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978-1-108-06135-3 - An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama, in Tibet: Containing a Narrative of a Journey through Bootan, and Part of Tibet

Samuel Turner

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### **An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama, in Tibet**

In 1783, at the opportunity presented by a new Panchen (or Teshoo) Lama, Bengal governor-general Warren Hastings sent a deputation to Tibet and Bhutan in the hope of promoting British-Indian trade across the Himalayas. Samuel Turner (1759–1802), an army officer in the East India Company, was appointed leader of the mission. His journal, offering first-hand descriptions of these countries, was originally published in 1800 and remained the only such English-language work for more than half a century. Assisted by the botanist and surgeon Robert Saunders and the surveyor and illustrator Samuel Davis, Turner interweaves geographical and scientific observations with descriptions of social and religious customs; the vivid account of his reception by the infant Panchen Lama is of particular note. The introduction sketches the history of Bengal–Bhutan relations and George Bogle's prior mission, while later sections deal with Tibet and the influence of China. This was and remains an invaluable account of eighteenth-century diplomacy.

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[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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COURT OF THE TESHOO LAMA,  
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THROUGH BOOTAN, AND PART OF TIBET.

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BY CAPTAIN SAMUEL TURNER.

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TO WHICH ARE ADDED, VIEWS TAKEN ON THE SPOT,  
BY LIEUTENANT SAMUEL DAVIS;

AND  
OBSERVATIONS BOTANICAL, MINERALOGICAL, AND MEDICAL,  
BY MR. ROBERT SAUNDERS.

LONDON:

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TO THE  
CHAIRMAN,  
DEPUTY CHAIRMAN,  
AND  
DIRECTORS  
OF THE  
HONOURABLE EAST INDIA COMPANY,  
THIS ACCOUNT OF AN  
EMBASSY  
TO THE COURT OF THE TESHOO LAMA,  
IN TIBET,

IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY THEIR MOST OBEDIENT, AND

MOST HUMBLE SERVANT,

*St. James's Place,*

*May 1, 1800.*

SAMUEL TURNER.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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IT is not known that any direct communication existed between Bengal and Tibet<sup>a</sup> before the year 1774. A physical reason might be assigned for this, in the enormous height, and vast extent, of the mountains which are interposed between the two countries, did not an almost equal degree of strangeness, prevailing between Bengal and Bootan, which lie adjacent to each other, necessarily imply a different, or at least some concurrent cause. The most probable one, which the history of little more than a century can afford us, is to be found in that spirit of conquest which forms the common character of all Mahometan states, and in that hostility which their religion enjoins against all who are not its professors. The Booteas, who, though a strong and hardy race of people, are little versed in the arts of war, and thinly scattered over a mountainous region, derive from their local situation the only means of defence against invaders; an advantage which they would inevitably lose, if they were to allow a free passage through their territories. It is certain, however, that,

<sup>a</sup> This name in Bengal, as well as Tibet, is pronounced with a duplication of the letter b; but out of respect to long established orthography, I have written it according to the more usual mode of spelling it in Europe.

at this time, a strong jealousy of all intercourse with the inhabitants of Hindostan, prevails universally amongst the natives, on its northern frontier. From Bootan, indeed, a caravan now annually visits the district of Rungpore, in Bengal, bringing with it oranges, walnuts, and the coarse woollen manufactures of that country, with the horses that carry them, for sale; and it returns, after a month's stay, with the cotton cloths, salt, and other articles, of the produce of Bengal. But the same privilege has never been allowed by the government of Bootan to the inhabitants of Bengal. Perhaps a people more enterprising than the latter, might have contrived to overcome this difficulty, since some individuals of the religious orders occasionally find their way both into Bootan and Tibet. One of these, named Poorungheer, accompanied the first deputation from Tibet to Bengal, in the year 1773, and afterwards attended the Lama on his visit to Peking. Something, therefore, co-operating with the political cause above assigned, to produce the same effect, may have arisen from the difference of manners, and of atmosphere, of the two countries. It is not possible to conceive a greater dissimilarity between the most remote inhabitants of the globe, than that which distinguishes the feeble bodied and meek spirited natives of Bengal, and their active and Herculean neighbours, the mountaineers of Bootan. Their religion, which might be supposed to have a powerful influence on their manners, has totally failed of producing similar effects on the two nations, though it is evidently drawn from the same source. The province of Bootan is, from its elevation, so cold,

## INTRODUCTION.

vii

that few of its southern neighbours could endure its severity; while its natives, clad in woollens, and little accustomed to the purifications which prevail so universally among the former, suffer nearly as much from the sultry and humid atmosphere of Bengal. Nor do the two countries differ less in salubrity. To the same cause, therefore, may be ascribed the difference in the bodily construction of the two people, and in their moral character, which is, in a great degree, the result of that construction.

