CHAPTER IV
THE PROBLEM OF BHUTAN

Curzon’s Tibetan Policy and the chain of events that followed the Expedition to Lhasa had, as indicated above a profound impact upon Bhutan, ultimately bringing that Himalayan country within the orbit of British colonial system. In Colonel Younghusband’s confabulations in Khamba and finally at Lhasa, and indeed in the entire episode since the announcement of the mission and its transformation into a full-fledged military expedition, Bhutan and more precisely the Governor of the eastern province, the Tongsa Penlop, played a not inconsiderable role. This was in marked contrast to the Government of India’s attitude and the policy towards that state it had followed since long. A brief account of the country, its government and India’s relations with her in the past will put the new development in clearer perspective.

The process of state formation in Bhutan, as in neighbouring Sikkim, it will be recalled, began with the arrival in large numbers of Tibetans from the thirteenth century onwards. These were largely Buddhist missionaries who established various branches of the Kargyupa school of Tibetan Buddhism but they also exercised a measure of political control. In 1616 the head of the Drukpa Kargyupa suppressed all rival sects and established himself as the theocratic ruler with the title “Shabdung Rimpoche,” or as he is known in eastern India, Dharma raja. The country came to be known as Drukyul, land of the Druk schools of Buddhism. For the general administration of the country, he

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1 For details see R. A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilisation*, London 1972, pp 70-82; also David Snelgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boston, 1982, Chapter 4, pp 111-143.
2 The school of Buddhism established in Bhutan was the Lho (Southern) Drukpa Kargyupa. Druk takes its name from the monasteries of Tibet, literally “dragon”, and hence, if accurately, the reference to Bhutan as the Dragon Kingdom. Bhutan is derived from two compound words, both Sanskrit, “Bhot” (Sanskrit for Tibet) and “anta” (end) i.e. Bhotana or Bhutan, at one end of Tibet or the Bhot country.

136
appointed a regent or Desi, the Deb Raja to Indians, the Penlops or chiefs of provinces and dzongpons, or heads of districts or dzongs, on the Tibetan model. Between them the Dharma and Deb Rajas ran the country with considerable authority, but from about the middle of the nineteenth century their powers weakened. By the turn of the century the governor of eastern Bhutan, the Tongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuk emerged as the most powerful figure in Bhutan.

Bhutan came into contact with the East India Company as a result of a border conflict with the Indian state of Cooch Behar during 1771 – 73. On an appeal from the latter against Bhutanese threats Cooch Behar was taken under British protection on payment of a tribute in April 1773 and troops were sent for its defence. When he received communications from the Tashilhunpo monastery’s Panchen Lama writing on behalf of Bhutan, Warren Hastings, anxious to promote trade with that country, and having lost the Kathmandu route at once responded. The upshot of this development was peace with Bhutan and a mission, under George Bogle to Tashilhunpo, the seat of the Panchen Lama. Neither this mission nor that under Samuel Turner, despite the friendliness of the Panchen, saw any significant improvement in the Company’s trade across the Himalaya. Interest in Bhutan as a channel to Tibet remained only sporadic.

During the forties of the nineteenth century trouble with Bhutan surfaced over the lawlessness prevailing in the Assam Duars. The problem were sorted out by the annexation of the Duars during 1841 – 42 and the payment to Bhutan Rs. 10,000 annually as compensation. Twenty years later trouble occurred in the Bengal Duars. An envoy

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3 A useful summary will be found in Ram Rahul, *The Himalayan Borderland*, Delhi 1970, pp. 53 - 66
6 Lamb, *op cit*, for details.
7 H.K. Barpujari, *Problem of the Hill Tribes: North east Frontier*, Vol. 1 Gauhati 1970, pp 166f. The compensation money was by all the principal men of Bhutan and the share of the Tongsa Penlop, whose financial loss from the British annexation of the Assam duars was enormous, was less than what he would have liked. It was because of this that he had harboured a hatred for the British.
sent to Bhutan returned humiliated by the Tongsa Penlop. War\(^8\) followed (1864) and the British imposed a Treaty, at Sinchula on 11 November 1864 known to the Bhutanese as the “Ten Article Treaty of Rawa Panji” by which Bhutan (Article II) surrendered,

The whole tract known as the Eighteen Duars bordering on the districts of Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Assam together with the Ambari Falakata and the hill territory on the left bank of the Tista upto such points as may be laid down by the British Commissioner appointed for the purpose.

