

THE ROLE OF SIKKIM IN INDO-NEPALESE RELATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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Sikkim is a perfect example of a state the political importance of which has always been far out of proportion to its geographical extent, the size of its population and the volume of its economic resources. Two factors account for this importance: Sikkim's geographical position as an opening to, militarily, the most vulnerable sector in the north-east frontier of India and its close relations with Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, the developments in which have always excited great interest in the Indian Foreign Office.

In British India's policy toward Nepal in the 19th century, Sikkim, often figured prominently. Nepal's attitude toward Sikkim, too, had a bearing on British India's Nepal policy. Relations between British India and Sikkim followed in the wake of Calcutta's war with Kathmandu and were politically its sequel. During the war, the British won over the Raja of Sikkim, a victim of Gurkha aggression for years, whose assistance in the war was rewarded by territorial accession and a guarantee of security against external aggression.

Through the Treaty of Titalya (10 February 1817), the British gave the Raja the territory lying between the rivers Mechi and Tista which was wrested from Nepal and which formerly belonged to Sikkim. Soon, thereafter, the British also turned over to the Raja the tract called Morang which lay between the rivers Mechi and Mahanadi. The British object was to strengthen Sikkim as a buffer between India and Nepal.¹ In the British policy of preventing Nepalese expansion to the east and circumvallating it, Sikkim constituted an important element. Calcutta took control of Sikkim's relations with Nepal; their disputes would now be subject to British mediation.² The boundary between the two states was delimited, the Indian government guaranteeing its inviolability.

British influence in Sikkim frustrated Kathmandu's aggressive designs, but did not curb its political ambitions. To Nepalese policy makers, events in Sikkim were of abiding interests; and any sign of anti-British feelings in the state was viewed as an opportunity for establishing Nepalese influence there. The coincidence of these feelings with turbulence in the Nepal *darbar* made the British all the more worried. This was evident in the decade preceding the establishment of the Anglophile Rana regime in Nepal in 1846 when the Kathmandu *darbar* intermittently intrigued with the Sikkimese raja.³ The British were determined to prevent Nepalese embroilment in Sikkimese politics in any way, and so the Superintendent of Darjeeling⁴ was asked to regain by "quiet dexterity" his political sway in the Sikkim *darbar*.⁵ As a "measure of precaution and activity, if necessary," a local corps was formed to defray Nepalese overtures for an anti-British alliance and Kathmandu's assurance of help in the recovery of Darjeeling from the British.⁶

In the early British policy toward Sikkim, Nepalese reaction was an important factor, particularly when Calcutta's relations with Kathmandu were none too happy. The idea of acquiring Darjeeling from the Raja of Sikkim, for instance, was dropped by the British several times for fear of causing in Kathmandu the impression that the step was but a prelude to British invasion of Nepal from the East.⁷ The acquisition, when finally made in 1835, had the distinct object of strengthening the British position in the eastern flank of Nepal. The position was further reinforced in 1849 when all the Sikkimese territory between the eastern Nepalese frontier and Darjeeling was annexed by the British. This annexation gave the British command of two passes leading into eastern Nepal. The Sikkimese would now have no access to the plains below except through the British territory.⁸

In the Anglo-Sikkimese disputes, Kathmandu's object really was to grind its own axe by either siding with the Sikkimese or the British, depending on the existing state of relations between Kathmandu and Calcutta. While, in the 1840s, the bitterly anti-British Pandes in Kathmandu encouraged the Anglophobe elements in the Sikkim *darbar*, the pro-British Ranas supported the British against the Raja of Sikkim. This was clear in 1849 when Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General,

took strong action against the Raja for having incarcerated Dr. A.C. Campbell, the superintendent of Darjeeling, and Dr. J. D. Hooker, the celebrated botanist. Jang Bahadur Rana, who had recently come to power at Kathmandu as the Prime Minister, offered assistance to the British as a means of ingratiating himself with the latter, and, perhaps, with the hope of some territorial reward.⁹

