

**Travellers Accounts Of Eastern Himalayan Borderlands: A Study Of  
Ralph Fitch's Travels To Eastern Himalayas.**

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Abstract: Travel writing on medieval India has largely focused on Mughal India while the borderlands of Mughal India have been ignored. This paper argues that there is sufficient material in the travel writings on Mughal India that represents the borderlands. Therefore, the paper proceeds to locate Ralph Fitch (1550-1611 AD) and his representations of eastern India and the borderlands of the Mughal Empire based on his writings. This paper argues that Ralph Fitch was a pioneer in many ways particularly in writing about the borderlands of the eastern Himalayas.

During the medieval period of world history, one of the most significant economic and military powers in the world was the Mughal Empire ruling over large swathes of the Indian subcontinent and was one of the three gun powder Empires of Asia, along with the Ottomans of Turkey and the Safavids of Persia. Most information on the Mughals reached Europe through travel writing and one of the most important travellers of the early period was Ralph Fitch. Though he was not the first Englishman to visit India, he is indeed remembered because he left behind a large number of writings that have become the subject of academic scrutiny till the contemporary period and is also an ongoing academic enterprise. Following the steps of EH Carr, the noted historian who prescribed that the scholar has to study the historian before one studies the works of the historian we understand that Carr's dictum is to

study the historian before one embarks on a study the text. One may undertake the exercise of trying to place Ralph Fitch and his work amidst the general issues of the period that formed the immediate context. One can locate the rise of British travellers, largely due to the improved navigation that led to the emergence of Great Britain as a naval power. It was the age of exploration beginning from the 15<sup>th</sup> century that paved the way for the golden age of long-distance sea travel in the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the year 1492, America was discovered and heralded a landmark shift in the history of navigation. The New World could be discovered due to the emergence and adoption of the new technologies primarily buoyed by the use of the compass, astrolabe and other innovations in cartography that gave clear ideas of the earth's surface. During this time the great desire was to find a trade route to India and Portugal emerged victorious in this race after the landing of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in Kerala in 1498 CE<sup>1</sup>. The discovery of America was not trying to discover America, specifically in mind.

Nevertheless, both Spain and Portugal needed to find a sea route to India. Matters did not rest here, and the only dragged on bringing about a new chapter of rivalry in the Iberian Peninsula between the two great naval powers of Spain and Portugal, both supported by their respective princes. As both of them were catholic nations, the conflict between them was mediated by the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church and in his wisdom, marked the boundaries in 1560 CE. This was done by a communication known as a Papal Bull that was the authoritative order of the Pope and binding on both these countries, namely Spain and Portugal. According to this mediation, China formed a boundary and their territories east of

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<sup>1</sup>Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe. *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature*. Simon and Schuster, 2001. 383.

China could be explored, conquered and administered by the Spaniards and the territories to the West became the domain of the Portuguese<sup>2</sup>.

King Philip of Spain, who was one of the most important patrons of these new naval expeditions was finally honoured when the Spaniards could get hold of a large number of islands that lay East of the Indonesian Archipelago. These were then known as the Philippines belonging to the Spanish monarch while the Portuguese did not lag behind and according to the papal bull limited their domains to the best and succeeded in acquiring territories in China that became known as Macau and were also successful in getting another vital port of Goa in India<sup>3</sup>. In the new world and Africa, Portuguese success was competing with the Spaniards and these were in the crucial areas were the vast region of Brazil in South America and some parts of Africa that comprised of modern-day Mozambique lay. The urban centres sprang up here were also modelled according to the Portuguese ideas, and then Lisbon, which was the most important commercial and religious centre of Portugal provided the model thus earning the title of little Lisbon for both Goa and São Paulo in Brazil.

Britain was not affected by religion, like the Iberian Peninsula since the British were not Catholics under the control of the Pope, but had a different Church known as the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church was practically independent primarily because of the attitude of the ruler Henry VIII<sup>th</sup>, who married Annie Boleyn and this triggered a controversy after which the monarch proclaimed the independence of the Church, and hence the Anglican Church became independent and British naval development was not weighed down by the religious compulsions of Catholic Iberia. In this aggressive posturing for the control of the high seas, the tipping point in favour of the British was the defeat of the mighty Spanish

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<sup>2</sup>Davies, Arthur. "Columbus Divides the World." *The Geographical Journal* 133, no. 3 (1967): 337-8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 339.