The mountains of Bootan form a part of the great chain, which geographers call by the general appellation of Mons Imaus, and of which frequent mention is made, in the mythological histories of the Brahmens, by the term of Himáloya. At their feet, a wide and extensive plain, covered with woods, and sunk in morasses, forms a natural division between Bengal and Bootan, being nearly unfit for the support of human life, and almost entirely destitute of inhabitants. Yet in the year 1772, the Raja of Bootan, with what plea, or from what provocation, I have not been able to learn, laid claim to the district of Cooch Bahar, which adjoins to it on the side of Bengal; and, meeting with little resistance from the natives, rapidly gained possession of it. This appears to have been the first instance of hostility between the two countries; and it had proceeded to its last extremity, before the government of Bengal, which had hitherto derived no benefit from the contested territory, was well apprized of what had befallen it. The example, however, was dangerous, and a detachment of native infantry, gradually

augmented from a few companies to two battalions, was sent to dispossess the invaders, and drive them back to their own frontier.

The military weapons of the Booteas are the bow and arrow, a short strait sword, and a faulchion, reflected like a pruning knife. These, though wielded by strong hands, and directed by much individual courage, were of little avail against the discipline, artillery, and musquetry of their antagonists; who experienced a much more destructive foe, in the pestiferous region through which they continued their pursuit, after having driven the Booteas from the scene of contention into their own confines. There the Raja, weary of the conflict, and alarmed for the safety of his own dominions, applied to Teshoo Lama, and obtained his mediation for a peace.

Teshoo Lama was at that time the Regent of Tibet, and the guardian of Dalai Lama, his superior in religious rank, who was yet in his minority. He was about forty years of age, greatly venerated on account of his sacred office, and not less beloved for the benevolence of his character, and the courtesy of his manners. All who approached him were his worshippers; so that he united, in his own person, both the political authority, and the spiritual hierarchy of the country. In his political character, indeed, he acknowledged the sovereignty of the Emperor of China, who had a delegate, with a small military force, I think about one thousand men, resident at Lassa<sup>b</sup>, the capital of Dalai

<sup>b</sup> In the pronunciation of this word, both in Tibet and Bengal, a strong aspiration is placed upon the beginning, Lahàssa: but for the same reason that I have rejected a

## INTRODUCTION.

ix

Lama, but who had not yet much interposed in the interior government of either division of the province.

The Lama, moved by the prayers of the Raja, and interested for the safety of Bootan, which was a dependency of Tibet, sent a deputation to Calcutta, with a letter addressed to the Governor, which I am glad to insert, as an authentic and curious specimen of his good sense, humility, simplicity of heart, and, above all, of that delicacy of sentiment and expression, which could convey a threat in the terms of meekness and supplication.

*Translation of a Letter from Teshoo Lama to Warren Hastings, Esq: President and Governor of Fort William in Bengal. Received the 29th of March, 1774.*

“ The affairs of this quarter in every respect flourish: I am night and day employed in prayers for the increase of your happiness and prosperity. Having been informed, by travellers from your country, of your exalted fame and reputation, my heart, like the blossoms of

double b in Tibet, I retain the established mode of spelling Lassa. It is rare, indeed, that our own mode of spelling the names of persons, or places, corresponds with their local pronunciation. I have endeavoured to express the sound of such names as will be found in the following pages, just as they caught my ear, in all cases where custom has not already appeared to sanction some particular mode of spelling. We need not travel beyond our own nation to discover how often, in this respect, custom and propriety are at variance.

spring, abounds with satisfaction, gladness, and joy. Praise be to God, that the star of your fortune is in its ascension! Praise be to him, that happiness and ease are the surrounding attendants of myself and family! Neither to molest, nor persecute, is my aim: it is even the characteristic of our sect, to deprive ourselves of the necessary refreshment of sleep, should an injury be done to a single individual; but, in justice and humanity, I am informed, you far surpass us. May you ever adorn the seat of justice and power, that mankind may, in the shadow of your bosom, enjoy the blessings of peace and affluence! By your favour, I am the Raja and Lama of this country, and rule over a number of subjects, a circumstance with which you have no doubt been made acquainted, by travellers from these parts. I have been repeatedly informed, that you have engaged in hostilities against the Dèh Terria, to which, it is said, the Dèh's own criminal conduct, in committing ravages and other outrages on your frontiers, gave rise. As he is of a rude and ignorant race, past times are not destitute of instances of the like faults, which his avarice has tempted him to commit. It is not unlikely that he has now renewed those instances; and the ravages and plunder which he may have committed on the skirts of the provinces of Bengal and Bahar, have given you provocation to send your avenging army against him. Nevertheless his party has been defeated, many of his people have been killed, three forts have been taken from him, and he has met with the punishment he deserved. It is as evident as the sun, that your army has been victorious; and