Although the British did not allow any Nepalese involvement in the incident, they exploited Sikkim's dread of Nepal to secure their object. The Raja of Sikkim was cowed with the stern warning that if he did not submit to British demands, he would forfeit their undertaking to defend Sikkim's territorial integrity. The undertaking was deemed inconvenient by some in the British government, for it involved the latter in the tangled web of Himalayan politics and exposed it to the risk of confrontation with China. Ultimately, the British decided not to give up this responsibility, for it was certain to result in Nepal's absorption of both Sikkim and Bhutan; Nepal, further strengthened, would then have aggravated India's security problem. The defence of Darjeeling, in particular, would have needed the maintenance of a large army at an enormous cost.¹⁰

The Rana government resented the strong British position in Sikkim but rendered no assistance to the bid of Maharaja Thothab Namgyal, the fugitive Raja of Sikkim, to escape to Tibet through the Nepalese territory in 1892. The Nepalese authorities arrested the Raja and turned him over to the Commissioner of Darjeeling.¹¹

The interrelations of the Himalayan states had somewhat of a restraining effect on the early British policy in the area. For fear of an undesirable reaction in Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and China, the British government avoided an outright annexation of Sikkim in 1861 following a military victory over the state. Ashley Eden, who led the British mission to Sikkim, feared a combination of the Himalayan states in common defence against the "proverbial acquisitiveness" of the British.¹² Consequently, he had to issue a declaration disclaiming any intention to annex Sikkim. This declaration, he was convinced, kept the states away from actively supporting Sikkim. Eden contended:

Had these states not distinctly understood that we were not advancing with any intention of annexation, it is impossible to believe that, with such combination of interest, they would all have joined to oppose us, if not avowedly, at least secretly.¹³

The justification of the policy of non-annexation lay in the fact that

Had any other policy been pursued, we should, I firmly believe (Eden continued), have been embroiled with the whole of the frontier and the Indo-Chinese states, and the result would have been a long, tedious and most expensive war".¹⁴

Sikkim was a valuable buffer state in the north-east frontier of India which warded off an immediate contact between British India and the tracts to its north where Chinese influence was a political problem for the British government in India.

The British policy was to isolate the Himalayan states from one another and gradually assume influence over them. British influence affected the traditional pattern of relations between the state, in the sense that the political content of the relations was progressively brought under British control while the cultural content was allowed to persist. British policy was also involved in localising political and military incidents in order to prevent their regional ramifications. In keeping with this policy, the British consistently restrained Sikkimese involvement in Nepal's disputes with Tibet.

Such involvement was likely during Nepal's war with Tibet in 1855-56. Jang Bahadur was suspected of attempts at drawing Sikkim and Bhutan into the fray. He approached the British government for the passage of his army through Sikkim, for it provided an easy access to Lhasa. The British having turned down the request, Jang Bahadur reportedly sought to win over the Raja of Sikkim by assuring him assistance to recover the Morang which the British had wrested in 1849. Campbell informed the British government that Jang Bahadur affected concern over Sikkim's plans to ravage the eastern tracts of Nepal at the bidding of Tibet which had traditionally intimate relations with Sikkim. Campbell was convinced that, having failed to forge an offensive and defensive alliance with the Raja of Sikkim, Jang Bahadur had planned to attack the state. Dalhousie dismissed these reports as groundless, but asked the British Resident at Kathmandu to warn the Nepalese *darbar* in "courteous but very decided language" that

the British government can never permit Nepal to possess itself of Sikkim, Whether permanently or temporarily. It is resolved to act up to the treaties which were long ago framed to that effect.¹⁵

Earlier, during the Dogra-Tibetan war (1841-42), the British had foiled Kathmandu's scheme of joining the Dogras with the hope of annexing some Tibetan territory. The British were then worried lest Kathmandu's action exacerbated the anti-Nepalese feelings in Sikkim and drew in Bhutan and China for the defense of Tibet.¹⁶

The British policy of developing the Sikkimese trade routes to central Tibet affected Nepal's traditional position in the Indo-Tibetan trade. Traditionally, Nepal had held a monopolistic position in this trade which used to be carried on through Nepalese passes. The closure of the easier Sikkimese trade route to Lhasa had been Kathmandu's policy through the ages as confirmed by its treaties with Lhasa.¹⁷ The British road building activities in Sikkim and the development of the Sikkimese trade routes caused the diversion of the Indo-Tibetan trade from the Nepalese routes with consequent loss to Kathmandu's commercial interests. Be-

fore long, Nepalese merchants were obliged to make use of the Sikkimese trade routes, and this gave the British some control over Nepal's trade with Tibet.¹⁸