Armada by Sir Francis Drake, the celebrated British navigator. This singular event heralded the rise of the British Navy and gave it enormous prestige, along with immense economic benefits in the form of a massive cache of gold that flowed to Britain<sup>4</sup>.

Britain, which was in the backwaters of global navigation, became immediately renowned and richer substantially. Most of the adventurous young men who sought an outlet for their energies were now spurred by this newfound buoyancy that ignited the minds of the adventurous Britishers to travel to lands far off. There was also newfound confidence in the Crown that led to a feeling of enthusiasm amongst many Englishmen. The sense of adventure that lay dormant was also now being realised and made possible. All this led to the rise of a large number of people who were ready to take great risks and try to distinct lands.

Ralph Fitch was a product of these circumstances, and thereby the exotic destinations definitely impacted his mind, and as a member of a literate class, he was clearly aware of the dangers and prospects of travelling to distant lands and crossing the high seas. Many of the Englishman, who travelled to India came from the well-educated sections of society and already had a literate background. They were well informed and travelled out of their own willingness to give vent to their adventurous inclinations. On the contrary, in the case of Spain where the age of discoveries was inaugurated, cartographic knowledge was not fully developed, and the hold of the Church and superstitions prevailed over everyone's mind. People sincerely believed that the earth was shaped like a flat disk and travelling to the edges, would cause the ship to tip over to a deep hole from where there would be no recovery. Since

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<sup>4</sup>"Sir Francis Drake | English Admiral." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 22, 2017.  
<https://www.britannica.com>.

religion was the predominant force in medieval Europe, and scientific reasoning was not developed or rational ideas also were not accepted, the medieval man was, therefore, subject to understand physical and natural phenomena only through the categories of religion, and it is these understandings that instilled fear of the unknown. Since literacy was also not widespread, even the brave people did not readily join in the adventurous ventures and therefore getting a crew to man the ships was difficult.

In the case of England, by the 14th century CE, the institutions of feudalism decayed and collapsed and in place of a use economy, there emerged an exchange economy based on market forces. The rationality of the markets and their requirements of literacy led to the rise of an educated and rational thinking class of which Ralph Fitch was one such product. At the other opposite, at a distance in time and space were the crew of Christopher Columbus that comprised mainly of criminals and other dregs of society who were promised remission for their crimes if they participated in the expeditions. This was a necessary precondition because there were no voluntary recruits available, including adventurers or soldiers of fortune. With the age of discoveries emerging into full bloom, aided by advances in cartography and geographical knowledge, more and more people started sailing, not just nearby, but to far-off lands and in addition to the nationally sponsored expeditions by the British and Iberian monarchs and also by the monarchs of the low countries, a new figure of the pirate emerged in the high seas. Therefore it was not just navigators or adventurers who travelled the high seas, but also pirates and traders<sup>5</sup>. By that time, Ralph Fitch travelled to India in the 16th century in 1579 CE, the main protocols of sea travel were already established, and we also have women travelling as part of the family indicative of the fact that sea travel has now

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<sup>5</sup>Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe. *Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature*. Simon and Schuster, 2001. 398-412.

become more regularised, safe and domesticated. All these conditions led to a shift in the composition of travellers from the hardy travellers of the earlier period in the 15th century to a more heterogeneous group of travellers that included both illiterate and well-read people in the group. This is also one of the factors that account for the production of literature by the British travellers as most of them were cultivated gentlemen and were already part of a literary tradition in contrast to the unlettered crew of the early Spaniards and Portuguese. Ralph Fitch's long journey can be placed in this trajectory of a navigational system that was already developed in Europe.