## INTRODUCTION.

xi

that, if you had been desirous of it, you might, in the space of two days, have entirely extirpated him; for he had not power to resist your efforts. But I now take upon me to be his mediator; and to represent to you, that, as the said Dêh Terria is dependent upon the Dalai Lama, who rules in this country with unlimited sway, though on account of his being yet in his minority, the charge and administration of the country, for the present, is committed to me; should you persist in offering further molestation to the Dêh Terria's country, it will irritate both the Lama and all his subjects against you. Therefore, from a regard to our religion and customs, I request you will cease from all hostilities against him; and in doing this, you will confer the greatest favour and friendship upon me. I have reprimanded the Dêh for his past conduct; and I have admonished him to desist from his evil practices in future, and to be submissive to you in all things. I am persuaded he will conform to the advice which I have given him; and it will be necessary that you treat him with compassion and clemency. As to my part, I am but a Fakeer; and it is the custom of my sect, with the rosary in our hands, to pray for the welfare of all mankind, and especially for the peace and happiness of the inhabitants of this country; and I do now, with my head uncovered, entreat that you will cease from all hostilities against the Dêh in future. It would be needless to add to the length of this letter, as the bearer of it, who is a Gosein, will represent to you all particulars; and it is hoped that you will comply therewith.

“ In this country, the worship of the Almighty is the profession of all. We poor creatures are in nothing equal to you. Having, however, a few things in hand, I send them to you as tokens of remembrance, and hope for your acceptance of them.”

This letter appears to have been laid before the Council on the same day that it was received : they yielded, without hesitation, to the intercession of the Lama, and consented to a peace with the Booteas, upon the easy terms of replacing the dominion of each government, within its former boundaries. The Governor himself more readily embraced the opportunity, which he thought this occurrence afforded, of extending the British connexion to a quarter of the world, with which we had hitherto no intercourse, and of opening new sources of commerce, of which our provinces stood greatly in need, to replace the vast drains which were annually made of their wealth and manufactures, in supplying the wants of our other establishments, and the commercial investments of the Company. What specific articles of trade might be drawn from the northern countries, or what physical or political accommodations, or difficulties, might be found to promote or obstruct it, were even beyond conjecture ; but under such circumstances, it seemed an object of much curiosity, well deserving the attention of government, to explore an unknown region, for the purpose of discovering, in the first instance, what was the nature of its productions ; as it would afterwards be, when that knowledge was



## INTRODUCTION.

xiii

obtained, to inquire by what means it might be most effectually converted to advantage. The contiguity of Tibet to the western frontier of China (for though we knew not where they were joined, yet we knew that they did actually join), suggested, also, a possibility of establishing, by degrees, an immediate intercourse with that empire, through the intervention of a person so revered as the Lama, and by a route not obviously liable to the same suspicions, as those with which the Chinese policy had armed itself against all the consequences of a foreign access by sea.

Of the persons deputed on this occasion by the Lama, two only ventured to encounter the burning atmosphere of Bengal; one, a native of Tibet, named Paima; the other, a pilgrim from Hindostan, whose name I have already mentioned, Poorungheer Gosein. These were both men of acute understandings, and ready information; and from them much knowledge was collected both of the country from which they came, and of the way which led to it. Even the presents, which they brought from the Lama, added something of information, and even of interest, to the other means of intelligence, which the occasion furnished. Amongst these were sheets of gilt leather, stamped with the black eagle of the Russian armorial; talents of gold and silver, and bulses of gold dust; bags of genuine musk; narrow cloths of woollen, the manufacture of Tibet; and silks of China. The chests which contained these, were of no bad workmanship, and the parts, which composed them, were joined together by dovetails. All these circumstances

were construed into indications of an extensive commerce, internal wealth, and an advanced knowledge of the arts of common life.

These considerations induced the Governor to lay before the Council, on the fourth of May following, a proposition, to which they cheerfully and unanimously assented, for deputing an English gentleman to Tibet, on the justifiable plea of paying a proper tribute of respect, in return for the advances which had been made by the Lama. Mr. George Bogle, a man eminently qualified for this mission, by a discerning capacity, and uncommon gentleness of manners, was nominated, on the recommendation of the Governor, to carry back an answer to the Lama, and to offer him suitable presents. He was furnished besides with a great variety of articles, consisting chiefly of British manufactures, to be produced as specimens of the trade in which the subjects of the Lama might be invited to participate. Mr. Hamilton, a Surgeon of considerable reputation in his profession, was appointed to accompany him.

