

CHINA'S SHADOW OVER SIKKIM

The Politics of Intimidation



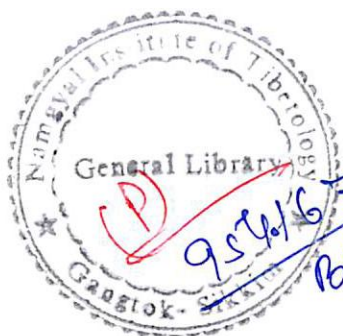
G.S. Bajpai

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Introduction

Sikkim, now the twenty second state of the Union of India is the most vital and vulnerable sector along the Sino-Indian border. The People's Republic of China has been making steady military preparations in the Chumbi Valley, across Sikkim and the entire area is now heavily garrisoned and converted into a strong military base. Since good roads have also been constructed by the Chinese leading to important Nathu La and Jelep La passes, this axis offers an easy route of thrust from the Chumbi Valley of Tibet to India. Even a temporary and limited success of such a military campaign would fulfil China's tactical objectives. The corridor between Sikkim and Bangladesh is the only land link which connects Assam and other states in the north-east region with the rest of India. In the event of its occupation by the enemy, not only those vital areas, but also a part of West Bengal, Bhutan and Sikkim will be completely cut off.

For India too, this is the most convenient route of advance into Tibet. If China attacks in this or some other sector, an advance by the Indian troops through Sikkim will enable them to capture a number of strategic Tibetan towns. It was through this very sector that the famous Younghusband expedition had advanced to Lhasa in 1903. Since then the communications and logistics capacity has tremendously improved and China too may well experience great difficulty in resisting a determined Indian attack through this sector. It is this dual importance which makes Sikkim vital to both, China and India.

This book is not intended to be a narrative history of Sikkim. Instead it tries to bring together some of the major events between the mid-nineteenth century when the British started making inroads into Sikkim, and the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975. During this period of about 100 years, Sikkim changed its status from an independent feudal state to a protectorate of the British Empire, then as a protectorate of independent India and finally as the 22nd state of the Union of India. When all the factors and events of that period are put together and all that the people at that time had thought, done and gained and all their mischief, crimes, follies and misfortunes are viewed in the context of destiny of that region, they combine to form a picture which is at once tense and kaleidoscopic.

The book falls into two parts. The first five chapters describe and analyze in chronological order various activities and events that took place before 1947. During that period, the course of Sikkim's history was vitally affected by the events in Tibet. Moreover, the British were trying to use Sikkim as a spring board for the export of their manufactured goods to Tibet and Western China. Through necessity, therefore, the description of events in Sikkim and Tibet and different facets of the Chinese and British diplomacy in that region had to be seen side by side. China had hardly any hold over Tibet at that time. Its prestige was dwindling and the Tibetans were so defiant that they hardly conformed to their wishes. Therefore, the Chinese welcomed every opportunity which gave them a right to handle Tibetan affairs on their behalf. In order to safeguard their commercial interests in Tibet, they were also opposed to opening of that area for trade through Sikkim. While in their communications to the British, they described Tibetans to be "doltish and suspicious in disposition", and blamed them for their "obstructiveness" in settling trade and border issues they, in fact, connived and instigated Tibetans against any direct contact with the British. By doing so they were able to obtain important concessions from the British and strengthen their grip over Tibet.

As regards the British, they were initially interested only in exploring the possibilities and

potentialities of trade with Tibet through Sikkim. Subsequently, however, all their moves were guided by their concern to safeguard other interests which they were trying to derive by way of Company's sea trade with China and establishment of a British representative there. To this end, they persisted in upholding "the feeble and tottering authority of China" over Tibet. They agreed to the recognition of China as the suzerain power in Tibet in order to ensure their own suzerainty over Sikkim. The Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet signed in 1890, at the latter's initiative, thus suited both, at the cost of Sikkim and Tibet. By this Convention, China recognized the British government's direct and exclusive control over Sikkim's internal administration and foreign relations. The British had already annexed Darjeeling, which was a part of Sikkim. They were now free to consolidate their hold over Sikkim. They stationed a Political Officer and an armed garrison there, surrendered to Tibet Sikkim's right to the Chumbi Valley and its enclave at Dobtra, offered to sacrifice all Sikkimese grazing pastures in North Sikkim in return for certain trading facilities in Tibet, and mounted armed expeditions from Sikkim to Khamba Dzong and Lhasa. While they did this and much more, they did not even understand whether to deal with the Chinese or the Tibetans while negotiating trade, transit, border disputes or other issues connected

with Sikkim. Most of the time, their policies were dictated by events and not *vice versa*. They altered their approach depending upon individual recommendations, hearsay and the opportunities as they presented themselves. But, as George Bernard Shaw rightly said, "You will never find an Englishman in the wrong. He does everything on principle. He fights you on patriotic principle, he robs you on business principle, he enslaves you on imperial principle."

The Tibetans were a simple people, not exposed to the type of diplomacy in which China and Britain were involved. Their main concern was the preservation of their religion and seclusion. Their initial politeness and courtesies extended to the British emissaries were misinterpreted by the British as their keenness to welcome trading of British manufactured goods in Tibet. They were, in fact, all through opposed to entry of all foreigners into their country and repudiated both, the 1890 Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet as well as the Regulations attached to it. They studiously ignored the provisions regarding trade and refused to cooperate in the demarcation of the border. The principle of watershed was unacceptable to them as they had their own concept of the boundary, based on ancient stone cairns and customs. They were equally sensitive about their grazing rights in North Sikkim and were determined not to abide by any restrictions stipulated under the Convention.

All this while the Maharaja of Sikkim remained a silent spectator. Whenever there was any problem between the British and Tibetans concerning any Sikkimese territory, he simply submitted the requests and representations to both the sides hoping to ward off the impending trouble.

The narrative begins with the historical background in Chapter one and deals with a brief history of the situation as it prevailed in Sikkim, Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal in the early eighteenth century and the initial efforts made by Hastings to open up Tibet for trade. Chapter two deals with the British inroads into Sikkim and reveals the eager commercial minded diplomacy of the East India Company at that time. It also deals with the circumstances leading to Sikkim becoming a British protectorate. Chapters three and four examine the implications of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 and the Regulations regarding Trade, Communications and Pasturage appended to it and the policy of patient waiting and indecision followed by Lord Elgin with regard to the demarcation of the Sikkim-Tibet border. The fifth chapter reconstructs the events leading to the forward policy of Lord Curzon, the bogey of Russian intrigues in Tibet, the Younghusband expedition to Tibet and the signing of the Anglo-Tibet Convention of 1904. On the basis of historical facts, this portion also brings out that our contention that the Sikkim-Tibet border is

well defined and demarcated on the ground is really not all that correct. The 1890 Convention, which defined the boundary in that sector, did so in very general terms, being the watershed between river Teesta and its effluents flowing into Sikkim and Mochu and other rivers flowing into Tibet. The question of attaching a map to the 1890 Convention was considered at length but the British themselves were not sure of the alignment, particularly in the northern sector of Sikkim. The proposal was given up because the map produced by the Surveyor General of India differed substantially from the one prepared by Sir Joseph Hookers. In any case, the map prepared by the Surveyor General could not be accurate as their representative, Roberts, could never reach the frontier and was stopped by the Tibetans at Giagong. As regards the demarcation, the Tibetans had refused to cooperate in it right from the beginning. Though some points along the boundary were identified and even pillars were erected at two passes (subsequently demolished by the Tibetans), and certain areas of north Sikkim and the Lhonak Valley were surveyed but the demarcation work was not undertaken because it was felt that the erection of boundary pillars was not necessary due to the physical impossibility of doing so in the high altitude areas and the fear that they might again be knocked down by the Tibetans creating the same situation which the government of India wanted to avoid.

The trend of activities in this region changed remarkably after India's independence in 1947. Within a short period after then, there were very significant developments which followed in rapid succession. On October 1, 1949, the Central Government of the People's Republic of China was proclaimed; the next year a fresh treaty was signed between India and Sikkim; the same year the Chinese Army advanced into Tibet to "liberate" it; the next year in 1951, a Seventeen Point Agreement was forced upon Tibet and in 1954, the Sino-Indian Agreement on Trade and Intercourse was concluded heralding a new era of friendship between India and China. However, Indian and Chinese interests continued to overlap in Tibet and the principle of peace and co-existence with China proved to be illusory. In the years to come, the Chinese troops stationed in Tibet became more and more aggressive and China even made a vague assertion that it would respect only "proper" relations between India and Sikkim. Chapter six deals with that period of harmony and conflict of interests. That is followed by a chapter dealing with the Sino-Pak collusion, and the Chinese ultimatum to open a second front in the Sikkim sector in support of Pakistan in its war against India in 1965. In Chapter eight, an endeavour has been made to study the pattern of Chinese propaganda and psychological warfare launched on the Sikkim-Tibet border, and

Chapter nine describes the height of China's arrogance—their unprovoked heavy firing at Nathu La and Cho La and the subsequent events.