British encouragement of Nepalese immigration to and settlement in Sikkim by giving them lands on favourable terms had both an economic and political motivation. The hardy Nepalese cleared tracts and turned them into arable lands. They also served the British interests as a counterpoise to the pro-Tibetan and anti-British elements in the Lepcha population of Sikkim. Lepcha grievance against the Nepalese occupation of most arable lands which was manifested in riots led to belated British measures to check land alienation to non-Lepcha hands.¹⁹ The ethnic problem created in Sikkim by the fast-growing Nepali population later assumed a political dimension which created administrative difficulties for the British.

Both in the formulation and implementation of British India's Nepal policy, Sikkim's relations with Kathmandu constituted an important element. The traditionally hostile relations between the two states enabled the British to play off one against the other and to gain influence over both. This influence brought to an end the years of political instability in the north-east frontier of India, destroying the power structure which had caused the British not a little trouble. The propensity of the Himalayan states to resolve their disputes by arms having been curbed, peace and tranquility in the region was gradually established.

FOOTNOTES

¹C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta, 1909), II, pp.322-24. Foreign Political Proceedings (F. P. P. — National Archives of India), 14 November 1846, No. 29; Memorandum on the Connection of the Sikkim Raja with the British Governor, by P. Melville.

²Article VI of the Treaty of Seguoli (December 1815) with Nepal and Article III of the Treaty of Titalya with Sikkim provided for British mediation in Nepal-Sikkim disputes.

³Foreign Secret consultations (S.C.), 22 August 1838, Nos. 9-14, 29 August 1838, No. 4, 12 September 1838, No. 1. K. Mojumdar, *Anglo-Nepalese Relations in the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1973), pp. 39-40.

⁴British India's relations with Sikkim were conducted through the Superintendent of Darjeeling.

⁵S.C., 26 December 1938, Nos. 137, 140; also S.C., 20 November 1839, Nos. 73-74.

⁶S.C., 29 August 1838, No. 4; 12 September 1838, No. 1; also S.C., 22 August 1838, No. 9-14.

The Raja of Sikkim was obliged to cede Darjeeling to the British in 1835 by a deed of grant.

⁷ Alastair Lamb. *British and Chinese Central Asia; The Road to Lhasa, 1767 to 1905* (London, 1960), pp. 89-90.

⁸ P.R. Rao, *India and Sikkim, 1814-1970* (New Delhi, 1972), pp. 25-31 Aitchison, op.cit., (Calcutta, 1931), XII, p. 53.

⁹ Foreign Political Consultations (F.P.C.), 14 June 1850, Nos. 369-554. J.D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals* (London, 1854), pp. 124, 426-63.

¹⁰ F.P.C., 14 June 1850, No. 433: Campbell's Memorandum, 1 February 1850. Also, No. 426: Lushington to Govt. of India, February 1850.

¹¹ Foreign Secret External Proceedings, June 1892, Nos. 158, 164.

¹² Rao, *op. cit.*, p.40.

¹³ F.P.P. May 1861, No. 17: Eden to Govt. of Bengal, 8 April 1861.

¹⁴ Quoted in Lamb, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ S.C., 27 October 1854, No. 50; 30 November 1855, Nos. 81-82.

¹⁶ Mojumdar, *op. cit.*, pp.133-34.

¹⁷ Political and Secret Letters and Enclosures Received from India (India Office Library, London), Vol. 246, Register No. 326: Memorandum on the Early History of the Relations between Nepal, Tibet and China compiled by the Nepal Darbar, 1909.

¹⁸ K. Mojumdar, *Political Relations between India and Nepal, 1877-1923*, (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 129-30.

¹⁹ Rao, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66. P.P. Karan, and W.M. Jenkins, *The Himalayan Kingdoms: Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 63-64, 69.