Mr. Bogle received his instructions on the 6th of May, 1774. He was detained for some time at Tassisudon, the capital of Bootan, waiting for passports; nor was it, I believe, without some reluctance, on the part of the Lama himself, that he at last obtained them. On the 12th of October, he arrived at Desheripgay, then the residence of the Lama, by whom he was received with great hospitality and kindness. Here, and at Teshoo Loomboo, he remained with him until the 8th of April following, when he took his leave, to return to Bengal. During

## INTRODUCTION.

XV

this interval, by employing his whole time and talents, in cultivating the good will of the Lama, and gratifying his insatiable thirst for foreign knowledge, Mr. Bogle so ingratiated himself into his confidence, as to be intrusted, some time after, with a considerable remittance in money, for the purpose of building a temple and a dwelling house, for the accommodation of his votaries to Bengal, on the banks of the Ganges. A piece of ground, on the opposite side of the river to Calcutta, was purchased, and granted to the Lama, on his application to the Governor for this purpose.

In the letter which the Lama wrote to the Governor upon this occasion, he stated, as a motive for making the request which it contained, that although in the different periods of his reviviscence he had chosen many regions for the places of his birth, yet Bengal was the only country in which he had been born twice; for which reason he had a predilection for it beyond any other, and was desirous of making it a place of his abode, apparently esteeming the sanctity of the Ganges, as a consideration of inferior importance. At length, in the year 1779, when the Lama, yielding to the repeated solicitations of the Emperor of China, visited Peking; he, with the same spirit of personal kindness, and in the desire of improving his connexion with the government of Bengal, desired Mr. Bogle to go round by sea to Canton, promising to obtain the Emperor's pass for him to proceed, and join him at the capital. The Emperor's promise was also obtained, to permit the first openings of an intercourse between that country

and Bengal, by receiving any letters which might be written to him by the Governor General, through the channel of the Lama. Unfortunately, however, the death of the Lama, and that of Mr. Bogle, which happened at nearly the same time, clouded this fair prospect, and completely frustrated every expectation which had been formed. I am sorry to add too, that events, of a much more recent date, have concurred to throw almost insuperable difficulties in the way of re-establishing our intercourse with Tibet, at least for some considerable time to come. It is well known, that, within a few days after his arrival at Peking, the Lama was seized with a disorder, supposed to be the small pox, of which he died<sup>a</sup>; and his body was soon after carried back, with great pomp, and interred at the place of his former residence. Upon this occasion, the Emperor of China wrote a letter to Dalai Lama, at Lassa, then the chief of all the Lama hierarchy in Tibet, a copy of which will be found in the Appendix, No. I. The original of this letter was some time in the hands of P. Amiot, a missionary at Peking, by whom, it appears, a transcript of it was then made, which, in 1783, found a place in *Memoires concernant le Chinois*, Tom. IX. Paris. A translation of this is inserted in that valuable compilation, Mr. Dalrymple's *Oriental Repertory*, Vol. II. p. 275.

<sup>a</sup> The detailed particulars of the Lama's journey to Peking, and of his death, were related by Poorungheer Gosein, already mentioned, who was one of his chosen retinue, and are recorded by Mr. Dalrymple, in his *Oriental Repertory*, Vol. II. p. 145. But as a curious and interesting performance, it is inserted in the Appendix, No. IV.

## INTRODUCTION.

xvii

These events were communicated to the Governor General, by the Regent Chanjoo Cooshoo, brother of the deceased Lama, and by Soopoon Choomboo, his favourite and cup-bearer. Faithful translations of their letters, as curious specimens of Tibetan manners and habits of thinking, are given in the Appendix, No. II. and III.

Soon after the receipt of these letters, intelligence arrived from Tibet of the re-appearance of the Lama amongst them. The soul of the late Lama, according to the doctrines of their faith, having passed into and animated the body of an infant, who, on the discovery of his identity, by such testimonies as their religion prescribes, was acknowledged and proclaimed by the same title and appellation as his predecessor.

Mr. Hastings, upon the receipt of these accounts, proposed to the Board, to send a second deputation to Tibet. He did me the honour to recommend me for this service, to which I was accordingly nominated on the 9th of January, 1783.

On my return, I delivered to Mr. Hastings, whom I met at Patna, a Report on the result of my mission, which was transmitted by him to the Board, and also a hasty Narrative of my interview with the young Lama; which latter was, by their order, sent to the Asiatic Society, to be inserted in their Researches.