The last ruler of Sikkim, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal is no more. During my five years stay at Gangtok, I used to meet him frequently and knew him rather intimately. There was a typical Bhutia shrewdness in him, but at the same time, there was gentleness, compassion and simplicity in his character which were rare and refreshing. He was a cautious, introspective and meekly ambitious person. That ambition, however, became more pronounced after his marriage with Hope Cook, an American, which made him believe that her international contacts could facilitate his claims to independence. This led to problems, not only with his subjects who were already clamouring for more democratic rights but also with the Government of India which was unwilling to consider any demand for change in Sikkim's status. The Chogyal obviously showed an alarming lack of sensitivity in dealing with the situation. At no point did he appear to have grasped the extreme to which his opponents were prepared to go, nor the intensity of their feeling against him. The last chapter deals with the internal turmoil during the decade of 1965-75. That decade was a period of fever, unrest and extreme tension and many books have covered the political changes which took place at that time. I have, therefore, not gone into those details

and have omitted some, while touching upon many other important episodes only in passing. That chapter also includes China's belligerent attitude towards the merger of Sikkim with the Union of India.

Apart from some portions of my personal knowledge, this book, like many other history books, is a synthesis of many sources and I bear a debt of gratitude to all the writers whose works I have consulted. A large number of quotations have been included to give the text authenticity. A bibliography of the books and other matters is given at the end of each chapter. It is hoped that when this account is added to other studies on Sikkim, the reader will get a slightly more stereoscopic picture.

I am very grateful to Dr. R.N. Bakshi, Director in charge of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages for his thoughtful generosity in reading the whole text and offering suggestions for improvement. I should also thank my wife for her patience and understanding while I was working on this book and my son Ashok for all the assistance provided by him in its completion.

G.S.B.

Historical Background

The second half of the eighteenth century saw many important changes which had a direct bearing on the commercial concerns of the East India Company. Britain was now being slowly transformed from an agricultural into an industrialized country. There was mass production of cloth and other cheap goods which needed a suitable outlet. Various commercial organizations had started arguing that the destiny of their business was not in that narrow island which they occupied, but in the acquisition of more free and open overseas markets. The flourishing trade of the East India Company had, however, begun to decline. The Dutch and Portuguese Companies which had also gained access to Indian markets, were putting formidable opposition to the Company and were bent upon breaking its monopoly. The "free merchants" who were deprived of holding shares in the Company were

also a force to reckon with. The Court of Directors in London which considered the matter, therefore, suggested to the Company that the possibilities of trade with Tibet and Western China should be explored. In this way, it could also offset the restrictions imposed on the British merchants in China where they were not allowed to travel freely and had to trade only at Canton. There was also a hope that the trade links between Bengal and Tibet would, in due course of time, provide a basis for establishing more cordial relations with the Chinese government in Peking.

The political situation in Tibet and also in Nepal and Bhutan, through which a feeble trade had continued for generations was, however, such that the Tibetan gates were temporarily closed for all trade and communication with India. The Sixth Dalai Lama was still a minor and the Council of Ministers who were responsible for the administration of Tibet were not able to manage the affairs satisfactorily. Their mutual jealousies and rivalries had led to repeated revolts and civil wars and on the request of the Tibetan Ministers for help, the Manchu Emperor had to send Chinese troops to restore peace. While the Tibetans were happy and welcomed the Chinese Army as their saviour, this gave the Manchu Emperor an excellent opportunity to secure a strong foothold in Lhasa. He appointed two Imperial Residents known as Ambans to stay in Lhasa with

an armed garrison. Initially, the Ambans had no power of intervention and their main task was only to keep the Emperor informed.¹ Gradually, however, they started asserting a great deal of Manchu suzerainty over Tibet and encouraged a policy of complete seclusion. This policy was also backed by the Lamas who were afraid of any rivals and had already opposed the visits of Portuguese Jesuits and Capuchins who had visited Tibet in the recent past and tried to propagate their faith by founding their missions at various places. The Lamas, and also the Manchus, were least inclined at that time to welcome the English or even Indian traders to visit Tibet.

In Nepal, the Gurkha power was rising to pre-eminence under Prithvi Narayan Shah who had succeeded his father in 1742. Shah was a very shrewd and ambitious person and he had started attacking various small states in Nepal, including the Newar states, with the intention of uniting the whole of Nepal under his command. Kathmandu was at that time ruled by a Newari Raja, Jayprakash Malla. When hard pressed by the Gurkhas, Malla decided to seek military assistance from the British and dispatched two messengers to Mr. Golding, who was the British Commercial Agent at Bettiah, to convey the Newar Raja's request for help against Prithvi Narayan Shah. The Newars had close racial and religious ties with Tibet and had strong

Buddhist sympathies. The Newari Raja was also said to be in close touch with the Dalai Lama, and it was generally believed that his intimate relationship with the Dalai Lama would help to expand the Company's trade with Tibet and China. During his regime Nepal had a brisk trade not only with the bordering districts of India but also with Tibet. The main exports from Nepal to Tibet consisted of articles such as broad cloth, snuffs, indigo, tobacco, knives, scissors, sandalwood, pearls, leather etc., which were bartered for gold dust, musk, tincals and woolen cloth of local manufacture. This trade had suddenly come to an end with the Gurkha victory and it was appreciated that it could be revived, and trade with China through Nepal could be opened again only if the Newari Raja was helped to return to power. It was, therefore, decided to send a military expedition, led by Capt. Kinloch, to Nepal against the Gurkhas.

The expedition left in September 1767 with very high hopes of success. Unfortunately, the bad terrain, heavy rains and shortage of provisions resulted in its complete failure and in 1769, Kathmandu finally fell to the Gurkhas. Capt. Kinloch had, however, occupied a small portion of the Gurkha territory north of Bettiah and the Company decided that he should continue to hold on to it. This embittered the Gurkhas and they began expelling all Europeans and even Kashmiri traders, Gossains and faqirs who were connected with Bengal trade.² Under those

conditions, the revival of trade with Nepal and, through her, with Tibet and China seemed impossible. The Gurkha Raja, Prithvi Narayan Shah, not only closed all doors for the English to enter Tibet, but also wrote to the Dalai Lama requesting him not to have any connections with them and to stop the import of all Indian and British goods into Tibet.

When the use of force failed, the British tried conciliation and deputed another Englishman, James Logan, to go to Kathmandu and meet the Gurkha Raja with two letters from the Governor of Bengal. In one of those letters the Governor expressed regret for supporting the Newar Raja Jayprakash Malla due to sheer ignorance, and expressed a desire to enter into friendship with him. He also explained that the opening of the traditional trade would benefit both sides, and suggested that the commercial relations between India and Nepal might be restored again.³ This mission also proved to be abortive, and Logan was driven out of Nepal.⁴

The British were, however, not reconciled to this situation. They regarded Tibet not only as a good local market but also as an ideal land route to the fabulous markets of China. The Directors of the Company, therefore, issued instructions that the routes going to Tibet *via* Bhutan and Assam might also be explored. An ideal opportunity for this was provided in 1772 when Bhutan laid claim to a portion of the adjoining

territory of Cooch Bihar district and rapidly occupied it. The Raja of Cooch Bihar approached Warren Hastings for help. Hastings sent an army which defeated the Bhutanese and drove them upto the foothills of Bhutan. The Raja of Bhutan then applied to the Panchen Lama of Shigatse to mediate for peace. Consequently, some presents and a letter from the Panchen Lama reached Warren Hastings on March 29, 1774. The letter requested him, in the name of religion and customs, to end the hostilities against the Raja of Bhutan and stated that by doing so, Hastings would "confer the greatest favour and friendship" upon the Panchen Lama.⁵ Hastings seized the opportunity and consented to peace on terms which were favourable to the Raja of Bhutan.

The letter and the presents sent by the Panchen Lama suggested interesting possibilities. First, a regular communication with the Panchen Lama could now be established through Bhutan. Second, the presents sent by the Panchen Lama, which included sheets of gilt leather stamped with the black eagle of the Russian armorial, Chinese silk, purses of gold dust, bags of musk and Tibetan woolen cloth, indicated the possibilities of external trade, internal wealth, and knowledge of the arts and industries. Third, if the relations with the Panchen Lama improved, British goods could find their way to China through the back door. As Turner recorded some years later, "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 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".⁶

Hastings, therefore, deputed George Bogle, an Englishman, to visit Tibet on a commercial reconnaissance "on the justifiable plea of paying a proper tribute of respect in return for the advances which had been made by the Lama".⁷ Besides the presents for the Panchen Lama, Hastings also sent through Bogle a variety of articles of British manufacture, which might serve as specimens of trade in which the Tibetans could be asked to participate. Bogle was also briefed to investigate the potentialities and internal resources of Tibet, the trading needs of the people, the availability of articles such as gold, silver, precious stones, musk etc. and the nature of communications between Bengal and Tibet, and between Tibet and other neighbouring countries.

Bogle, accompanied by Alexander Hamilton, an assistant surgeon of the Company, set out on his mission in May, 1774. The Panchen Lama was, apparently, not happy to hear this, and he hurriedly

wrote another letter to Warren Hastings requesting him to recall Bogle to Calcutta and not to send him to Tibet. It was only after the persuasion of Purangir, the Hindu Gossain, who had been patronized by the Panchen Lama, that the latter agreed to permit him to proceed to Tashilhunpo, provided he came with only a few attendants.