By Articles III, VI and VII Bhutan agreed to surrender all British subjects as well as those of Sikkim and Cooch Behar who were detained against their will and agreed to the extradition of criminals. The VI article raised the subsidy or compensation for the loss of the duars to Rs. 25,000, to be doubled within three years. Other articles related to trade. Article VIII which later came in for discussion and amendment, stated:

The Bhutan Government hereby agree to refer to the arbitration of the British government all disputes with or cause of complaints against the Rajahs of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, and to abide by the decision of the British Government and the British Government hereby to engage to enquire into and settle all such disputes and complaints in such manner as justice may require and to insist on the observance of the decision by the Rajahs of Sikkim and Cooch Behar.\(^9\)

The Dharma and Deb Rajas and some of the principal chief such as the Paro penlop, accepted the Treaty with good grace. Not quite the Tongsa Penlop, and a military demonstration was needed to force his acquiescence.\(^10\) He remained sullen. It was during the Younghusband Mission that Bhutan finally came closer to the British. By then the old Tongsa Penlop was dead and important changes had taken place in Bhutan.

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\(^10\) *Ibid* p. 157
Tongsa Penlop, Ugyen Wangchuk: Relations with the British

By the end of the century Ugyen Wanchuk, son of the successor of the tormentor of Sir Ashley Eden in 1864, had emerged as the single most important factor in Bhutanese politics. The transition of the country from a theocratic to a feudalistic state had a major role to play in the rise of the Tongsa Penlop. Owing to the lack of adequate communications between different administrative centres and the scantiness of resources of the Central Government preventing the establishment of a standing national army allowed the Penlops and Dzongpons by and large to assert themselves against the country's time honoured usages and conventions. They also took over from the Lamas most of the political functions as well. For instance the Deb Raja used to be elected by the State Council but in later years he became merely a nominee of the most powerful of the Penlops. Similarly in the past the Deb Raja appointed both the Penlops and Dzongpons. However, with a change in the state organization the Penlops who owed their position to the power to the Deb Raja soon appointed the Dzongpons from among their own followers. But it was the series of three wars, in 1868 -69, in 1877 and the last in 1884 - 85 which saw the emergence of the Tongsa Penlop to Supreme authority in Bhutan.

The first civil war broke out as a result of a dispute between two Dzongpons. The Government of India was careful not to be involved in these disputes. The contestants or their adherents were forbidden to collect recruits and arms to prosecute their wars from British territory, and those who were granted political asylum in British territory were removed far from the frontier and located in areas where a strict watch could be maintained over them. The second strife commenced when the powerful Punakha Dzongpon and his adherents took up arms against the authority of the Deb Raja. Once again the Government of India enjoined strict non-interference in the internal squabbles of the Bhutanese. The Government of Bengal was cautioned that there should be no room for the Deb Raja to accuse the British of deviating from its established policy of having nothing to do with the internal affairs of Bhutan. The third civil war began in October 1884, when the Tongsa and the Paro Penlop together with some Dzongpons
turned against the Deb Raja supported by the Thimphu and Punakha Dzongpons. The cause of the turmoil was said to be the anger of the Tongsa Penlop at the Thimphu Dzongpon’s withholding his share of the British subsidy paid to Bhutan for the loss of her Duars.\footnote{For details, Labh, op cit, pp 116 - 117}

The significance of these civil wars lies in the fact that with the exception of the Tongsa Penlop all the leading Dzongpons emerged exhausted from it. The Paro Penlop was his relative. In the civil war, and in its immediate aftermath the Tongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuk established himself so firmly that no significant civil or internecine strife occurred in Bhutan again. Wangchuk to whom the share of the subsidy was an important source, understood that if it were withheld by the British he would be worse off. Thus motives of self interest and a correct appraisal of the advantages of a connection with the British determined his outlook and his relations with the Government of India. Equally on its part both Bengal and the Government of India recognized Ugyen Wangchuk’s unrivalled authority in Bhutan.