This, I, at that time, considered as the final result of my mission, and the only part of it which appeared to merit any public, or official notice. Nevertheless, as I had carefully committed to writing, upon

the spot, every thing remarkable, which occurred to me in the course of my employment on this extraordinary service, I have, since my return to England, been induced to flatter myself, that my Journal might not be deemed altogether unworthy of the public curiosity. The trite plea of the importunity of friends, would naturally suggest to me the ridicule which has so often and so justly been cast upon it, if I had not, in the lateness of the publication, an evidence to acquit me, at least of too great forwardness to obtrude myself on the public notice. I have exceeded the rule laid down by Horace, of *nonum prematur in annum*, if it may be construed to extend to compositions of this nature. I may, also, without presumption, venture to hope, that, however incompetent I may be to embellish my narrative with the dress best fitted for it to appear in, yet the novelty and curiosity of the subject will, in some degree, compensate for my own deficiencies, as an Author, of which I cannot possibly be unconscious.

# CONTENTS.

---

## PART I.

---

### CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
Leave Calcutta—proceed through Plassey to Mòorshedabad—cross the Ganges near Bauleah—arrive at Rungpore—Calamatty.—Tuffoon, or tremendous Hurricane.—Mungulhaut, respectable for its Manufactory.—Zeenkaubs.—First View of the Mountains of Bootan.—Cooch Bahar.—Bungalo—singular Custom in this District—extensive Woods—Practice of felling Timber—wild Elephants—Pine-apples, present Abundance of—first Introduction into India.—Inroad of the Moguls into Assam—Fate of the Invaders.	3

### CHAPTER II.

Chichacotta—Frontier of Bootan—Approach to Buxadewar—noxious Quality of the Atmosphere beneath this Range of Mountains—its Effects on the Inhabitants—fatal to Captain Jones, and great Part of the Troops that served under him—Colonel Sir John Cuming another Instance of its injurious Consequence.—Tangun Horse, a Species peculiar to these Mountains—Ascent and Entry into Buxadewar.—Chong, and Arra, the Spirit prepared from it.—Character of the People.—Visit the Soobah—Impediment to our Advance—Curiosity, and Urbanity of the Soobah—invited to accompany him during the Performance of a religious Ceremony—Description of the Ceremony—its Design.—Beautiful Scenery in the Vicinity of Buxadewar.—Skilful Archers.—Commencement of the rainy Season.—Dispatches from the Daeb Raja.—Prepare to proceed.—Poorungheer.—Short Stricture on the Manner and Character of the Soobah.—View of Buxadewar—Etymology of its Title.—Mode of travelling in Bootan.	18
--	----

### CHAPTER III.

Leave Buxadewar.—Ascend Peachukom Mountain—its prodigious Altitude.—Caution of the Booteeas.—Gigantic Creepers.—Bamboos, a peculiar Species.—	
---	--

Sheenshilla.—Pheadinchim.—Fatal Accident.—Gygoogoo.—Post of Communication.—Tehintchieu, Hatchieu, Patchieu Rivers.—Snow upon the Summits of the Mountains.—Tangun Horses, their surprising Energy.—Pipes conducting Water for the Accommodation of Travellers.—Bridge and Cataract.—Sheenshilla.—Approach to Murichom—laborious Employment of the People, in which the female Sex bear a heavy Share—extensive Use of the Bamboo.—Village of Murichom—Advantage of Situation—Fertility of the adjacent Lands.—Teezpaut, a Species of Cinnamon.—Remarkable Instance of great Age.—Pestiferous Fly.—Tetim.—Terrible Disaster.—Baboosoo and Merifaka Mountains.—Peanjoo.—Minzapeezo, a most copious Waterfall.—Ingenious Method of constructing Roads along the Sides of Precipices.—Awful Scenery.—Dewta Tehuptehup.—Peculiar Way of passing deep Ravines.—Chain Bridge of Chuka.—Castle of Chuka.—Change in the Face of the Country—Temperature of the Weather—natural Productions.—Punugga.—Hatchieu.—Kepta.—Lomeela Mountain.—Selo-cha-zum.—Durbee Castle.—Mudwallahs for the Defence of Hill Fortresses.—Pauga.—Tehintchieu, Patchieu.—Noomnoo.—Poës.—Wan-goka.—Symtoka.—Bridge over the Tehintchieu.—Valley of Tassisudon.	43
---	----