Bogle reached Tashilhunpo in December, 1774, and was so successful in cultivating the goodwill of the Panchen Lama that the relations between the British in India and Tibet "got off to an auspicious start".⁸ During one of the meetings, the Panchen Lama explained to Bogle that he was reluctant to permit him to enter Tibet because he was advised by many people against it, and he had been told that Englishmen were very powerful and were fond of war and conquest. He also showed Bogle a letter received from the Agent of the Dalai Lama in which it was pointed out that once the English were able to enter a country, they created disturbances and became its masters.

Bogle made a thorough study of the foreign trade of Tibet and reported to Hastings that Tibet had considerable foreign trade as its land was mountainous and barren and people had to depend on other countries for their supplies.⁹ From China came coarse tea, rich satins, silken scarves (known as *Khadas*), silk threads, furs, porcelain cups, glassware, cutlery, silver and tobacco;¹⁰ the Russian

traders of Lamaist faith, who were mostly Kalmuks, Western Mongols and Buriats of East Siberia, brought with them camels, yak tails, leather hides, silver, furs and other Siberian goods;¹¹ the imports from Kashmir consisted of sugar, fruits and dried raisins, and from Assam came spices, linen, silk cloth and timber. From Nepal and Bhutan, the Tibetans got rice, iron and coarse woolen cloth. The imports from Bengal had dwindled considerably due to the adverse political situation at that time, but, as the Panchen Lama himself told Bogle, Indian merchants used to take to Tibet abundant quantities of broad cloth, pearls, coral and amber beads, conch shells, spices, tobacco, sugar, indigo etc.¹² Bogle concluded that there was a considerable scope to introduce, besides the above articles, many new ones, particularly as the Tibetans were a very curious people and were immensely fond of articles from other countries.

Tibet apparently produced sufficient quantities of gold, musk, wool, yak-tails and salt to pay for those imports. The goods imported from China and Russia were bartered either with those commodities, or with items such as broad cloth pearls, amber and coral beads and spices imported from Bengal. Similarly, the goods imported from Bengal, Kashmir, Nepal and Bhutan were bartered mostly for gold and other local products, and partly for Chinese tea and porcelain goods.

Seen from this perspective, trade with Tibet appeared to be a very attractive proposition. However, there were many obstacles. The Tibetans were very suspicious of the intentions of the British. Within the last seven years of Bogle's visit to Tashilnunpo, the East India Company had sent an expedition to Nepal against the Gurkha Raja, and another to Bhutan in support of the Rajah of Cooch Bihar, and the Tibetans were not sure that a similar policy would not some day be followed against them. Moreover, the Manchus discouraged trade with Europeans; and even in the mainland of China, they had restricted it only to Canton. As the Panchen Lama confided in Bogle, the reluctance of the Regent of Lhasa to trade with the English was also because of his fear of offending the Chinese.¹³ The situation was further aggravated by the hostile behaviour of the rulers of Nepal and Bhutan, who were reluctant to grant free passage to the traders. In view of these considerations Bogle concluded that it was impossible to obtain permission for Europeans to trade in Tibet and suggested that the only other alternative was to continue to use the Asians for trade with Tibet.

But there was also a brighter side of the situation. Due to his personal liking for Bogle, the Panchen Lama had virtually agreed to open a free communication of trade between Bengal and Tibet and, fortunately, the Panchen Lama's authority and influence at that time was such that his willingness

to encourage trade could easily bring about the desired results. "While the Company's views on a communication with Tibet", wrote Bogle, "are only to an extension of commerce, I am inclined to think that the Panchen Lama's influence is sufficient to accomplish them".¹⁴ The Panchen Lama had already written to the Regent of Lhasa and to some of the principal merchants in this regard. He assured Bogle that he would write also to the Grand Lama at Peking to depute some persons to call on Hastings, suggesting thereby a possibility of opening a channel of communication with the Government of China. He also expressed keenness to establish a monastery at Calcutta, on the banks of the Ganges, to enable the Tibetan pilgrims to visit India and revive the old religious connections between the two countries. Bogle saw great commercial possibilities in this proposition. "The fondness of the Tibetans for everything strange and curious", he concluded, "strengthened by religion, will probably lead many others to undertake so meritorious a journey and pilgrimages, like the Hadj at Mecca, and it may in time open a considerable mart for the commodities of Bengal."¹⁵

Bogle returned from his Mission in 1775, and four years later, Hastings decided to send him to Tibet once again in order to strengthen the earlier relations and to encourage trade. However, before Bogle could set out on his mission, it was learnt that

the Panchen Lama was about to leave for Peking. While in Peking, the Panchen Lama died on November 27, 1780.¹⁶ After some time, Bogle also died of cholera on April 3, 1781. These unfortunate events frustrated all expectations which Hastings might have justifiably nursed.

However, Hastings did not give up his efforts, and in 1783, after the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama had been found, he sent Captain Samuel Turner to renew those contacts under the pretext of sending his regards to the new incarnation of his old friend, the Panchen Lama.

Turner reached Tashilhunpo on September 22, 1783. The Panchen Lama was an infant of about a year at that time, and, therefore, he had to confine his liaison with the Regent and his colleague, Soepon Chenpo. Turner had a number of meetings with them and was struck by a peculiar combination of awe and resentment towards the Chinese which dominated the behaviour of Tibetan officials at that time. They explained to Turner the difficulties which they had to encounter in obtaining permission for his entry into Tibet and also disclosed that the Emperor had sent instructions to the Regent that he should not allow any stranger (referring, presumably, to the British) to meet him. "Its (Manchu) influence", Turner recorded, "overawes them in all their proceedings and produces a timidity and caution in their conduct".¹⁷ At the same time he noticed that the

Tibetans also resented the interference of the Chinese. When some Chinese officers and troops came to Tashilhunpo to show reverence to the new incarnation, they were treated with distant reserve and during their stay, the Tibetans "were evidently impatient... and assumed an unusual air of secrecy, to prevent them from obtaining knowledge of anything relating to their affairs".¹⁸ This dilemma presented an insurmountable barrier to formulating any satisfactory arrangement for the revival of trade between Bengal and Tibet.¹⁹

The Regent of Tashilhunpo, however, promised Turner that he would extend all possible assistance to the Indian merchants who came to Tibet on behalf of the Government of Bengal. He also gave assurance that all those merchants who were recommended by Hastings would be given free admission, facilities for transportation, and allotment of accommodation for their stay and the sale of their goods. Turner still hoped that once the Tibetans "became acquainted with the pleasures of luxury and the profits of commerce, they will be roused from their apathy and crave for new objects of opulence and ease."²⁰ He had no doubt that this trade link between Bengal and Tibet would, in due course of time, provide a basis for developing a back door trade with China.

Turner and Robert Sunders, who accompanied him on his mission, also confirmed that Tibet had an abundant quantity of gold and other minerals. "The

Tibetans found gold, in large quantities and frequently very pure. In the form of gold dust it was found in the beds of rivers and at their several bendings, generally attached to small pieces of stone, with every appearance of its having been a part of a large mass. They found it at times in large masses, lumps and irregular veins".²¹ He also reported on the availability of sufficient quantities of Lead, Copper, Mercury and Borax, and concluded that "their mines and minerals were capable of opening to them such inexhaustible source of wealth as to be alone sufficient to purchase everything of which they stand in need".²²

The East India Company at that time was interested mainly in trade rather than diplomacy. Tibetan books, Indian fables and Chinese proverbs had all described Tibet as a land of treasure and the richest country in the world. The profusion with which Gold was used in various monasteries and homes and bartered for consumer goods everywhere, had left no doubt about the authenticity of such reports. Those alluring reports of wealth were further confirmed by Bogle and Turner, who reported about the existence of great commercial potential in Tibet. They found that Tibet depended on imports of large supplies of various articles, and, besides the articles already in demand, a number of other articles could also be introduced. There was also a hope that through the mediation of a person so revered as the Panchen Lama, the company would ultimately succeed in establishing cordial relations with the Chinese Government in Peking.

Soon after Turner's return, however, Hastings resigned and returned to England, and his successors, Lord Macartney and Lord Cornwallis, gave up all efforts to approach Tibetans through a conviction of their futility. The position became still worse after 1788 when the Gurkhas invaded Tibet and occupied some of the Tibetan territory. On behalf of the Panchen Lama, the Regent immediately rushed two messengers with a letter to the Governor General of India. In his letter, the Regent described the plunder and massacre done by the invading Gurkhas, and also disclosed that the Chinese Amban in Lhasa had already approached the Emperor of China to send troops. However, the Panchen Lama was against the participation of the Chinese troops in the war and, therefore, preferred either peace with the Gurkhas or their annihilation by the Governor General's forces. The letter went on to say that if neither of those alternatives was possible, and the Chinese Army had to drive the invading Gurkhas out, he would request that the English should at least not assist the Gurkhas.²³

Lord Cornwallis turned down the request for any effective assistance, and in support of his decision he gave, among other reasons, his keenness to avoid any displeasure of the Emperor of China by interfering between the Tibetans and the Gurkhas.²⁴ But, before his reply could reach Tashilhunpo, the Tibetans had already negotiated with the Gurkhas and agreed to

pay an annual tribute of three hundred Tibetan ingots of silver if the Gurkhas vacated their towns and withdrew to Nepal. Accordingly, the Gurkhas had withdrawn, and the Tibetans had also paid their first installment of the tribute to Nepal.