Ralph Fitch travelled to India through West Asia as these were the regions that the British were familiar with and also because going through the Cape of Good Hope would mean a roundabout journey, this was the easiest travelled route and also both these regions of West Asia, were familiar to the British. They included the biblical lands known as the Levant that comprise the modern countries of Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and the region between the two rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris that the British called as Mesopotamia, based on the earlier Greek understanding <sup>6</sup>. To understand the British obsession with the Middle East, one also has to understand the nature of the power shift from the ancient world to the modern world. In the ancient world, the ideas of the Greeks and later the Romans predominated, and during the period of Greek supremacy, the classical world had evolved, and the Greek traditions were continued by the Romans, and therefore the reference point for all these civilisations as the centre of the world was Greece. Borderlands of Greece and the regions beyond Greece in the eastern side became known as the near East. In the modern period, Britain emerged in the centre stage of world politics and became the centre of the

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<sup>6</sup> Prasad, Ram Chandra. *Early English Travellers in India: A Study in the Travel Literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods with Particular Reference to India*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1980. 30.

world, and the Near East became the Middle East. This shift was taking place during the period of Ralph Fitch, and therefore this short diversion is necessary to see the power shift that made Britain, the greatest power in the 19th century, and whose genesis lay in the 17th century when the new world order was taking shape in its embryonic stage. In addition to these representations of Britain, we also come to understand that Ralph Fitch's actions are also in tune with the people of his time and of the striking aspects is the recording of the exotic practices and natural phenomena.

In the above paragraph, a brief sketch of the context illustrated the main influences prevalent in 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Prosperity and the growth of literacy also encouraged the production of new books and maps aided by the print revolution. Learned societies proliferated in Britain, and they were at the forefront of the scholarly endeavours, and in the universities, the system of education already included a study of the classics

We have taken a short detour from the main story of Ralph Fitch to retrace the context of the relations between England and many other countries, and the conditions that led to the travellers make up. This obviously leads us to the question of how the subjects were constituted under the English rule in medieval England and the shift during the age of discoveries. In a significant contrast from the unlettered sailors on board Christopher Columbus's vessels, the English travellers during the age of discoveries presented themselves as cultivated gentlemen. In fact, these people became gentlemen after acquiring certain cultural capital that included education. In this case, the growing number of educated Englishman was trained in the classics and had a good exposure to Grammar, logic and rhetoric. Therefore, the subject matter and the representation of the same was very different, when these travellers wrote about different countries.

Most of the ideas of the Levant and the Middle East that was in circulation in Europe was largely on account of the biblical references to these regions and knowledge of these regions during the age of the Crusades. Much like the later traveller Pietro Della Valle first travelled to the Levant and the Middle East, and then came to South India, Ralph Fitch also followed the same path but travelled to Goa and from there to the heartland of the Mughal Empire. His stay in Goa and in the plains of North India provided him with the cultural frames of reference that keeping to full use while describing India. Most of these representations concern the landscape and customs of North India<sup>7</sup>. Goa that lay on the west coast of India was an important springboard for many people as it was a Portuguese possession and already had a Catholic population and was also known as Little Lisbon. Further, these travellers and merchants who already had been frequenting Europe and India were largely based in Goa. It is for this reason that Ralph Fitch developed an understanding of the cultural and socio-economic patterns of India fairly well. His interaction with the Europeans and their role in war and also in other capacities in North India helped him to differentiate the perspectives of the Portuguese and English clearly. Most of the Portuguese sailors and people of other trades did not follow norms of civility that would be understood by the Englishman as harsh and hence had a reputation for some hotheaded behaviour. Both Englishman and Indians were many times troubled by this display of the behaviour. One of the reasons for this is that the Portuguese and the Spaniards had a troubled history in the Iberian Peninsula due to constant struggles with the Moors. Both these were also Catholic countries, unlike England and secondly, Britain was also isolated from many of the currents of struggles in the Iberian Peninsula. It is in this context that the aggressive behaviour of the Portuguese was sought to be explained, and many historians also explain the religious fervor

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 28, 47-62.

due to the developments in the Iberian Peninsula. Ralph Fitch did not amplify his unease with the Portuguese, but we can easily understand that there are some tensions between Ralph Fitch as an Englishman and between the Portuguese. Some of the Englishmen were imprisoned by the Portuguese on suspicion of being spies in Mesopotamia. Interestingly, Ralph Fitch's work maps the presence of Portuguese in Goa and eastern borderlands of Bengal, but not in North India. In short, the Portuguese were found primarily in the coastal regions. During this time, the Europeans had many versions of what constituted India, and the ideal representation of India becomes constructed only after the 16th century<sup>8</sup>.