## CHAPTER IV.

Tassisudon—my Arrival notified at the Palace—the Raja or Lama occupied in religious Ceremonies—strict Observance of all Duties appertaining to their Religion.—Message from the Daeb Raja—Interview—Zoompoon, Zoondonier, Zempi—Citadel—Audience Chamber—Ceremony of Introduction—Particulars of the Interview—Tea—local Observance—extensive Fashion—peculiar Mode of preparing it.—Polite Attention of the Raja—Dress, of the religious Order—Manner of our Reception.—Second Interview.—Silk Scarfs—their Use on all Occasions of Ceremony or Compliment.—Comparative View of Manners.—Natural Productions.—Peculiar Sentiments of the Rajah—Variety of Expression—Art of Drawing—Mr. Davis's superior Skill.—Visit to the chief Officers under Government—Tasse-Zompoon, Zoondonier, Zempi—Outline of their Rank and Authority.—I undertook to mediate the Peace of the Zeenkaubs, who are pardoned, and re-admitted into favour—Instance of implicit Obedience to the Will of their Chief.—General Design of the present Work.—A Bootan Repast.—Boora Soobah, or Toonso Pilo.—Bees.—Benevolent and humane Sentiment.—Order of Gylongs—regulated Periods for religious Service—some Rules of the Society—Ablutions—Temperance—Cleanliness—general Appearance—endemic Disorder termed Gheig, or Aubi.	64
--	----



## CONTENTS.

xxi

## CHAPTER V.

PAGE

The Valley of Tassisudon.—Palace of the Chief—its extensive Accommodation, containing all the Officers of State, a very numerous establishment of Gylongs, and a Temple of Worship.—Coldness of the Season—Buildings ill calculated to obviate its Effects.—The Rajah's Stud.—Ancient Site of Tassisudon—Palace of Lam' Ghassatoo.—Mode of supplying the Valley with Water from the surrounding Hills.—The sacred Sentence enclosed in Temples, inscribed on Tablets, on Flags, and on Rocks.—Brahmennee, or sacred Bull.—Artisans—Paper Manufactory.—Season of the Rains moderate—general Salubrity of our Situation.—Poshtee.—An Excursion.—Wandeechy.—Settlements of the Religious.—A Recluse.—Caution of the Daeb.—Mr. Saunders taken ill—Incantations for his Recovery.	89
--	----

## CHAPTER VI.

Commotions—excited by Wandipora Zoompoon and a degraded Chief.—Punukka Zoompoon arrives at the Capital to pay the customary Duty of Allegiance.—Popular Administration of the present Daeb Raja.—Ascribed Cause of the Rebellion—prudent Precautions—Subjects called upon for their Allegiance—weak Condition of the Capital—extreme Vigilance—general Alarm—Letter from the Rebel Leader—Insurgents gather Strength—Skirmishes between the contending Parties—some Loyalists badly wounded with Arrows—their Dread of Poison—strong Position of the Rebels.—Invited to visit the Rajah—his compassionate Concern for the deluded Mob, and confident Expectation the Tumults would soon be quelled.—Miserable Artillery—humane Motive for desiring to employ it—cautious Conduct of the Combatants—general Trait of these Warriors—the Rebels, after an obstinate Contest, totally defeated.—Military Character of the Booteeas—not deficient in Courage—feeble Attack—want of Discipline—Accoutrements and Arms—Use of Poison.—Raja Mocom Narrain—his Vakeel.—Wandipore invested by Zoondonier and Punukka Zoompoon.—General Thanksgivings.—Reduction of the Castle.—Flight of the Rebels.—Plunder and Spoils.—The Raja meditates a Visit to Wandipore, to settle Affairs in the disturbed Districts—announces his Design—invites me to meet him.	106
--	-----

## CHAPTER VII.

The Raja proceeds to Wandipore—sends a Messenger—we prepare to follow—pass Symtoka—dreariness of the Way—meet a Party of the Daeb Raja's.—	
--	--

d

	PAGE
Improving Appearance of the Country.—A Procession.—Faculty of prolonging the Sound of wind Instruments—instanced also in Bengal.—Matchieu-Patchieu—Tahantchieu Rivers.—Bijnee—Berhampooter—Wandipore.—Liberal Supply of Refreshments from the Raja.—Miserable Quarters.—Lines of the Besiegers—Advantages of Position.—Castle of Wandipore—Tradition regarding it.—Bridge—Lightness and Beauty of its Structure.—Mineral Springs.—General Ignorance of the Contents of these Mountains.—Curious Effect of a strong Current of Wind.—Turbulent Situation of Wandipore.—Process of making Butter.—Departure from Wandipore.—Tame Elephant.—View of the Mountain of Ghassa—Snow—hot Bath.—Palace of Pudukka.—Matchieu-Patchieu Valley—Banks of the River—sheltered Situation.—Expensive Decoration of the Palace.—Gardens—Variety of Fruits—advantageous Site for Horticulture.—Laborious Services imposed upon the Female Sex.—Zemrigatche.—Nymphæa Nilotica—its religious Estimation in Bootan as well as in Egypt.—Propitiatory Offerings to the Dewtas.—Narainee, particular Account of.—Leave Pudukka.—Telagong.—Stupendous Mountains.—Hunnoowunt.—Muttura.—Madejee Sindia.—Jumna.—Ultimate Defeat of the Rebels.           -           -           -	124