The Tibetans, however refused to pay subsequent installments on the plea that the treaty had not been approved by the Dalai Lama. Angered Gurkhas, therefore, invaded Tibet once again in October 1791, and this time they penetrated right upto Tashilhunpo. The Panchen Lama and all Gylongs escaped across the Brahmaputra. After stripping Tashilhunpo of all its wealth, the Gurkhas withdrew and reassembled at Tingri plains, situated between Shigatse and the Nepal border.

The relations between the Manchu Emperor and the Dalai Lama were of the nature of "patron and priest". The Manchu Emperors, being strong in temporal power, provided assistance whenever required, while the Dalai Lama gave spiritual guidance. Thus when the Court of China came to know about it, the Emperor immediately dispatched an Army to protect the Lama and his territory. This Army, which entered Tibet *via* Sinning and Tachienlu, reached Shigatse in the winter of 1792. It defeated the invading Gurkhas in a series of engagements and pushed them upto the frontier. The panic-stricken Gurkha Raja now turned to the British, and on March 1, 1792, he signed a commercial treaty with them.²⁵

When the Chinese Army pressed further and reached as far as Nevakote, within 20 miles of Kathmandu, the Gurkha Raja sent two letters to Lord Cornwallis requesting for ten cannons with ammunition and technical know-how and four battalions of troops to assist him. The Chinese General, Fu-Kang-an, the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama also addressed Lord Cornwallis complaining against the Gurkhas for their unwarranted aggression and requested him not to give any assistance to the latter against them. Cornwallis did not want to embroil himself with the Nepal-Tibet war. He was more concerned with the necessity of safeguarding the Company's sea trade with China and the establishment of a British representative in Peking. As on the previous occasion, he sent diplomatic replies to both the parties explaining the Company's policy of peace and non-interference in the disputes of others, and offered only to mediate between the Chinese and Nepalese Governments. To this end he also deputed Captain Kirkpatrick to proceed to Nepal. In the meantime, the Gurkhas had been badly defeated and a treaty was signed between Nepal and China. By this Treaty the Gurkhas agreed to offer tribute every five years, to return the wealth of Tashilhunpo looted by them, and to abstain from similar aggression in future.²⁶ Kirkpatrick's mission thus proved to be futile.

These events marked a turning point in the history of Sino-Tibetan relations. The victorious

Chinese troops ordered sweeping reforms which were to prove very detrimental to British interests. In future, the Dalai Lama was to be selected through the use of the golden urn which was presented by the Emperor. The Tibetans were forbidden to have any direct dealings with foreigners except through the Chinese Ambans; the Gurkhas were no longer to be allowed entry into Tibet; Tibetans could go to Nepal only after obtaining permission; import of currency from Nepal and Bhutan was prohibited, and Tibet was now to have its own currency. The Chinese General also had the southern frontier of Tibet bordering Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, hurriedly and haphazardly surveyed and marked by heaps of stones called Obos or Opos. In doing so, he also annexed the entire Chumbi Valley, which belonged to Sikkim, and pushed his boundary upto Cho La-Jelep La range.²⁷

Geographically the entire Chumbi Valley lies to the south of the Himalayan watershed. Ethnically, the Chumbi people, known as Tromovas, though of Tibetan origin, had their own dialect and customs and always differentiated themselves from the Tibetans. The northern boundary of Sikkim extended upto Tangla (beyond Phari, now in Tibet). The old Sikkimese documents had thus described the country; "This sacred country is bounded on the North by the Mon-Thongla (i.e. Tangla) mountain, which is guarded by the spirit "Kiting". On the east lies the Itas-h-Gons mountain. Its southern gate is "Nagsharbhati", which

is guarded by "Ma-mGon-Lcham-Bral-yab-Ldub". Its western gate, Itmar-mchd-rTen, is guarded by the terrible female spirit "Mamos". In 1682, when the boundaries of Sikkim were again fixed at the time of Phuntso Namgyal, the first Maharaja of Sikkim, it was announced that the territory of Sikkim was bounded by Wallung, Yarlung and Tmar Chorten in the West, Nuxalbari and Tilalia in the south, Tagong La in the east, and Tangla in the North. The Sikkim rulers also had a palace in Chumbi,²⁸ and had constructed monasteries at Bakchum and Kirunglsal.

There is no authentic record to show the exact reason for such an action by the Chinese. While some people believe that this area was occupied by China simply because the ruler of Sikkim had offended it by his stand on the Nepal-Tibet war, some others hold that the Chinese brought that area under Tibetan rule due to annoyance caused by Sikkim's failure to depute a representative to participate in the discussions which China and Tibet were holding with the Gurkhas.²⁹

These circumstances resulted in a sudden and dramatic end of all British efforts to trade with Tibet. Bhutan was already reluctant to allow any Englishman to travel in the country, or to permit unrestricted movement of even Indian traders to go to Tibet through its territory. The two Tibeto-Nepalese wars, and the wavering policy followed by the Company at that time, gave a further blow to the British

commercial interests by offending both, the victors and the vanquished of the Gurkha wars. Because of the commercial treaty, which the Nepal Government had signed only a year ago, it had hoped that some military aid from the British would be forthcoming, and it felt badly let down when the same was not given. The Chinese, on the other hand, got an impression, which the English were unable to counter, that the Gurkhas had received active support from the British to invade Tibet. This gave them an ideal opportunity to explain to the Lamas that the British were following a policy of expansionism towards Nepal and Bhutan and that their persistent efforts to explore Tibet were sufficient indications of their nefarious designs on Tibet. The Lamas were convinced that they should avoid all communication with India and ban the entry of all foreigners to Tibet. Even the Hindu Gossains, who were so far patronized by the Tashilhunpo monastery, and enjoyed many favours, were now looked down upon as guides and spies of the enemy, and were prohibited from staying at Tashilhunpo. Under the pressure of the Lamas, the Tibetan Government issued instructions to all its border officers to prevent foreigners from entering Tibet. The doors to Tibet, which Warren Hastings had succeeded in opening a little, were once again closed.

Notes and References

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- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 125-126.
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- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
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- 16 It was commonly believed that the Panchen Lama was murdered by the Chinese because of the favour shown by him towards the English. For a detailed examination of



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British Inroads into Sikkim

All efforts to open trade with Tibet through Bhutan and Nepal having failed, the British concentrated on Sikkim. Accordingly, Captain Barre Latter of the Bengal Army was deputed to establish contact with the Maharaja of Sikkim, Chugpti Namgyal. He was authorised to hand over to the Maharaja of Sikkim, the entire area between the rivers Mechi and Teesta, provided he agreed to enter into the treaty relationship with the British. The terms proposed were acceptable to the Maharaja, who signed a treaty with the Company at Titalia on February 10, 1817. By this treaty, the Maharaja agreed not to commit aggression on the Gorkhas or any other state; to submit all its disputes with the neighbouring states to the Company for arbitration; to render military assistance to the Company, if necessary, in its wars in the hills; to permit stay of the Europeans or Americans in his territory only with

the permission of the Company; to deliver up all criminals and public defaulters who might take refuge in his kingdom and not to levy duties on British merchandise and afford protection to merchants and traders from Company provinces.¹

These concessions were a great diplomatic triumph for the British. Sikkim was, for the first time, brought under the influence of the Company. It could now trade through Sikkim right up to the Tibetan border without payment of any transit duties. Two months later, the British happily granted to Sikkim, an additional territory of Morung (a low-lying area between rivers Mechi and Mahanadi) but imposed a more rigid condition that in times of emergency, the Governor General's orders to the local authorities of Morung were to be obeyed in the same manner, as those coming from the Maharaja of Sikkim.²

There was no significant development in the area until 1830, when the Governor General Lord William Bentinck sought the approval of the Council to open negotiations with the Maharaja of Sikkim for the transfer of Darjeeling to the East India Company in exchange for an equivalent either in land or money. The Council was initially opposed to the idea but finally, in 1835, gave clearance that Captain G.W. Lloyd, who had already surveyed that area might be deputed to go to Sikkim and request the Maharaja of Sikkim for the transfer of Darjeeling to the Company for the establishment of a sanitarium there.

The Maharaja of Sikkim agreed to transfer Darjeeling to the Company, provided the British handed over to Sikkim, Kummo Pradhan, an ex-Sikkim agent in Morung who had embezzled the revenues and escaped into British territory, and restored Debgong area to Sikkim. Debgong, which used to be a part of Sikkim, had been occupied by Nepal. However, it was ceded to the Company in 1815, which in turn had ceded it to the Raja of Jalpaiguri. The Maharaja of Sikkim even gave the Deed of Darjeeling Grant to the officer escorting Lloyd back to Darjeeling with the instructions that it may be handed over to Lloyd as soon as his conditions were complied with.³

The British Government was reluctant to accept either of those demands and Lloyd was ordered by Sir Metcalfe, the officiating Governor General of India, to refrain from further negotiations on that subject. Lloyd had in the meantime, taken possession of the Deed of Darjeeling Grant, even had it amended by the Maharaja of Sikkim in order to remove some drafting errors and continued his correspondence with him on the question of transfer of Darjeeling. He intentionally twisted one of the letters received from the Maharaja, and forwarded the Deed Grant to the Government of India with the interpretation that the transfer of Darjeeling to the Company had been agreed to by the ruler without any conditions. Darjeeling was thus taken over by the Company.