Upto the end of 1903, as Lord Minto reminded Secretary of State John Morley, “practically no advance has been made in opening up of the country and removing the distrust and even hostile aloofness of the Durbar.”\footnote{FSEP March 1907: Nos. 6 – 7 Menlo to John Morley, 21 February 1907.} There was even a doubt whether Bhutan could be treated as one of the Native States in India, a doubt which was not removed by the description of the State as such in Sir William Hunter’s \textit{Imperial Gazetteer}.\footnote{Ibid. This question of Bhutan’s status arose when the British Minister in Siam (Thailand) sought a clarification on the Bhutanese in that country, and was told that “there is no doubt that Bhutan is a Native State in India under the suzerainty if His Majesty.” This of course was not true.} When the Younghusband Mission was preparing to enter Tibet, there was some anxiety about the possible reaction of the Bhutanese. In September 1903 Colonel Francis Younghusband recommended that the Bhutanese should be induced to declare their intentions. He suggested that if they were approached at once they might be willing to adhere to the British cause, as they would imagine that a refusal to British overtures would result in the loss of subsidy and also the possibility of strong measures by the
British to secure the safety of the Mission's line of communications. An additional reason for establishing good relations with Bhutan was found in the fact that there was every reason to suppose that a practical road could be made up the Amo Chu or Di Chu to the Chumbi valley, and Younghusband though it desirable to obtain the consent of the Bhutanese Government to the dispatch of a survey party to explore the route. He would use the Maharaja of Cooch Behar to secure the neutrality if not active assistance of the Bhutanese. 

The Government of Bengal was more solicitous. British relations with Bhutan was conducted through this Local Government and the Commissioner of Rajshahi was the channel of communication with the Bhutanese authorities. The Political Officer of Sikkim who functioned directly under the Commissioner was not yet concerned with Bhutan. In October 1903 Bengal obtained the approval of the Government of India to dispatch a letter to the Tongsa Penlop inviting him to meet the Commissioner at Buxa or Kalimpong, whichever was convenient. The letter stated that the Government of India was "desirous of obtaining the good offices of the Government of Bhutan" in order to secure a satisfactory solution of its difficulties with Tibet. Along with the letter was sent a gold watch and a gold chain for Ugyen Wangchuk. A month later Bengal proposed a series of concessions to Bhutan, including raising the subsidy of Rs. 25,000 if that Government would consent to the construction of a road through its territory into Tibetan territory. The Government of India was cautious; all it wanted was Bhutan's neutrality if not active friendship. They wanted no reference to the road as this might rouse Bhutanese suspicious, but if a reference was made to only a small part of Bhutan through which it might passes they were willing to approve.

After the British occupation of the Chumbi valley in December 1903 the political management of Bhutan was transferred from the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner for Tibet Frontier Affairs, Colonel Younghusband, under the direct control of the Government of India. Consequently, the correspondence with the Tongsa Penlop

14 FSEP November 1903: Nos 159 – 234.
15 FEAP, March 1904, Nos. 66 -125
passed through Younghusband. On 25 December Younghusband wrote to both the Tongsa and Paro Penlops asking them to meet him at Chumbi and informing them that a survey team had been sent to Bhutan to explore a route through the Chumbi valley. This, Younghusband explained to the two Bhutanese, was an urgent matter and there were no Bhutanese representative to consult. Ugyen Wangchuk sent his cousin, the Trimpuk Dzongpon, in February 1904 assuring Younghusband of Bhutan’s friendship with the British and permitting him to construct the road. While a guest of the Mission in Chumbi the Trimpuk had an interview with the Lhasa delegates who were present there, and it is said did his best to pave the way for a settlement between the Indian and Tibetan Governments. Before he left the British camp on his return to Bhutan, the “most friendly relations were established between him and the British officers with whom he came into contact.” The Tongsa Penlop arrived in June, and in the words of the Government of India to the Secretary of State “the moment of the advance into Tibet contributed the turning point in our relations with Bhutan”.

