of Nepalese export to Bihar and Bengal even in those days. He lists the market price of rice in the hills as eight pathis of husked rice for one rupee. Related directly to commerce is his observation regarding the virtual non-existence of a consumer's market. Each family produced its needs itself. A serviceman had these necessities supplied by his tenant. The class of serviceman who lived entirely on their salary unsupported by land was virtually

unknown. Kirkpatrick describes difficulties in procuring provisions on his journey even for a single day if accompanying Nepalese officials had not intervened, which means that people did not grow enough from their land. If there were a few surplus regions, their supplies did not reach the scarcity-hit areas because of poor modes of transportation. His note on vegetable cultivation is interesting for what it has to reveal. Potatoes appear to have been a new crop and Nepalese farmers were ignorant of the method of preserving seeds. So, every year potato seeds had to be procured from Patna. The valley knew very few of the vegetables which are known to-day except cabbage and Tibetan turnip, tarul (an edible root) and wild asparagus. Kirkpatrick's eyes did not miss the two fruit-rich regions of Pharping and Nuwakot valley. He gives special credit to orange cultivation in the western hills and in the enclosed gardens in the Nepal valley.

From his account, it becomes clear that the commercial picture has not changed substantially. Nepal's types of exports and imports remain almost the same with a few additions. The exports consisted of rice, timber, herbs and products of Tibet. The imports included textiles, spices, sandalwood, vermilion powder and metals. Nepalese currency did not fare as badly as it does to-day in maintaining a parity of exchange with the Calcutta rupee. It was 7.8 per cent less than the Indian rupee. The imports were not on a staggering scale, imbalancing its exports as they are to-day. People had simple habits and lived on home products. The use of the word Kachar (Kuchar) by Kirkpatrick for lower Tibet or the Himalayan valleys is curious and is probably intended to mean the "frinze" (of Tibet). Kachar is now used only to describe the last range of hills just before the Bhitrimadesh in some parts of central Nepal.

Kirkpatrick did not encounter any mining site where work was being done. He passed through the famous Tama-Khani in the Chitlang valley where work had long been stopped. He has a high opinion of Nepalese copper. In spite of this fact, Nepalese copper was less competitive in the Calcutta market than imported overseas copper because of the higher cost of its production. This observation gives the impression that mining of copper in Nepal had received a set-back just because of the unfavourable market conditions. Production of copper in Nepal was barely enough for home consumption. In fact, stringent methods were adopted to stop its being smuggled outside the country.⁸ He also noticed a few ores of iron and lead, and refers to stone mines including slate mines. The main obstacle in the way of their proper exploitation (in respect of stones) was transportation. He makes no fuss about exploding the myth of gold mines in Nepal.

The chief crafts and industries have been mentioned as being carpentry, metal works, paper, brick and spirit distilling. It is interesting to note that Nepali carpenters were then ignorant of the use of the saw. The popular brew was jand as it still is.

The medium of exchange in Commerce, that is money, is described at some length with a brief history of the great source of earning that it once was to Nepal. Coins of gold, silver and copper are mentioned. The rupee consisted, unlike now, of sixteen annas. But it was not unusual for the rupee to vary either below or above the fixed standard slightly. He mentions a small coin called the chidan (cheedum), a two hundred and eighty-eighth part of a rupee. Perhaps it is the same as the damma, the denomination of which was laid down by an Italian missionary, P. Costantine da Loro, who spent some months in Nepal in 1740. It is as follows:

1 Mandarmeli (mohar) = 4 Zochi (suki)
 1 Zochi = 32 Damme (dam)
 1 Damme = 4 Giava (Jawa)⁹

From this denomination, a dam would be a hundred and twenty-eight part of a mohar and a two hundred and fifty-sixth part of a rupee. The more widely used mohar had a Nepali (or Newari) equivalent called the adhidan, which is totally out of use now.

There are other subjects not directly useful to commerce, but of general interest, dealt with in the book. These include history, government, people, festivals, architecture and historical places and forts. A word list of 28 pages in Nepali and Newari and 4 pages in Magar and Limbu is also furnished to illustrate the comparative vocabulary in these languages. The greater part of the chapter on history is based on a Vamsavali which is held to be more reliable than many later versions of these chronicles. Two of his passing remarks seem to have started a fallacious belief. One is his comparison of Newar women with the Nair women of south India, which led some historians later to seek the origin of the Newars in that quarter. Another is his assumption that no Muslim had ever subjugated this Hindu kingdom and this led historians to overlook the invasion of Shams ud-din Illyas in the middle of the 14th century A.D. The account of the people is not complete, but it is generally illuminating about those whom it describes. His Kath Ehotias most likely indicate the Tamangs, whom Hodgson later described as Murmis. The word Kath is perhaps derived from the some root as Kanth is derived, meaning thereby that these are the Bhotias living in the valley's immediate surroundings.