India as a land of the heat and dust, and land, where people were always devoted to the pursuit of religion that marginalised all forms of rational thinking and leads to superstitious ideas, both among the sovereigns and the ruled, became a standard depiction. Ralph Fitch in the course of his travels does not display any prejudices towards either the Hindus or the Muslims, unlike the Portuguese. In fact, he has some positive understanding of the Muslims and was comfortably placed in their midst. In the assessment of the historian E F Oaten, Ralph Fitch has not paid much attention to the Mughal Emperor<sup>9</sup>. We also have certain moments of despair and one this moment was when Fitch and another Englishman were detained in Mesopotamia. The reason for his detention and subsequent imprisonment was that Ralph Fitch was labelled as a spy<sup>10</sup>. When we come to the criticism that he did not represent the Mughal Emperor in detail, we also have to understand the other side. His association with the commoners helped them to understand the pulse of the people and therefore his accounts

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<sup>8</sup> Spencer, Jonathan. "Orientalism Without Orientals." *Anthropology Today* 5, no. 2 (1989): 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> Oaten, Edward Farley. *European Travellers in India: During the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, the Evidence Afforded by Them with Respect to Indian Social Institutions, & the Nature & Influence of Indian Governments*. Asian Educational Services, 1991. 106-111.

<sup>10</sup> Prasad, Ram Chandra. *Early English Travellers in India: A Study in the Travel Literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods with Particular Reference to India*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1980. 27.

are not only descriptive but also analytical. Keeping the smooth flow of his writings, we also see that Ralph Fitch did not encounter any violence or physical attack during his travels in India. Therefore, he was given a free space to document and represent many things that he wished to do.

Ralph Fitch's writings can be counted as the first lengthy text of travel writing that heralded a new genre in writing about far-off lands and travel. It is only later that this genre is treated under the rubric of travel writing since such a genre of writing did not exist during Ralph Fitch's time. Therefore, we can label him as not only a pioneer but also as a trendsetter and an exemplar of the early modern period, which is the period of the prehistory of travel writing. We are employing this term prehistory to bring about the fact that there was a nascent and emerging field of writing where Europeans wrote about Asia, and in this case, it was the Portuguese pioneers who started this genre of travel writing. Ralph Fitch was familiar with the Portuguese, and therefore his writings have transcended the typical English ideas about Asia and move more in the direction of a European hybrid. By this time of the 16th century, the Portuguese also had started writing a large number of texts that dot the libraries of modern Europe today<sup>11</sup>. Most of the Portuguese writings are concerned with this world and pragmatic everyday texts that can be understood by both King and the commoner. One of the historians of this period, Boxer has dealt with this point in detail with suitable examples<sup>12</sup>.

Bengal in the East had a strong Portuguese presence, mainly due to the coastal character of the region. On the other hand, inland, waterways also flourished in North India and the city of Patna was one of the most important centres of trade on account of its favourable location.

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<sup>11</sup> BOXER, C. R. "Some Remarks on the Value of Portuguese Sources for Asian History, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries." *Portuguese Studies* 1 (1985): 193–203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

While Patna was connected to the Ganga valley through the river Ganges, it was also connected to the northern regions of the Himalayas through the caravan networks. One of the destinations of the caravans in the North was Cooch Bihar, which served as a gateway to the Himalayas. Ralph Fitch left detailed notes about Cooch Bihar, which was his next destination.

We also had to understand that, Patna, one of the important cities on account of accessibility to the river Ganges was the node of a very important network of trade linking large parts of north India. Therefore, the city of Patna was a confluence of traders from many parts of north India and also from the Himalayan region of Nepal. Travelling in the eastern direction Ralph Fitch came to the region of Cooch Bihar, which was an entirely different region, both culturally and also physiographically. In Cooch Bihar, there emerges a clear difference between two divergent landscapes, the agrarian plain regions that constitute Bengal and a contrasting region that is wooded, mostly with forests of bamboos and canes<sup>13</sup>. While this region of Cooch Bihar is very different from neighbouring regions due to which it can be treated as a borderland, Ralph Fitch made the mistake of identifying Cooch Bihar as a region that was near Cochin-China<sup>14</sup>. Sir Edward Gait, one of the earliest historians of Assam, contested this fact and since then the mistake of Ralph Fitch has been acknowledged. Despite these two errors of representation, Ralph Fitch deals with the journey to Cooch Bihar from the plains of lowland Bengal, which are two different landscapes very clearly. His understanding of the topography of the wetlands of the lowland region of Bengal to the sub-Himalayan regions of Cooch Bihar, and then to the higher elevations of North Bengal that border to

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<sup>13</sup>Baruah, SwarnaLata. A Comprehensive History of Assam. MunshiramManoharlal Publishers, 1997. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Bhutan and Sikkim are very clear and also verifiable geographically and one can use them, even for describing the region today also<sup>15</sup>.