The Tongsa Penlop too tried to bring about a peaceful settlement to the Tibetan problem. He had been present at the engagement in Gyantse, the largest Tibetan masonry fort on the route to Lhasa. Its easy fall to the British forces was to leave a lasting impact upon the future Maharaja of Bhutan. Ugyen wrote to the Viceroy at the end of the Expedition that he would “henceforth” look to the Government of India for “protection and justice” in the event of an invasion of Bhutan by a foreign power. And the only foreign power that could do so was China-Tibet.

The Government of India acknowledged the services of the Tongsa Penlop by conferring upon him the Order of Knight Commander of the Indian Empire (KCIE). In April 1905 Claude White, who as Assistant Commissioner for Tibet Affairs to Colonel Younghusband was also directly concerned with Bhutan, went to Punakha along with A. W. Paul to present the Penlop with the insignia of the Order. This was followed up by

16 Ibid
17 White, op cit, P. 105. The deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling A W Paul, who had established a close friendship with Ugyen Wangchuk also on the latter’s invitation.
an invitation to Ugyen Wangchuk to visit Calcutta on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. This was White’s idea. The Knighthood had an important bearing upon Bhutan’s relations with India: it contributed to the prestige and power of Ugyen Wangchuk and at the same time ensured British influence in the Himalayan State.\textsuperscript{18} The Political Officer’s visit, or mission as he called it, so interestingly described in his \textit{Bhutan and Sikhim}, gave him an opportunity to develop a close friendship with the Bhutanese strongman, and a mutual regard developed that was to come very handy in the years ahead. The reception White and Paul received in Bhutan was in sharp contrast to the hostility shown to Ashley Eden some forty years ago. White stayed on in Bhutan for some time after the investiture ceremony to see the country and the people, and his descriptions of Bhutan is equally in sharp contrast to earlier accounts.\textsuperscript{19} A visit to India by Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, White felt, would have great advantages; a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya would dispel any suspicions the Buddhist people of the Himalaya might have entertained against the British.\textsuperscript{20} While still in Bhutan, in April, White approached the Government of India. The latter was reluctant, but when White again wrote in May, they relented,\textsuperscript{21} but Bhutan was to be treated as any other Indian State.

Sir Ugyen Wangchuk arrived in Calcutta at the end of 1905 to a 15 – gun salute. Both he and the Maharaja of Sikkim were received in audience by the Viceroy and the Prince of Wales, and were even allowed to make presents to the latter. For Wangchuk and Namgyal the Calcutta trip had been more than a memorable one: it showed them the reality of British power in India. The visit was a watershed in British relations with Bhutan, the beginnings of which can be seen in the Younghusband Expedition. The Bengal Government not inaccurately sums up the result of the past few years thus:

\textsuperscript{18} FSEP June 1905; Nos 734 -54. The Deb Raja and the numbers of the Bhutanese Council wrote to the Viceroy expressing their gratitude for the honour shown to Ugyen Wangchuk and imploring him to regard them “with parental kindness and affection equaling the love of a mother for a child,” in Labh, \textit{India and Bhutan}, \textit{op cit}, P. 151.

\textsuperscript{19} FEAP February 1907: Nos 40; See also White, \textit{Bhutan and Sikhim}, especially pp 105ff.

\textsuperscript{20} FSEP April 1905; No 44.

\textsuperscript{21} FSEP May 1905; No 89 - 90.
The effect of the Mission to Tibet both upon Sikkim and Bhutan is very marked. The relations into which these states have been brought with the British government are much more than intimate than has hitherto been possible, and the friendship with them has been cemented by the recent visit paid by the Maharaja and Maharaj Kumar of Sikkim and the Tongsa Penlop of Bhutan to Calcutta, where they had the privilege of making the acquaintance of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.22

The letter from the Deb Raja which the Tongsa Penlop handed over to the Viceroy, however, said it all for Bhutan in characteristic flowery language:

Henceforth His Most Gracious Majesty the King – Emperor and His Excellency the Viceroy are as the sun and moon, and we the minor chiefs under the Supreme Government as the stars. As the stars and the constellations must never fail in loyally attending on the sun and the moon, so do we the entire Bhutanese nation resolve to do likewise to the Supreme Government, hoping that as the sun and the moon are like the parents of the whole world, we also will enjoy the blessings of their beneficent rays for ever and ever till the cessation of worldly existing.23