Since the Company did not pay adequate compensation for the cessation of Darjeeling, the relations between the Company and the Maharaja became very strained. It was only after more than five years of protracted negotiations and correspondence that in 1842 did the British agree to pay Rs. 3,000 annually in exchange for the Darjeeling tract. The amount was increased to Rs. 6,000 per year in 1846.

The irritants between the two sides, however, continued mainly on account of the inability of either side to apprehend and hand over criminals who had crossed the border and were not traceable. The lack of adequate facilities to traders and other visitors to Sikkim also gave grounds for complaint. One such incident which precipitated matters was the visit of Dr. Joseph Hooker, an English naturalist who went to Sikkim to explore the Himalayan region. Hooker complained of "excessive annoyance and obstructions" to Dr. A. Campbell, Superintendent of Darjeeling. Campbell not only wrote to the Maharaja of Sikkim, and demanded that the officials concerned should be punished, but also proceeded to Sikkim to look into the matter personally.

While in Sikkim, Campbell and Hooker crossed into Tibet on two occasions *via* Kangralama and Chola passes in order to explore trade routes between Sikkim and Tibet. On the second occasion, they were caught by Tibetan soldiers and escorted back to the Sikkim border, where they were arrested by Sikkimese

officials. This caused considerable concern in the Government of India. When the Sikkimese Government did not release them in spite of a letter from the Governor General, Lushington, Acting Superintendent of Darjeeling was instructed that "it was necessary that the savage insolence of the Raja should be severely chastised...so that he felt the power of the British Government". Lushington was even authorised to advance to Tumlong, the capital of Sikkim and occupy the country.⁴ Both prisoners were, however, released even before the instructions reached Lushington.

Lushington, however had his own apprehensions. He not only feared the contingency of a general uprising among the people, but also the possibility of the opposition that could be offered by the Tibetans and the people of Bhutan should their fears or prejudices induce them to join hands with the Maharaja of Sikkim. Lushington therefore expressed reservations whether the "object in view was sufficient to justify in incurring the dangers and expenses of a war of which one could not see the end".⁵ He felt that a personal appearance by the Maharaja and a surrender of the officials responsible for the arrest would be a satisfactory vindication of the honour of the Government. With the approval of the Government of India, Lushington wrote to the Maharaja, but the latter ignored the intimation. Accordingly, the annual compensation of Rs. 6,000 for Darjeeling was stopped,

and Morung as well as its adjacent areas of the Sikkimese territory were annexed by the British.

Campbell was still not satisfied and on some flimsy grounds such as the kidnapping of some British subjects and non-payment of compensation to victims of crime, he moved his forces to Sikkim on November 1, 1860. Campbell's forces were, however, beaten back and had to retreat to Darjeeling.

The Government of India was keen to avenge the humiliation suffered by Campbell's retreat and decided to send another expedition led by Col. J.C. Gawler, with Ashley Eden attached to it as the Envoy and Special Commissioner. Eden was instructed that the purpose of the expedition was not to annex Sikkim (which was regarded as a good buffer between the British dominion and Tibet), but to strike a blow and secure a treaty of friendship and alliance with the Government of India. In taking any action against Sikkim, Eden was told, care would have to be taken not to antagonise China and spoil the prospects of trade with Tibet.

Gawler's expedition did not meet with any resistance and was able to secure a Treaty with the Maharaja of Sikkim in March, 1861. This treaty guaranteed that the Government of Sikkim would abolish all restrictions on travellers and encourage free commerce and reciprocal intercourse; permit British subjects to go into any part of Sikkim for travel and trade and offer protection to them; exempt all

summed up, "There lies the modern Brynhilde, asleep on her mountain top; men call on the Viceroy of India to play the part of Siegfried and awaken her from the slumber of ages".⁷

At this time it was believed that the real obstacle to the Indo-Tibet trade was the Chinese Government. In 1774, when Bogle was on his way to Tashilhunpo, the Panchen Lama had rushed a messenger with a letter to Warren Hastings intimating that the Emperor of China had issued instructions that foreigners, including Englishmen, should not be permitted to enter Tibet, and, since it was not possible to permit him entry without permission from Peking, Bogle should be recalled to Calcutta. Though this contention was subsequently found to be incorrect, for the Panchen Lama did finally permit Bogle to visit Tashilhunpo without any reference to Peking. Bogle faced other similar situations during his stay in Tibet which forced him to the conclusion that the Chinese Emperor's ultimate authority was "a stumbling block" in all his efforts to open trade and communication between Bengal and Tibet. For example, when Bogle explained to the Lhasa officials, who had come to see him, the desirability of trade between the two countries and the mutual benefits that could accrue, the Lhasa Regent assured him of his full cooperation but pointed out that the ultimate authority rested with China. Turner had a similar experience. When he visited Tashilhunpo about 10 years later, he discovered

- abandonment of that expedition was one of the main factors in securing the convention concerning Burma". *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 130, p. 1140.
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The Eternal Triangle

In the beginning, the British Government regarded Peking as the major stumbling block to the opening of any regular trade and communication between India and Tibet. It was under the impression that left to themselves, the Tibetans would happily welcome free trade and that they had been avoiding any direct contact with the British only due to their fear of offending the Chinese. Such a conviction must have been the outcome of the experiences of Bogle and Turner whose findings formed the basis of policy of the East India company. Both of them had reported on return that Tibetans avoided any contact with the British only due to their fear of offending the Chinese. Smyth and Blanford who had met Tibetan officials and were stopped from going inside Tibet had also returned with a similar experience. What was not clear to the British for at least three decades was the fact that the Tibetan resistance to British advances

was equally strong, if not more. The Tibetans were themselves scared of any relaxation with regard to the entry of foreigners, whom they considered a threat to their religion. This hostility had grown with the passage of time. As the British Empire in India became more and more powerful, incorporated parts of Garhwal, Kumaon, Lahaul, Spiti and Assam under its rule and entered into treaties with Sikkim and Bhutan, the Tibetans became more and more apprehensive of British moves and motives. The impression of cordiality conveyed by the Tibetans to successive visitors was purely for reasons of diplomatic expediency.

The exact relationship between China and Tibet and the extent of its hold over Tibet was also not very clear to the British. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Tibet enjoyed *de facto* independence and was ruled by the Dalai Lama only with the nominal assistance of the Chinese Resident. The Chinese had hardly any real control over Tibet. Eastern Tibet was already revolting against the Chinese and the Lamas were fomenting anti-Chinese sentiments. As White recorded, "The Tibetans would not obey the Chinese and the Chinese were afraid to give them any orders. China was suzerain over Tibet only in name...they had no power and could enforce no orders".¹ On the recommendations of the Government of Bengal, Foreign Secretary Durand had also written to Lord Dufferin that, "if any

satisfactory and enduring settlement is to be effected, we must manage to associate the Tibetan leaders formally with the Amban, if not to make them the chief parties and the Amban rather a witness to the agreement".² John Walsham, the British Minister in Peking, however, favoured the recognition of China as the suzerain power in Tibet and had recommended that all agreements concerning Tibet should be signed with the Chinese in order to safeguard the other greater interests which they were trying to derive from their diplomacy in China. "Any direct negotiation with Tibetans", John Walsham advised, "would weaken the Imperial authority in the province (Tibet)...and whatever tended to lessen the dignity of China should be avoided."³ The British Foreign Office now chose to agree with the views of John Walsham. Instructions were, therefore, given to the Viceroy of India that he should avoid the risk of disturbing relations with China and not to raise any points which might weaken Chinese influence in Tibet.

As regards China, it was certainly conscious that its commercial interests in Tibet would suffer with the opening of that area to the British trade. It was, therefore, interested in keeping that area secluded, and to that end, even instigated Tibetans against the British. At the same time it was also clear to the Chinese that only by negotiating with the British could they safeguard their right to handle Tibetan affairs.

On several occasions in the past, China had expressed its inability to persuade Tibetans even to allow a British trade mission to visit Tibet and the Chinese Ambans were not even allowed by Tibetans to visit the border areas during fighting at Lungthu. Now, once again it took fresh initiative and dispatched Amban Sheng Tai, the then Chinese Resident in Lhasa to negotiate with the British. Sheng Tai arrived at Gangtok in December, 1888 to hold discussions with A.W. Paul who had accompanied the expedition as its Political Officer, and H.M. Durand, the Indian Foreign Secretary.