In the contemporary period. This region is named as sub-Himalayan West Bengal, which is a geographical name and not a cultural region but includes many cultural regions. Therefore, we understand this region as a geographical region that is distinct from the mountain ranges of the North on one side and the Great Plains of Bengal on the other side. In fact, the production patterns in both these regions are also quite different, which is also covered by Ralph Fitch and one can decipher from his writings that the agrarian regions of Bengal were relatively densely populated even during the time of Ralph Fitch and continue even to this day to be one of the densest settlements in the world. The topography of this region of sub-Himalayan West Bengal that includes Cooch Bihar is covered with bamboo and cane is accurately depicted by Ralph Fitch. Cooch Bihar as a land where cotton and silk are found in plenty is another representation by Ralph Fitch and is also seemingly very precise<sup>16</sup>. We also find some elements missing from the depictions of the traveller Ralph Fitch, and one is struck by the absence of any mention to the flourishing trade networks to Dhaka since these networks very important and linked the economy of Cooch Bihar and North Bengal with Dhaka. One of the important points that the reader feels to notice is the absence of the traders and their networks to the city of Dhaka. That was one of the most important commercial centres of eastern India.

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<sup>15</sup> Ryley, John Horton, and Ralph Fitch. *Ralph Fitch, England's Pioneer to India and Burma: His Companions and Contemporaries, with His Remarkable Narrative Told in His Own Words*. Asian Educational Services, 1998. 112-7.

<sup>16</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 24-5.

The two cities of Patna and Dhaka were the most important centres in the trade networks that extended in the easternmost to Dhaka and linked Northern India and was an object of interest to the British like the Portuguese, who had a keen interest in this network earlier<sup>17</sup>. John Deyell, one of the most important economic historians of Bengal, painstakingly points out that Bengal, which had a coastline served as a natural outlet for the Himalayan regions towards the ocean. He does this by invoking the earlier Portuguese writer Pires, who quotes another early writer. We understand that this point figures regularly in contemporary debates about the linkages between the Himalayan regions that are landlocked and transnational trade. From an early period, the push towards the sea was one of the most important aspirations for the early Indian rulers to gravitate towards the eastern and western coasts. Such an exercise has not been adequately done in the case of the Himalayan regions as in the case of North India and Central India where Ranbir Chakravarty has explained this process. Similarly, most of the landlocked regions were perpetually starved of some commodities and therefore needed access to the sea, very badly and thus the importance of Bengal arises in this context.

Cooch Bihar was the entrance to the Himalayan regions and from the Himalayas. It was the entrance to Bengal and had a very important geographical position. The term for this in Indian languages is known as dooars or the doorway. This was pointed out in detail by Ralph Fitch, and he also elaborated on the trade networks. Ralph Fitch was clearly aware of the relations with Bhutan, and he also had a clear understanding of the topography and trade routes, landforms and the mountains and streams in the regions of Bhutan and Cooch Bihar and also Assam<sup>18</sup>. S L Baruah, one of the seminal authors on Assam is famous for a work

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<sup>17</sup> Mukherjee, Rila. *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*. Primus Books, 2011. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 27.

titled, 'A Comprehensive History of Assam' and uses in detail information from Ralph Fitch's travel to Cooch Bihar in the 16th century and reconstructs the administrative setup and the socio-economic conditions, drawing upon the writings of Ralph Fitch<sup>19</sup>. We also get a very different picture from the writings of another traveller from Europe, who happened to be a Jesuit Father named Stephan Cacella. He also visited the regions of Cooch Bihar and Assam, which is a neighbouring region and rendered by him as Kamrup<sup>20</sup>. There are also many other English travellers who travelled to these regions in the later centuries, and they are regularly invoked to point out the contrast between the region of Cooch Bihar and the borderlands that dot the surroundings of Cooch Bihar.