Kirkpatrick has described almost all the hamlets that he visited as being places of "mean appearance". He appears to be a

man of big cities. He remained unimpressed by the grand architecture of Nepal. For referring to the Basantapur palace he says: "Even the Rajah's house being but a sorry building and claiming no particular notice the streets are narrow and as filthy as Benares." This is exactly the opposite view of what passionate Indologists like Sylvain Levi and Percy Brown had to say about this architecture and Nepalese towns in later years. But Kirkpatrick was also the person to have coined the famous phrase on Nepal: "There are as many temples as houses, and as many idols as inhabitants." He was able to inspect some of the Nepalese forts on his way and these did not strike him as being strong in structure or large in capacity. This is perhaps true. The Nepalese had defended these forts or fought battles against their enemies not on the structural strength of these forts but by taking advantage of the natural defences and with their sheer bravery.

The list of festivals indicate a great change since his time. This is because many of these are no longer observed in the valley. Almost all the festivals were performed in the style of journeys and several of them were connected with streams wherein the journey was undertaken from its mouth to its source. One such festival connected with the Bagmati started from Chovar and ended in Bagdvara.

In the present review only a few such points have been selected which are in my opinion interesting because they show a change between then and now or illustrate the continued presence of our characteristic problems during all these years. Kirkpatrick shows great powers of observation and deductive logic in what he wrote in such a brief time. Accounts which are not put in the proper order or quite untrue are not wanting in the book, but this does not diminish the importance of the book in any way. The relative distance of various places based on hearsay evidence is quite erroneous. Elsewhere, there are weak remarks not supported by facts. For example, his account of the severity of frost in the valley which could have frozen the tanks or the reading of temperature in the valley at 87° for the month of March are plainly exaggerations. The accompanying drawings in the book, being various illustrations of the people, landscape, monuments and weaponry, do not correspond to reality. The distortion may have crept in from their being redone by an artist who prepared them from the rough field sketches of the author. The most glaring of all mistakes committed in the book, and the last to be expected from the author, is in recording the year of Prithvinarayan Shah's death as 1771 and Pratapa Simha's death as 1775. In fact, the last figure is the correct date for Prithvinarayan Shah's death and 1777, the year of the death of his son. For some one who belonged to the same generation as these two last kings this is surely an unpardonable blunder.

We may conclude this review by mentioning the simplicity of the Nepalese folks to which the author has alluded and greatly praised. In social intercourse the officers in the army spoke to their junior ranks in the most unreserved and unaffected manners; and the juniors addressed their seniors equally frankly. This was to be seen everywhere, between the civil and the military as well as between the low and high officers. When they encamped for the night at a site on their journey, the tent being insufficient for all, the accompanying Nepalese officials quickly raised a hut from the freshly cut branches of trees or went to sleep under the trees making no fuss about the discomfort. Are not our folks still the most cheerful and the most enduring people in the world ?

NOTES

1. Kirkpatrick, Colonel: An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal, the Substance of Observations Made During a Mission to that Country in the Year 1793; Manjusri Publishing House, New Delhi, 1969 (reprint); pp xix and 386; 1 map; 15 illustrations.
2. Markham, Clements: The Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa; Manjusri Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971; p. ixviii.
3. Refer to Pemberton's (1838) and Ashley Eden's (1864) missions to Bhutan. See also A. Deb's Cooch Behar and Bhutan in the context of Tibetan Trade in Kailash, a journal of Himalayan Studies: Volume I, no. 1 (1973), Kathmandu: pp. 80 - 88.
4. Yogi, Naraharinath: Itihasama Sandhipatra Samgraha; pt.i; Kathmandu, 1965, pp. 17 - 20.
5. Baral, Leelanateshwar: Life and Writings of Prithvinarayan Shah; Thesis submitted for Ph.D. degree, London, University, 1964, p. 25.
6. Baral: Ibid., p. 27.
7. Regmi, M.C.: A Study in Nepali Economic History; Manjushri Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, p. 147.
8. Regmi, M.C.: op. cit.; appendix G, p. 219.
9. Rhodes, N.G.: "The smallest coins in the world", Spink's Numismatic Circular; March, 1973, p. 100.