## CHAPTER VIII.

Return of the Raja to Tassisudon—our Visit to him— <i>anxiety</i> to hear our opinion of his favourite Seat—displeased that we were refused admittance—recital of what appeared peculiarly striking.—His marked approbation of Mr. Davis.—Buxa Soobah.—A Buffoon.—Electrical Machine.—Mechanic turn of the Raja—medical Genius.—Ipecacuanha.—Wandeechy.—Fatal accident to our Camp Equipage.—Tibet Dogs.—Entertainment at the Villa.—Marvellous Stories of the Raja—of a Gigantic race of Men—of People with Tails—of Unicorns.—The Rajah's Pilgrimage to the sacred Shrine of Pootalah.—Temple of Wandeechy.—Repast—Bull Fight.—Return of the Rajah to the Palace.—Messengers from Tibet.—Durga Pooja.—The great Autumnal Festival of the Hindoos.—Dussera.—Dewali.           -           -           -           -           -	149
--	-----



## CHAPTER III.

PAGE

Deserted Villages—fatal Effects of the Small-pox—Ignorance of its Treatment— a serious Calamity—Occasion of the Removal of the Seat of Government and Monastery from Teshoo Loomboo to Chamnamning.—Gangamaar—hot Bath— Surface of the Ground adjacent—Labourers in the Fields—rude Expression of Surprise.—Place of Fragments—huge Idol—Mahamoonie—a religious Rite.— Shoohoo.—Nainee—improving Appearance of the Country.—Tehukku.—Jhansu- jeung.—Valley of Jhansu.—Woollen Manufactory—Economy in Dress.—Monas- tery of Jhansu.—Beggars.—Dukque.—Corricle.—Castle of Painom—Bridge— Town.—Keesoo.—Tsondue.—Distant View of Teshoo Loomboo—Enter the Monastery.	218
--	-----

## CHAPTER IV.

Messages of Compliment and Congratulation from the Regent and Soopoon Choomboo—Custom of presenting a white Scarf—favourable Tokens of a friendly Disposition.—Preparations for our Reception—Hall of Audience—Lama's Throne—Introduction to the Regent—The Regent's Assurance of the Identity of the Lama—his Friendship for the Governor General in his pre-existent State—Attention and Respect paid him at the Court of China—his Regeneration acknowledged by the Emperor—Satisfaction derived from the Receipt of the Governor General's Dispatches.—Projected Removal of the Lama to Terpaling —the Monastery prepared for his Reception—Tea—Dismission.—Sketch of the Person—Manner—Dress of the Regent.—Bells, a Summons to Devotion.—Visit to Soopoon Choomboo.—Emperor of China—his Influence—a Votary of the Tibet Faith.—Umbas—Jasoos—Gesub Rimbochay—Dalai Lama—Soopoon Choomboo, Sadeek—honoured by the distinguished Attention and Favour of the late Lama —promoted by the Emperor—his Character held in high Estimation—important Period in the Annals of Tibet.—First public Tribute of Acknowledgment and Allegiance to the regenerated Lama—Preparations for his Removal from Kylee to Terpaling—Offer to attend the Ceremony.—Party proceeds to escort the Lama—Homage paid by his Votaries on the Way—Entry into Terpaling— Return of the Regent—Cavalcade—Bonfires—Chinese.—Correspondence with Dalai Lama.—Hostile Disposition of Gesub Rimbochay.	231
--	-----

## CONTENTS.

xxv

## CHAPTER V.

PAGE

Permission from the Regent to view the Interior of the Monastery.—Gorgeous Temples.—Solemn and mysterious Ceremonies.—Numerous Assembly of the Gylongs.—Periods for Devotion.—Loud Vociferation.—Clamorous Noise attending the Performance of their religious Rites.—Serious Attention to the Duties of their Faith.—Profound Respect for their sovereign Lama.—Visit the Mausoleum dedicated to the Memory of the late Teshoo Lama.—Cursory View of this highly venerated Structure.	255
---	-----