There are certain cultural aspects that were very peculiar to the European travellers, and Ralph Fitch was one such person who did not fail to notice some of these aspects that seemed very different from their experiences and also from North India. He points out that people are very religious in this region and show many observances that relate to everyday practices and also extend to animals. He also points out that with respect to animals, even though some of them are sick and lame and unable to move, the normal course would have been to kill the animals, but in the region of Cooch Bihar, the people keep them alive and nurture them till they are dead. Ralph Fitch calls the kings as Sukhaldeghe, but it was Narayan who was on the throne. The latter name is one of the most important and celebrated personalities of Cooch Bihar, and we now seem to doubt whether Ralph Fitch has accurately represented the history of Cooch Bihar and if the representations are accurate, why did he not mention the latter name<sup>21</sup>. From where did this error set in? The answer seems to lie in the religious context of

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<sup>19</sup>Baruah, SwarnaLata. A Comprehensive History of Assam. MunshiramManoharlal Publishers, 1997. 216-7.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 443.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 216-7.

Cooch Bihar, where people believed in omens, gods and planetary influences. Therefore, the King was under the spell of Saturn, which is considered to be a very inauspicious planet. He did not rule under his own name as he had asked his brother to administer in his name for a year, so as to set back the influence of Saturn. We also get some other vignettes of information that seemed very peculiar to the Englishmen like the longevity of the people and also the practice of elongating earlobes that gave the impression of a person having very large ears. Actually, Ralph Fitch was not wrong as this practice is prevalent even in contemporary India and Southeast Asia in a different fashion <sup>22</sup>.

Many readers may find fault with Ralph Fitch as he was guilty of omitting certain facts which the 18th-century travellers revelled in describing. Among these facts, the most important was the physical make-up of the population whom the 18th-century travellers classified as belonging to different racial groups like the Mongoloid, the Aryan and the Dravidian. We cannot find any fault with Ralph Fitch in this regard for he was free of the bias of racial discrimination since race as a category of analysis was not important in the 16th century Europe and is the only favour during the Enlightenment period and was reported by the travellers who include Hudgson, Buchanan and Latham <sup>23</sup>.

David Risley is a name that crops up when we talk about the racial classification of the Indian population using certain scientific methods <sup>24</sup>. However, there was no scientificity to this whole exercise as has been proved by recent debates on race, and Ralph Fitch was, therefore, free from this whole bias of representing the other as belonging to a racial category, which was automatically stratified on a hierarchical scale. When we observe the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, Robert Montgomery. Puraniya, Ronggopoor and Assam. W. H. Allen and Company, 1838. 36, 662.

<sup>24</sup> Srivatsan, R. "Native Noses and Nationalist Zoos: Debates in Colonial and Early Nationalist Anthropology of Castes and Tribes." *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 19, (2005): 1986–98.

origins of the category of race, we are astonished that it was during the period of Enlightenment that this category became one of the most important categories of analysis and also of representing the other, and later the only dominant category, which led to the whole world being categorised on racial lines<sup>25</sup>. Ralph Fitch has done a great service by bringing about a narrative that is not tainted by this poison of race. The writers of the Enlightenment brought about the idea of a race to the forefront. Though this category is fully discarded today, it occasionally resurfaces, because many of the indigenous people have also internalised this concept of race.

The Kingdom of the Tippera or Tripura was next stop, and he is built with this region in detail<sup>26</sup> proceeding eastwards and also get references to the Kingdom of Arakan<sup>27</sup>. While referring to the non-state spaces, Ralph Fitch also has talked about these nonstate spaces and their inhabitants and one of the most important groups are the Mog, who also launched the famous invasion of Dhaka that was carried out by the Mog pirates<sup>28</sup>. There is also a problem with his identification of the Himalayan region of Sikkim and Bhutan, Bhotia, to designate this particular place, but we are lucky to identify this is Sikkim because he mentions the name of the King as Dermain<sup>29</sup>. Though he grasped the idea of the title of King, who is known as Chos-Gyal meaning the King of Dharma, which is modelled on ancient Hindu political ideals of the righteous ruler, which is also a concept in the Buddhist religion<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press, 1995. 4, 6, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 26-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Dasgupta, Biplab. *European Trade and Colonial Conquest*. Anthem Press, 2005. 267.

