

**Sikkim Political Agency and the
Development of British Policy in the Eastern
Himalaya.**

1889 - 1914

A
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I, Ruth Marie Lepcha, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any degree in any other University / Institute.

This is being submitted to the North – Eastern Hill University for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History.

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PREFACE

Residents and Political Agents have played a crucial role in the establishment and consolidation of British paramountcy in the Indian States. Coming under a variety of designations, their functions, powers and status differed widely, depending largely on the importance, political and strategic, of the State in which they were located. By and large interwoven with the techniques of indirect rule, a few of these Residencies and Residents have in recent years received some attention in the broader studies on the making of British Policy in India. Works on specific Residencies are few: notable among these are W. S. Desai's *History of the British Residency in Burma*, and the recent *Brian Hodgson at the Kathmandu Residency* by K. L. Pradhan. However, these two and much of the other writings relate to the early years of British rule in India. Both Michael Fisher's *Indirect Rule in India. Residents and Residency System 1764 – 1857*, on their growth and functioning, and M. E. Yapp's *Strategies of British India. Britain, Iran and Afghanistan 1798 – 1850* on the importance of the "frontier agency system" in the development of frontier policy, cover only the Company's rule. Little, therefore is known of Residencies and Political Agencies in India under the Crown. The Sikkim Political Agency is one of the least known in India. That virtually nothing is known of its history or the ideas of the men who occupied it and shaped British policy in the region constitute a significant gap in the frontier history of the eastern Himalaya.

The present study aims at a critical analysis of the work done of the Sikkim Agency in promoting colonial interests, both commercial and political, in the eastern Himalaya from 1889 when it was established, to 1914 when it played a decisive role in the Tripartite Conference at Simla and in the resultant Simla Convention. Special attention is being paid to the ideas of the two Political Agents, John Claude White and Charles Bell, and the extent to which they helped shape British policy. It aims, incidentally to throw light on or show in what respects the Sikkim Agency differed from other Agencies or Residencies in the country. The first chapter discusses the

circumstances leading to the creation of the Agency and the establishment of British authority over the State: the various steps taken by the Political Agent, here styled as Political Officer, to reorganise the administration and raise revenues. The second deals with enforcing the provisions of the Convention of 1890 in respect of trade and the Sikkim – Tibet boundary. The addition to the functions of the Agency, when the Political Officer also became the recognized adviser to the Government of India for Tibet affairs, as a result of Curzon's Tibet policy, is the subject matter of the next chapter. The fourth chapter deals with the role of the Political Officer in bringing Bhutan into the British fold. The final chapter discusses how the ideas of the Political Officer, Charles Bell, moulded the North-East Frontier policy of the Government of India. The Epilogue while summarising the results of the findings attempts an assessment of the first two Political Officers. The Introduction, which surveys the East India Company's relations with Sikkim provides the historical background.

This work is based on documents preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata and in the Sikkim State Archives, Gangtok. Contemporary and semi-contemporary materials have also been used. A select Bibliography is appended.

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Abbreviations Used

FPP	-	Foreign Political Proceedings
FPC	-	Foreign Political Consultations
FPAP	-	Foreign Political 'A' and Proceedings
FSEP	-	Foreign Secret 'A' Proceedings
FSEP	-	Foreign Secret Establishment Proceedings

INTRODUCTION

SIKKIM AND BRITISH INDIA: SURVEY AND RELATIONS

Sikkim until recently a tiny Himalayan Kingdom and now a state of the Indian Union, is located between $28^{\circ}07'4''$ and $27^{\circ}04'46''$ North Latitude and $88^{\circ}00'58''$ and $88^{\circ}55'25''$ East Longitude. It has an area of 7096 sq. km, and is bounded on the North by Tibet, on the East by Tibet and Bhutan and on the West by Nepal. It was, in all probability a large kingdom in former times. Ashley Eden, in 1864 noted that Sikkim though a very petty state was formerly a fair-sized country reaching from the Arun river on the west to the Taigon Pass on the East; from the borders of Tibet on the North to Kissengunj in Purneah in the South. One writer gives a picturesque account of the Kingdom:

Tibet, Nepal, India and Bhutan all touch its borders. Here, the scenic beauty of mighty snow-capped peaks, such as the 28, 162 foot Kanchenjunga on the Nepal – Sikkim border, mingles with the romanticism of an historic past. There are huge, pine covered forests bordering terraces of rice. Sikkim's simple, sturdy and struggling people have preserved a distinct cultural and historical identity. Its villages of quaint wooden buildings hug rugged Himalayan slopes. Lights of little hamlets glitter like a myriad of glowworms in the evening. Old Buddhist monasteries perch on rocky shelves beneath the eternal snows. A mule train picks its way over the sharp rocks that pave the old trade routes to Lhasa, Tibet; for here in Sikkim, is a past living in the present.¹

Being mountainous, it consists of a tangled series of interlocking mountain chains, rising range above range, from the south to the foot of the north-most range.

¹ Pradyumna P. Karan and William M Jenkins, *The Himalayan Kingdoms: Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal*, Princeton, 1963, p. 56.

Most of these mountain ranges are 10,000 to 28,000 feet high. Mt. Kanchenjunga (28,140 ft) is situated in the Singli-la-range, the crest of which forms the boundary between Sikkim and Nepal. The other main mountains are Kinchingham (22,700 ft), Siniolchu (22,620 ft) and Chomioms (22,386 ft). Between these gigantic mountains are a number of passes like Chorten Nyima-la, Naku-la, Kongra-la, Chulung-la, Bom Chho-la and Sese-la.² These passes link northern Sikkim to Tibet. The Khungyami-la, Gora-la, Nathu-la, Jelep-la and Batan-la link eastern Sikkim with the Chumbi valley of Tibet. Nathu-la and Jelep-la are found in the Chola range and are of great strategic importance to both India and China. The Dako-la pass links south east Sikkim to Bhutan.

While the mountain passes link Sikkim, territorially the rivers contribute in defining the territorial limits of Sikkim. The Teesta, described as the 'life line', is the chief effluent river that separates Sikkim from the present state of West Bengal. The Teesta which flows in a generally southerly direction is joined at Tsiinhang, by its main tributaries the Lachen, Lachung and Rungeet and at Ringen, it is joined by Rungnu-Chu. All these rivers run through mountainous terrain and over rapids and are therefore un-navigable.

The climate of Sikkim ranges from sub-tropical in the south to tundra in the northern parts. Most of the inhabited regions of Sikkim, however, enjoy a temperate climate with the temperature seldom exceeding 28°C in summer or dropping below 0°C in winter. To be precise, Sikkim enjoys a gradation of climatic types with the inner and more land-locked valleys possessing a relatively dry climate. The lower an outer Sikkim which is on the whole ravine-like, with the rivers flowing in deep gorges, has a temperate climate. In northern Sikkim the vegetation becomes much bolder and the valleys open out into wide grassy meadows such as Lachung and Yumthang. In general, the greater part of Sikkim has a climate which favours evergreen forests, these are spotted with small lakes and gifted with a large variety of avi fauna. The state enjoys five seasons viz,

² See Edwin H Pascoe, *A Manual of the Geology of India and Burma*, Delhi 1950, P 318; S C Bose *Geography of the Himalaya*, New Delhi 1976, pp. 11 ff.

winter, spring, summer, monsoon and autumn. The monsoon season is between June and September. The average annual temperature for most of Sikkim is around 18°C. She also receives regular snow fall during the winters. During the monsoons the state is lashed by heavy rains that leads to landslides. Dense fogs also affect many parts of the state during the winter as well as the monsoons.