The talks had a bad start. The Chinese Resident declined to regard the question as one between the British and the Tibetans and insisted that Tibet being a part of the Chinese Empire, the rights and interests of Tibet were the rights and interests of China. The border, he argued, was an open question which could be settled only after taking into account the evidence which the Tibetans and the Sikkimese could advance. As regards Sikkim, he asserted that the Maharaja of Sikkim was in a certain degree subordinate not only to the Tibetan Government but also to the Chinese Resident in Lhasa and should continue to pay "homage" to the Amban at Lhasa and "tribute" to the Grand Lama and government of Tibet. He also demanded that the Maharaja of Sikkim should be allowed to retain his dress and wear the hat and button conferred upon him by the Chinese Government.⁴

Durand recommended that while, as an act of courtesy to the Chinese Government, the Maharaja of Sikkim could be permitted to wear the hat and button conferred upon him by the representative of the Emperor of China send annual letters and presents to the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist temples...and annual letters of a purely complimentary nature, which would not be couched in the language of an inferior addressing a superior, to the Chinese Resident, the question of "paying tribute" to the Grand Lama or "paying Homage" to the Amban should not be agreed to. The Chinese Resident, however, continued to hold that Sikkim was from the very beginning a dependency of Tibet and former ceremonies with regard to presents and letters to the Chinese and Tibetan officials of Lhasa should remain unchanged.⁵

These claims of the Chinese Resident were very embarrassing. "If we give way in respect of Sikkim", wrote Durand to the Viceroy "we might even have China claiming suzerain right over Darjeeling and Bhutan Doors which we acquired from her so called feudatories". Durand recommended, and the Viceroy agreed, that "it was desirable to break off negotiations and have no formal agreement at all rather than purchase an agreement at the price of such concessions".⁶

Frustrated by the stalemate, Durand suggested that the Government of India should occupy the

entire Chumbi Valley, including Phari unless the Tibetans recognized the frontier as indicated to them and accepted the exclusive supremacy of Britain in Sikkim. The British Foreign Office in London was however, more worried about Anglo-Chinese relations and was not prepared to sacrifice them for the sake of Tibetan trade and diplomacy. It, therefore, advised the Government of India against any such action and instructed the Viceroy "to avoid the risk of disturbing relations with China....and keep the negotiations alive".⁷

The Chinese too could not afford to be indifferent. Their main anxiety was the possibility of direct Anglo-Tibetan contact in any future dispute and such disputes were inevitable as long as the border alignment remained unsettled. They, therefore, reopened talks in April 1889 and agreed to accept the British protectorate over Sikkim provided the Maharaja of Sikkim continued to pay tribute to the Grand Lama, the Government of Tibet and the Chinese Resident in Lhasa. When those conditions were rejected, better terms were offered in August and again in November 1889. Finally they agreed not to insist on Sikkim sending letters and presents to the Chinese and Tibetan authorities and the Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet was signed by Lord Lansdowne and the Chinese Resident Sheng Tai at Darjeeling on March 17, 1890.⁸

The 1890 Convention recognized, for the first time, that Sikkim was a protectorate of the British

Government and the latter alone was to have a "direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of that state. Except through and with the permission of the British Government neither the Ruler of the State nor any of its officers were to have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country". The British were happy that their paramount rights in Sikkim, which had so vehemently been challenged by Tibetans, had been recognised by China. Though the Convention did not make any mention of China's similar authority over Tibet, it established once again China's right to negotiate with the British all questions relating to Tibet.

The Convention defined the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet to be "the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the river Tista and its effluents from the water flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nepal territory". (Art.I). By Article III, the Government of Great Britain and Ireland and the Government of China also guaranteed to respect the above alignment of the boundary and to prevent all acts of aggression.

The Convention solved the immediate problem of the Tibetan occupation of the Lungthu area of Sikkim, but deferred for future settlement three other

outstanding questions namely Indo-Tibetan trade, manner of communication between the Indian and the Tibetan Governments, and the Tibetan grazing rights in Sikkim.

The British were keen to have free trade and travel facilities throughout Tibet. On February 23, 1891, they proposed, among other things, that a free trade mart should be opened at Phari and a British Agent stationed there; British subjects should be allowed to acquire land and construct houses, shops and godowns there and they should be allowed free movement upto area "lying south of the crest of the mountain range running from Chumu Lhari to the North East corner of Sikkim and beyond that with a proper passport issued by the British authority and countersigned by the Chinese Frontier Officer at Phari". The Chinese Amban found it difficult to accept those terms and blamed the "ignorance and stupidity of the Tibetans" for his helplessness and requested in reply that the trade mart might be opened at Yatung and that it would be "impossible" to arrange for free travel by British subjects beyond that place. He also informed that the Tibetan authorities had already started necessary construction there and, therefore, the British subjects could not be allowed to purchase land and erect buildings there. As to the pasturage, he suggested that the Tibetans grazing their cattle in Sikkim might be given a time limit to return to Tibet, and the grazing tax might be charged only from those who continued to remain in Sikkim.⁹

Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division pointed out that the whole northern boundary was in dispute and the Tibetans were in occupation of certain areas which were well inside Sikkim and did not permit the British officers to go beyond them, he was emphatically told not to raise the question of border demarcation "that will irritate Tibet and weaken Chinese influence in that country".¹⁰ The British were unhappy but helpless. The terms accepted by them were the only alternative to breaking off the negotiations altogether. "The compromise", as the Secretary of State for India recorded on August 11, 1893, "was not all that might fairly have been expected, but in the circumstances, it was expedient to come to terms with the Chinese Government".¹¹

The Regulations regarding Trade, Communication and Pasturage, which were to be appended to the Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet took over three years to conclude and were ultimately signed at Darjeeling on December 5, 1893.¹² The main provisions of these Regulations were:

- (1) A trade mart was to be established at Yatung (Tibet) and kept open to all British subjects for purposes of trade from May 1, 1894. British subjects trading there were at liberty to travel between Sikkim and Yatung, to reside at Yatung, to rent houses and godowns and to conduct their business transactions without any vexatious restrictions. Excepting articles

such as arms, ammunitions, narcotic drugs etc. which were enumerated in Regulation No. III, and whose free import and export was prohibited, all goods entering Tibet from British India across the Sikkim-Tibet frontier, or *vice versa*, were to be exempted from duty for a period of five years, commencing from the date of the opening of Yatung to trade. After the expiration of five years, a tariff, mutually agreed upon, was to be enforced, if necessary. The Government of India was allowed to send officers to reside at Yatung to watch the conditions of British trade there, and all trade disputes arising between British, Chinese or Tibetan subjects in Tibet were to be settled by personal consultations between the Political Officer for Sikkim and the Chinese Frontier Officer.

- (2) Despatches from the Government of India to the Chinese Imperial Resident in Tibet were to be handed over by the Political Officer for Sikkim to the Chinese Frontier Officer who was to forward them by a special courier. Similarly, despatches from the Chinese Imperial Resident in Tibet to the Government of India were to be handed over by the Chinese Frontier Officer to the Political Officer for Sikkim for onward transmission. (By implication, the Government of India was

not expected to communicate directly with the Government of Tibet, and *vice versa*)

- (3) After the expiry of one year from the opening of the Yatung Trade Mart, the Tibetans grazing their cattle in Sikkim were to be subjected to such regulations which the British Government enacted from time to time for their general conduct of grazing in Sikkim.

The Trade Regulations, like the Convention itself, were finalized by the British and Chinese Commissioners. Though a member of the Tibetan Council was present at the negotiation, he was ignored and insulted,¹³ and was not required to sign them.¹⁴ For the last over hundred years the British had tried to establish friendly relations with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, and it was strange that they should have preferred to avoid them when the Tibetan question was being solved. It was also strange that by signing the Indo-Tibet Convention and the Trade Regulations with the Chinese, the British should have accepted the latter's sole authority over Tibet and bound themselves to deal only with them. That arrangement naturally suited China beyond all expectations. "The successful issue to which matter has now been brought", said a note sent by the Chinese Government, "gives the Yamen the greatest satisfaction, for, another bond has been added to the friendly ties uniting the two nations".¹⁵

Neither the Sikkimese nor the Tibetans were happy with the terms of the Convention relating to

Sikkim and Tibet. By accepting the fact that the watershed between the Teesta river system in Sikkim and the Mochu river and its tributaries flowing into Tibet formed the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet, the British virtually surrendered Sikkim's right to the Chumbi Valley and its enclave at Dobtra. Though the Chumbi Valley had been occupied by the Chinese after their victory in the Gurkha War of 1792, they were still not able to extend any effective administration there, and for all practical purposes the entire area south of Tang La continued to be regarded as falling outside the jurisdiction of Tibet. Thus, in 1804, when Namkha Ondu of Sikkim (the great grand father of the present Yangthang Kazi) referred some dispute to the Chinese Ambans in Lhasa, he was told in reply, "As you are amongst the people who live beyond Tang La pass, which is the boundary, you are not under Tibet and we, the two Ambans, have no authority over you and could, therefore, only send advice privately from time to time".¹⁶ Such being the background, the Convention should have restored this area to Sikkim, but, on the contrary, it legalised the previous aggression.

Similarly the Dobtra enclave, bounded in the east by Drik, in the west by Chiblung, in the north by Rhe, in the south by Tinkyé, and measuring approximately 150 square miles belonged to Sikkim since the 17th century, and all matters concerning 'revenue, legal disputes etc., were the responsibility

of the representative of the ruler of Sikkim who used to reside there. The Convention also failed to restore the ownership of that area to Sikkim.