<sup>29</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Rahul, R. "The System of Administration in the Himalaya." *Asian Survey* 9, no. 9 (1969): 696-7.

There are many beginning groups that he tries to identify and one such group she identifies as originating from either Moscow or Tartary<sup>31</sup>. We may grant him the liberty as the term was used to refer to the Mongols or the Mongol Tatars after the Mongolian invasion of Central Asia and the borderlands of Europe. Another important aspect that he points out, with regard to trade is the horse trade originating from Yunnan<sup>32</sup>. As the border towns of the Himalayan region like Darjeeling became famous because of the wool trade, this commodity became an important item, and Ralph Fitch is clearly mentioned to the large volume of trade in wool<sup>33</sup>. He also describes people wearing many different kinds of woollen dress and shoes, and from this, we may guess that he is referring to people from Yunnan or eastern Tibet<sup>34</sup>. This short description of Bhutan is complete only when he talks of trade in animal tails that were bound for China and Pegu<sup>35</sup>. He could not identify this as yak tail as he was not familiar with these animals.

Before proceeding to Burma, the region of Pegu is given prominence, and Ralph Fitch also talks about these regions and the towns are also given a short description. One of the important towns in the town of the Macao, and he calls it a very fortified and strong city. Most of the towns here depended on overseas trade<sup>36</sup>. Gold, silver, kings, palaces, trade and the wives and concubines of the kings, white elephants and all the exotic items that make up the Oriental imagination of the later period are clearly delineated and described by Ralph Fitch. He also makes an interesting observation that during the court proceedings, the king

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<sup>31</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, see also Yang, Bin. "Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective." *Journal of World History* 15, no. 3 (2004): 284-6.

<sup>35</sup> Foster, Sir William. *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921. 5, 30-33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

used to have his wife and concubines also seated beside him when he presided over the royal court <sup>37</sup>. A large number of commodities that make up the trade between Bengal and Burma and also between Burma and south-east Asia are mentioned and include the white cloth predominantly from Bengal, precious stones and pepper, lead and tin from Southeast Asia, and another important commodity was opium that originated from India <sup>38</sup>.

The Portuguese are everywhere in the coastal belt from Bengal to Burma into Indochina and also to China, and he also gives a description of the inhabitants of Burma who practice the Buddhist religion <sup>39</sup>. Ralph Fitch, has very convincingly demonstrated that the prosperity of Burma was mainly due to its trade with the Bengal on one side and Indochina on the other side, including China. We know that a clear idea about the central role of Bengal in the trade networks and now the question arises as to how this centrality came up in the first place?

Contrary to popular assumptions that Bengal was in the centre of trade and outlet to the sea to North India, Rila Mukherjee points out that this was a very late development that took place only during the middle period of the Mughals after their Afghan interregnum when the treasury was shifted to Rohtas after the conquest of Bengal by sheer Shah <sup>40</sup>. The main beneficiary of Sher Shah's economic reforms was the Mughal emperor Akbar, who inherited not only the territory but also the administrative institutions and the legacy of the currency reforms <sup>41</sup>. Rolf Fitch, was one of the earliest to point out this development that is focused on economic history rather than political history and is being appreciated now. He meant the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31-4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34-8.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>40</sup> Mukherjee, Rila. *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*. Primus Books, 2011. 106.

<sup>41</sup> Habib, Irfan. "Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in the Economy of Mughal India." *The Journal of Economic History* 29, no. 1 (1969): 39-44.

region of Aachen and its orientation towards Tripura, rather than towards a is also a very perceptible observation. In addition to the hill regions of Sikkim, Bhutan and the regions of Tripura and Arakan, Ralph Fitch also talks about some of the minor islands that served as important landmarks in the history of the sea.

. One may assess the writings of Ralph Fitch in a very positive way by pointing out that he has delved into a number of topics with regard to eastern India and its borderlands detail, which is a pioneering effort and has recorded many events, including certain very perceptible events and some exotic facts. Another striking point about this writing is that he is free from the later biases and value judgements that have become the staple about the borderlands.