## CHAPTER VI.

The Regent.—Soopoon Choomboo.—Countries contiguous to Tibet—Bengal endeared to the Tibetians by religious Prejudices.—Gunga Sagur—the Confluence of the Ganges with the Sea.—Jagarnaut.—Performance of Pilgrimage by Proxy.—A Devotee—Geography—Astronomy.—Pranpooree—his extraordinary Course of Mortifications.—Russia—the Czarina.—Taranaut Lama.—Kharka.—Intercourse between Russia and China.—Pilgrims from Khumbak.—Gallery of Idols—Means by which the Cabinet is occasionally augmented.—Teshoo Loomboo famed for the Manufacture of Images.—Lama of Luddauk.—War between England—America and France.—Commerce—of the English Nation.—Spirit of Inquiry and Research.—Siberia—Baikal.—Wandering Tartars.—No Tradition extant of an ancient People inhabiting towards the North.—General Belief of the Origin of Learning.—Inference drawn from the Similarity of the Sanscrit and Tibet Alphabet.—Character in which their sacred Writings are preserved and printed—that of Correspondence and Business.—Regent notifies his Design of leaving the Monastery—commends me to the Care of Soopoon Choomboo in his Absence.—Visits my Apartments, accompanied by Soopoon Choomboo and the Lama of Luddauk.—Science of Palmistry.—Attar, Pawn.	266
---	-----

## CHAPTER VII.

Departure of the Regent—his Desire to travel unobserved.—Egypt—Eunani—Singhi.—Use of the Symbol of the Lion in Tibet and Egypt—superstitious Regard for celestial Phænomena—Skill in Science—Bigotry—Court of China—Spectacles for the Entertainment of the Lama—Soomeroo.—Coincidence with the Hindoos in scientific Knowledge—Benares esteemed the sacred Seat of all human Learning.—Teshoo Loomboo—Geographic Site—particular Description of.—Plain of Teshoo Loomboo—Shigatzee-jeung—Luddauk—Cashmeer—Nipal—China—Russia—Siberia.—Abruptness of the Hills—local Effect.—Vortexes of
--

Wind.—Rock behind Teshoo Loomboo—View from hence.—Berhampooter—Megna—Pudda—Sundrabunds—Pirates—Maunserore—Rise—Course of the Ganges and Berhampooter.—Seasons in Tibet.—Meat preserved by the Action of intense Cold.—Use of undressed Meat.—Sheep, their Value for Food, Raiment, and Use.—Dryness of the Atmosphere in Tibet—Precautions used against it. 287

## CHAPTER VIII.

Local Appellation of Tibet—Stricture on the Religion—Use of musical Instruments in their sacred Services—Comparison with the Hindoos—Assemble in Temples for the Performance of religious Duties—Lama, the sacred Superior—Gradations in the sacerdotal Class—Gylong—Tohba—Tuppa—Establishment of the Monastery—Interdictions of the religious Order—Noise and Pomp of their religious Ceremonies—Kugopea—Habit of the Priests—Yellow, the distinguishing Colour, worn by the Sect Gyllookpa—of which the Superiors are Dalai Lama—Teshoo Lama—Tarranaut Lama—Red, by the Shamar.—Lam' Rimbochay—Lam' Sobroo Nawangnamghi—Lam' Ghassatoo—their Contentions—Prevalence of the former.—Humane Trait in the Character of the Tibetan.—Tribute of respect paid to the Dead—Festival in Honour of the Dead—superstitious Practices—sanctioned and performed by the Class devoted to Religion.—Omens.—Calendar of Time—Cycle of twelve Years.—Art of Printing. 305

## CHAPTER IX.

Return of the Regent—Time appointed for my Departure—rapid Advance of Winter—Audience of Leave—Soopoon Choomboo—farewell Visits from numerous Friends—prepare to leave Teshoo Loomboo—previous Observance of some superstitious Ceremonies.—Beggars—Mohammedans—Hindoos.—Benevolence displayed at Teshoo Loomboo.—Tsondue.—Skating.—Terpaling.—Interview with Teshoo Lama—Manner and Conduct of the Lama—his Age—Parents—Gyeung—her splendid Dress—Gyap—Invitation to an Entertainment—Officers of the Lama's Household—Impression of profound Respect.—Veneration entertained for the Memory of the late Lama—his humane, intelligent, conciliating Character.—Amiable Manners of Mr. Bogle.—Parents of the Lama—Pavilion—Entertainment.—Gyap—his Delight in manly Sports—his superior Skill—polite Offer to instruct me in the Arts he practised.—Repast—raw Meat—Gyeung, particularly abstemious.—Music—Vocal—Instrumental.—Conclusion of the Entertainment.—Wait upon the Lama—Votaries of the Lama—Calmuc Tartars—liberal Offerings.—Last Visit to the Teshoo Lama, and his Parents. 326