The Tibetans had their own reasons to repudiate the Convention. Their main objection was that they were not a party to the negotiations and neither the Convention nor the Regulations had ever been confirmed by any Tibetan representative. They alleged that the British had negotiated with the Chinese simply because of one-sided privileges which the latter had agreed to offer to them. Accordingly, the benefits of the Convention were not mutual and the advantages allowed to the British subjects inside Tibet were not extended reciprocally to the Tibetans in India or Sikkim.

The Tibetans had their own concept of the Tibet-Sikkim boundary. As early as 1849, Hooker had returned from north Sikkim area with the impression that the boundary ran along Donkya La-Kinchinhow *i.e.* Khangchengyao and Chhomiomomo *i.e.* Chomoyumno, leaving the Chho Lhamo Lake (which is clearly to the Sikkimese side of the watershed) in the Tibetan territory. This boundary, according to him, was even marked by "cairns of stone some rudely fashioned into chaits, covered with votive rags of wands of bamboo".¹⁷ Sarat Chandra Das, who had been sent by the British to Tibet to carry out survey work there, had also mentioned in 1882 that Gengang *i.e.* Giagong was regarded as the "boundary between

the territories of the Grand Lama and the Rajah of Sikkim.¹⁸ In 1884, the Colman Macaulay expedition, which was deputed to explore the possibilities of opening a trade route to Khamba Dzong via Lachen and Thangu, also went only upto Giagong where it was met by the Dzongpon (District Officer) of Khamnba Dzong. Macaulay was very keen to return via Chho Lhamo lake and Donkya-La but could not do so due to Tibetans' objection. The Tibetans were so determined that they did not permit the expedition to move any where beyond Giagong. While camping at Giagong on November 8, 1884, Macaulay recorded in his diary, "I asked him (Dzongpon) if he had any objection to our going a few miles towards Chho Lhamo lake and back. He said that I was master and could go if I liked but his throat would be cut if I went".¹⁹ In order to assert their claim further, Tibetans had even made a wall and some posts near Giagong, and in the area which was clearly to the Sikkim side of the watershed as described in Article I of the Convention.

The Tibetans continued to violate the border and insisted on coming south of the watershed. One such armed Tibetan party, led by a Tibetan official met Major L.A. Waddell to the south of Donkya La and asserted that Waddell's party could be allowed to go only upto the summit of Donkya La and not beyond that. Waddell explained to the Tibetan official that according to 1890 Convention, which had just been

concluded, the boundary was eight miles beyond Donkya La, along the watershed of river Teesta and its effluents, but the Tibetans did not consent to allow him even to cross into the Lachen Valley *via* Donkya La. Similarly, when J.C. White, the Political Officer in Sikkim, visited the Lhonak Valley in 1891, he was met there by Dzongpon of Khamba Dzong who informed him that he had entered Tibet and should return from there. He also expressed complete ignorance of the 1890 Convention. White had to return to Thangu *via* Lungma La without exploring the Lhonak Valley, for which purpose he had gone there. From Thangu he went to Giagong with the plan of proceeding to Lachung *via* Chho Lhamo and Donkya La, but he was again met by the Tibetan officials at Giagong who insisted that they knew nothing about the Convention and refused to permit White's party to pass through Chho Lhamo and Donkya La. White had to abandon the plan and travel *via* Sebu La, to the south of Khangchengyao.²⁰

Consistent repudiation of the Convention and violation of the border irritated White. He reported the matter to the Government of Bengal which in turn enquired from the Government of India whether the question of boundary dispute and delimitation of the border could now be taken up. They were, however, told that nothing should be done in the matter until Yatung trade mart had been established.²¹

The aggressive attitude of the Tibetans continued. It was learnt by White that the Tibetan Government

had directed its troops to move to Dongchui La and Giagong in order to occupy old positions and to build store-houses for their accommodation so that they could stay there on a permanent basis. White again reported the matter and suggested that the presence of Tibetan troops in the territory assigned to Sikkim by the Convention should not be permitted and that they should be pushed back. Promptly came telegraphic instructions from the Government of India that the Political Officer "should, as far as possible, confine himself to trade questions and avoid controversial matters...and if he has merely learnt by accident that a small post is being temporarily established (by the Tibetans) he should take no further action".²²

Sikkim, India and Communist China

There was nothing of major historical importance taking place along the Sikkim-Tibet border for the next fifty years or so. Meanwhile, India became independent on August 15, 1947.

The British had for long treated Sikkim virtually as an Indian princely state. The Sikkim Darbar was accordingly invited to Delhi for discussion with the new Government of India and the Chamber of Princes in order to determine its future status. The official delegation, led by Maharajkumar Palden Thondup Namgyal, which participated in those discussions did not show any inclination to accede to the Indian Union as other princely states had done. Accordingly, a "Standstill Agreement" between the Sikkim Darbar and the Government of India was signed on Feb. 27, 1948. By this agreement, all

administrative arrangements and relations as to the matters of common concern existing between the Crown and the Sikkimese State on August 14, 1947 were to continue between the Government of India and the Sikkim Darbar pending the conclusion of a new treaty. The "matters of common concern" specifically included Currency, Coinage, Customs, Postal and Telegraphic Communications, External Relations and Defence.¹

Two years later, negotiations were started again to finalize the shape that the future relationship between India and Sikkim might take. During the course of those negotiations the Government of India held detailed consultations with the Sikkim Darbar as well as representatives of various political parties in Sikkim. A provisional Agreement which was drawn in March 1950 as a result of those negotiations became the nucleus of the treaty signed between India and Sikkim on Dec. 5, 1950. By this treaty, Sikkim was to continue to be a Protectorate of India (Article II), the Government of India was to be responsible for the defence and territorial integrity of Sikkim, and it was empowered to station troops anywhere within Sikkim for the defence of Sikkim or the security of India (Article III); the Government of Sikkim was forbidden to import any arms, ammunition, military stores or other warlike material without India's prior consent (Article III-2); all external relations, whether political, economic or financial

were to be conducted and regulated solely by the Government of India (Article IV); the Government of India was to have exclusive right of constructing, maintaining and regulating the use of railways, aerodromes and landing grounds, post, telegraph, telephones and wireless installations in Sikkim (Article VI); and the Government of India was empowered to construct and maintain roads in Sikkim for storage purposes and for the purposes of improving communications.

On the economic side, the Government of India agreed not to levy any import or other duties on goods of Sikkimese origin brought into India. The Indian nationals and subjects of Sikkim were also given right of entry into and free movement in Sikkim and India respectively. They were also free to carry on trade and commerce and acquire, hold and dispose of property—movable and immovable.²

The Chinese had already recognized the British Protectorate over Sikkim in 1890. By signing the Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet on March 17, 1890, they had admitted that "the British Government whose protectorate over Sikkim state is hereby recognized, has direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of that State."³

The new Government of India, which took over from the British Government in India, had inherited all existing treaty rights including extra territorial

rights and obligations with regard to Tibet. Thus it had the right to keep a representative at Lhasa and maintain Trade Agencies at Gyantse, Yatung and Gartok with military escorts, to lease lands for the building of houses and godowns at the marts, maintain a chain of rest houses and telegraph lines between trade marts and the frontier; hold courts at the Trade Agencies to try cases of Indian nationals involved in crimes at the marts or on the trade route, and to hold joint enquiries with the Tibetan authorities into disputes involving Indians and other nationals.⁴ In a letter to the Tibetan Government, sent in August, 1947, Government of India sought an assurance that the Tibetan Government would continue relations on the existing basis, and the Tibetan Government confirmed their acceptance of the former relationship with the new Government of India.⁵

It was in this capacity as protector, that the Government of India assumed responsibility for the defence of the Sikkim-Tibet border. On October 1, 1949, the Central Government of the People's Republic of China was proclaimed, and the Government of India extended its official recognition to it on December 30, 1949. One of the first tasks on the agenda of Communist China was to "liberate Tibet". Though Chou En-lai assured K.N. Panikkar, First Ambassador of India to Communist China that "his Government was anxious to secure their ends by negotiations and not by military action",⁶ the Chinese Army was soon

ordered to advance into Tibet, and on October 25, 1950, Peking Radio announced that the process of liberation of Tibet had already begun. The next day the Government of India sent a note to Peking deploring the Chinese invasion and pleading for "slower but more enduring methods of peaceful approach".⁷ The Chinese Government immediately retorted : "Tibet is an integral part of Chinese territory. The problem of Tibet is entirely the domestic problem of China. The Chinese People's Liberation Army must enter Tibet, liberate the Tibetan people, and defend the frontiers of China. This is the resolved policy of the Central People's Government....and no foreign interference shall be tolerated".⁸ The Government of India assured in reply that they did not intend to interfere in China's internal affairs and that "they had neither any political or territorial ambitions as to Tibet nor did they seek any novel privileged position for themselves".⁹ However, China's tone remained unchanged. China rudely reiterated that liberating the Tibetan people and defending the frontiers was the "sacred task of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and in doing so, the Chinese Government was only exercising its sovereign rights".¹⁰ To quote Panikkar, "both parties made their point of view clear, and were content to rest there".