Since Sikkim is situated in the ecological zone of the lower Himalayas, the forested region of the state exhibits a diverse range of flora and fauna³. Owing to its altitudinal gradation the state has a wide variety of plants from tropical to temperate, to alpine and tundra. The flora of Sikkim includes the rhododendron, orchids, figs, laurel, banana, sal trees and bamboos, which are found in the lower altitudes which enjoy sub-tropical climate. In the temperate elevations above 1,500 meters, oaks, chestnuts, maples, birches, alders and magnolias grow in large numbers. In the alpine zone, vegetation like juniper, pine and firs are found. Over 424 species of medicinal plants are found in Sikkim. Similarly, Sikkim has a variety of fauna, like the snow leopard, the musk deer, the red panda, the Himalayan marmot, the barking deer, the Himalayan black bear, the Tibetan wolf, the civet cat and the yak. The avifauna of Sikkim comprises of the impeyan pheasant, the snow partridge, the snow cock, the lammergeyer, the golden eagles, quail, babblers, robins and wood peckers. However, the most beautiful birds of the state are the five species of sun-birds or honey suckers. Sikkim is also a treasure house of butterflies and moths, the number exceeds two thousand varieties.

Sikkim does not only have a variety of flora and fauna but also a variety of minerals like copper, zinc, lead, mica, coal, graphite and limestone. Deposits of copper are found at Rhenock, Dikchu, Barmiak, Rinchinpong. These minerals were not exploited during the period under review. Sikkim's wealth therefore was not derived from its mineral resources but from agriculture. Sikkim's economy remains largely

³ J D Hooker who is considered the greatest authority on the vegetation of Sikkim, in his *Essay to the Flora Indica*, divides the country into three zones. The lowest level upto 5000 feet above the sea, he called the tropical zone, thence to 13000 feet the upper limit of tree vegetation the temperate and above to the perpetual snow line at 16000 feet the Alpine.

agrarian, based on traditional farming methods on terraced slopes. The majority of the population grows crops such as rice and maize or monsoon crops like millet, barley and buck wheat. Cardamom and potatoes are today among the main export items. Fruits like oranges, pineapples and passion fruits are grown in abundance.

Trade Routes

It was, however, not these resources, but the India-Tibet trade route that passed through Sikkim, that gave the Himalayan State its importance to the British. The formidable mountains rising out of the clouds prevented large scale trade and commerce. There were several routes from the Tibetan plateau to the plains of India through which passed pilgrims and a limited trade. One of the best known of these lay through the Kathmandu valley, its terminus being Benares. From Sikkim easily traversed passed which gave access to the Chumbi valley the comparatively low (1520 feet) and easy gradient to the Nathu La, leading directly to the core areas around Lhasa. The Kingdom occupied a commanding position on the traditional Kalimpong – Lhasa trade route. In neighbouring Bhutan the trail through the Paro valley connected the plains with the Chumbi valley and Tibet. Eastward of Bhutan lay the historic Tsona-Tawang-Assam route. Through these routes and mountain passes into Tibet, traders carried cloth, spices, grain, small manufactured goods and brought back salt, wool and often yak herds; the famed Tibetan gold dust and silver was said to constitute a considerable part of it.

People

The major communities in the state are the Lepchas, Bhutia and the Nepalese. The Lepchas⁴, it is believed, are the aborigines of Sikkim. They call themselves 'Rong Kup' which means Children of the Snowy Peak. The name Lepcha is the anglicised

⁴ For a study of the Lepcha, Geoffery Grover, *The Lepchas*, Their origin is still doubtful. According to the Lepcha folklore and belief, in the beginning of creation, the first primogenitors of their tribe were Fodongthing and Nazaongnyo who were created by 'Rum' or God of the Pure Snow of Kingsoomzaongboo Choo's or Mount Kanchenjunga's pinnacle. Thereafter they were sent down to live and prosper in Mayel-Lyang which lies in the lap of Kingsoomzaongboo Choo. Apart from the Lepcha folklore the most accepted historical theory of the origin is that they came from the East along the foot of the hills from the direction of Assam and Upper Burma. The *Gazetters of Sikkim* will also be found useful for the ethnic composition of Sikkim.