While all this was happening in Tibet, a Tibetan Goodwill Mission was on its way to Peking. It reached there in April, 1951 and on May 23, 1951, a 17-point

Agreement was signed between Tibet and China. By this Agreement, the Tibetan people were to "drive out imperialist forces from Tibet....(and) return to the big family of the Motherland - the People's Republic of China." Lhasa Government was to actively assist the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to enter Tibet and consolidate the National defences. The Tibetan Army was to be merged with the PLA, and the Chinese Government was to handle all external affairs of Tibet in future.

The Government of India did not fail to realize that the Chinese actions in Tibet were going to change the entire course of Indo-Tibet relations but it seemed absolutely helpless. "Many things happen in this world," Pt. Nehru said in the Lok Sabha, "which we do not like, and which we would wish were rather different, but we do not go like Don Quixote with lance in hand against everything we dislike. We put up with these things because we would be, without making any difference, merely getting into trouble".¹¹

In December, 1953, India proposed to China that negotiations might be held to settle some of the outstanding issues. About four months later, the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse was concluded between the two countries on April 29, 1954. The major thing about that Agreement was the preamble which laid down the five principles, namely, recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country, mutual non-aggression, mutual

non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and peaceful co-existence, which were to govern the mutual relations and approach of the two countries. The Agreement itself dealt with the opening of Trade Agencies by both the countries, the definition of trade marts, routes and passes of entry and facilities to be extended to pilgrims, customary traders, and border inhabitants of India and Tibet, but it was supplemented by an Indian Note which declared that the Government of India would withdraw, within six months, the military escorts of the Trade Agents stationed at Yatung and Gyantse, hand over to the Government of China the Postal, Telegraph and Public Telephone services and all the rest houses built between Gyantse and the Sikkim border. Independent India felt that those extra-territorial privileges were the relics of imperialism, which India, as a free and non-aligned country, would not like to keep in any country of the world. "By this Agreement", Pt. Nehru declared "we ensure peace to a very large extent in a certain area of Asia (which) could be spread over to the rest of Asia and indeed over the rest of the world".¹²

However, this monument of friendship on which India had built high hopes, soon proved to be an illusion. Barely had six weeks passed after its ratification on June 3, 1954, when the Chinese troops started intrusions all along the Indo-Tibet border and started using force in assertion of their

supposed claims. This was followed by Chou En-lai's letter of September 8, 1959 which claimed, for the first time, vast areas of India, which had so far been vaguely included in some of the Chinese maps and accused Indian troops of trespassing into Chinese territory and provoking Chinese troops.¹³

While there existed such a crisis all along the rest of the Indo-Tibet border, the Sikkim sector did not figure in the dispute anywhere. The only reference to Sikkim was in the letter of the Prime Minister of India, dated March 22, 1959 to Chou En-lai in which he clarified that "the boundary of Sikkim, a protectorate of India, with the Tibet region of China was defined in the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 and jointly demarcated on the ground in 1895"¹⁴ and there was no dispute whatsoever about that sector. Chou En-lai sent the usual vague reply which bore very unpredictable implications "Like the boundary between China and Bhutan", he said, "the question does not fall within the scope of our present discussion....China is willing to live together in friendship with Sikkim and Bhutan, without committing aggression against each other, and has always responded to the proper relations between them and India".¹⁵

The only relations which India had with Sikkim at that time were those which were governed by the 1950 Treaty signed between independent India and Sikkim. Under this Treaty the external relations of

Sikkim, whether political, economic or financial, were to be conducted solely by the Government of India. Under treaty obligations, the Government of India was the only competent authority to take up with other Government matters concerning Sikkim's external relations. During his visit to India in April 1960, Chou En-lai had also assured Pt. Nehru that China respected India's relations with Sikkim.¹⁶ Later on April 25, 1960 he repeated in his press conference, "China respects India's relations with Bhutan and Sikkim". According to the Indian claim, there were in support of this categorical statement "not only several first hand and independent textual records but also tape recordings of what Chou En-lai (had) stated".¹⁷ However, the Peking Review which claimed to have carried the text of the interview, made the statement conditional by adding the adjective "proper" before relations.

This was deliberate and became more evident in subsequent years. In one of their protest notes sent to India, the Chinese Government alleged that the "special relations" between India and Sikkim were nothing but the protectorate imposed by India over the people of Sikkim, encroaching upon its independence and sovereignty, and tightening its military control on the pretext of improving the defence of Sikkim.¹⁸ The note accused India of trying her utmost to maintain that relationship and implied that it could not approve of it.

After the meeting the two Prime Ministers agreed that officials of the two Governments might meet each other and consider matters "which pertain to certain differences which had arisen between the two Governments relating to the border areas". Though the Sikkim-Tibet border was clearly defined by the 1890 Convention and a very small portion had even been actually demarcated, some problems had already arisen in the meanwhile. In their note of July 2, 1960, the Chinese Government had accused Indian Military personnel of intruding into the Chinese territory at Nathu La on many occasions. In a subsequent note, dated August 27, 1960, there were again allegations of Indian troops having entered Tibetan territory through Nathu La. Similarly, the Government of India had also protested to the Chinese Government against the intrusion of a Chinese armed patrol into Sikkimese territory near Jelep La on September 20, 1960. However, when the discussions between the officials of the Government of India and the People's Republic of China started, the Chinese refused to discuss questions pertaining to the northern boundaries of Sikkim with Tibet on the ground that this did not fall within the scope of those discussions.¹⁹

Soon after the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, China started concentrating troops along the Sikkim border. Indian troops also moved forward and started construction of defence structures. The Chinese

Government was prompt to protest and on January 10, 1963 it sent a note alleging that the Indian troops had crossed Nathu La and built 39 pill-boxes in an area which was about 300 meters inside Chinese territory.²⁰ Two months later, China accused India of "intensifying the repairs and reinforcement of their pill-boxes and defence work and constructing some additional structures including a pill-box, a shelter, communication trenches and sentry posts, and laying a telephone line" to the southeast, northeast and north of Nathu La".²¹ The note demanded that India should dismantle all defence works set up on the Chinese territory.

The same theme was repeated by China in another Note which was given to the Indian Embassy in China on June 4, 1963. In this Note China suggested: "Should the Indian side refuse to withdraw the intruding Indian forces and dismantle the aggressive military structures, then the Chinese Government would request India immediately to despatch officials to conduct with Chinese officials, a joint investigation".²² The Indian side continued to maintain that its "protective defence works" were on the Sikkimese side of the border and rejected the demand for any joint investigation.²³

Three more Chinese protest Notes followed in quick succession. All of them dealt with the same theme that "the Indian Government (had) itself admitted that its troops had constructed many military

structures around Nathu La, thus interrupting normal traffic across the border between Tibet and Sikkim".²⁴ To its Note of July 31, 1963, it also attached a photostat of Nathu La which purported to show the ridge (i.e. watershed) and presence of "several aggressive works" extending to the slope on the Chinese side of the pass. The Note reiterated that India should immediately demolish its alleged structures from Chinese territory and despatch its officials for a joint investigation.²⁵ In reply, India also produced a photostat showing the highest watershed ridge marking the boundary on the Nathu La pass, old and traditional prayer flags placed by travellers at the pass, and the Nehru tableau located 74 feet on the Sikkim side of the border, which commemorated the opening of the Gangtok-Nathu La road on September 18, 1958.²⁶ China again made the same allegations on November 30, 1963, and India refuted them summarily. The demand for joint investigation was repeated by China and rejected by India.

China now decided to enlarge the issue both in terms of content and requirement. On September 18, 1964, it was alleged that "Indian troops had not only entrenched themselves unlawfully across Nathu La", but had also "crossed Tungch La (i.e. Dongchui La, situated south-east of Nathu La) and....built eighteen aggressive military structures (dug outs, shelters, bulwarks etc.) on the Chinese side of the pass, or on the boundary line (eleven on the Chinese

side and seven on the boundary line)". It urged that India should dismantle not only those structures which were supposed to be on the Chinese side of the border but also "all the military structures...on the China-Sikkim boundary line".²⁷

Three months later China included Jelep La and Cho La also, and alleged that twenty seven military structures (dug outs, bulwarks etc.) had been built "on the Chinese side or on the boundary line" at Jelep La and four on the boundary line at Cho La.²⁸ The new demand for the removal of the structures from the Chinese territory, as well as from the China-Sikkim boundary, was repeated. India made enquiries and found that those additional allegations were also "completely false and unfounded".²⁹

During this period of two years China made hectic military preparations. A number of new posts were set up and defences improved. At least three Regiments of the Chinese Army were now concentrated in the narrow Chumbi Valley, across Sikkim. These troops became more and more aggressive and started extending their activities even across the border. On August 27, 1964, a Chinese patrol party intruded into Nathu La. On December 25, two armed Chinese again intruded in the area east-south-east of Nathu La. The same day another group of fifteen Chinese was found in the same area, taking up firing positions on seeing Indian troops. The next day, on December 26, 1964, yet

another group of armed Chinese intruders was found on the Sikkim side in the area about 2 miles east-south-east of Nathu La. On January 19, 1965, there was an even more serious incident when 30 armed Chinese soldiers intruded into Sikkim almost 3 km. south of Kongra La. Events were taking a strange turn. The Chinese notes and their intrusions were very truculent and menacing. That all this might be a prelude to something serious was only too apparent, but India could only appeal to China to abandon its policy of tension and conflict and it did so.³⁰



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