Chinese Threat: White’s Recommendation

Meanwhile important developments were taking place in Tibet which would result not only in the orientation of White’s ideas about Bhutan but also bring in a new significance to the Gangtok Agency. The Lhasa Convention, it will be recalled again, was not only whittled down by the British Cabinet but by the Adhesion Agreement with China (1906) and the Anglo Russian Convention (1907) Britain surrendered all the gains of the Younghusband Mission.24 China took advantage of this to transform her suzerainty to actual sovereignty. O’Connor, though only a minor official, very perceptibly wrote of the new situation in March 1908 from his vantage point Gyantse:

It is clear, I think, that one of the principal results of our intervention in Tibetan affairs since 1903 is the more complete establishment of Chinese influence in Tibet than has ever been the case before. Before our mission

22 FEAP May 1906: Nos. 159 – 162; Chief Secretary, Bengal to Foreign Secretary, India, 9 January 1906.
23 FEAP May 1906: Nos 84 – 86; in Labh, op cit, P. 154.
to Lhasa Chinese suzerainty was a very shadowy affair and the Tibetans openly flouted the Amban. But after the thorough thrashing we gave them and the flight of the Dalai Lama, they were a good deal cowed and much more amenable to reason and discipline. The Chinese naturally took advantage of the state of things and stepped into place which we had helped to prepare for her.  

White was no less perceptive than O'Connor about the Tibetan situation after Younghusband’s withdrawal from Lhasa. He regarded the Chinese threat to Bhutan, just as it had been to Sikkim more than a decade earlier, as real. Almost immediately after his retirement and after twenty years experience of the political conditions in the Himalayas, White wrote:

In the case of Bhutan, Government should utilize this unique opportunity of a new regime in that country to enter into a new treaty and to increase the inadequate subsidy that we now dole out as compensation for the annexation of the Duars, the most valuable tea district in India. If this is not done soon China will acquire complete control in Bhutan, and demand from us, as she did in the parallel case of Sikkim, the retrocession of the Bhutanese plains. Further any political disturbance in this frontier would seriously affect the supply of labour on the tea gardens in the duars, and so cause great loss to the tea industry.

The Treaty of 1865 provided that Bhutan’s disputes with Sikkim and Cooch Behar should be settled by reference to the Government of India. It did not allow British intervention in any of Bhutan’s disputes with Tibet and China. White felt that this shortcoming in the Treaty made the Government of India helpless in the face of Chinese or Tibetan intervention in Bhutan. This was no imaginary fear, for, after all, the Amban’s intervention in the Tongsa and Paro Penlop’s dispute with the Deb Raja was of recent memory. White, therefore, felt that it would be very desirable to revise the Treaty while the British still administered the Chumbi valley and while the Bhutanese attitude was extremely favourable to the Government of India. Before laying down his office White had suggested to the Government of India that Article VIII might be modified by the addition of the words “and any other neighbouring states” after “Sikkim and Cooch.

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26 White, *op cit*, pp 283 – 84.
Behar", and that the annual subsidy to Bhutan be revised to Rs. 1,00,000 if Bhutan agreed to the modification.\(^{27}\) White also considered it desirable to add certain clauses in the Treaty similar to those in the 1861 Treaty with Sikkim by which the Government of India would be empowered to keep its military forces in Bhutan, build roads, prevent the cessation of any Bhutanese territory and allow no hostile force from entering into that country. He would not insist on these if Bhutan were unwilling to accept them, but he would carry out the revision of Article VIII at all costs.

With the imminence of British withdrawal from the Chumbi valley, scheduled for 1908, White’s anxieties about Chinese threat to Bhutan increased. There had been reports from the Residency at Kathmandu that the Amban at Lhasa had directed the Tibetans to send military officials to Nepal to familiarize themselves with that country’s military. The Amban was also reported to have declared that Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan owed allegiance to China and that they should act together against any British designs. The only security against such developments, White said, was the revision of the Treaty as he had suggested. Article VIII, altered, would thus read:

The Bhutan Government hereby agree to refer to the arbitration of the British Government all disputes with, or cause of complaint against, all neighbouring states, and to abide by the decision of the British Government: and the British hereby engage to enquire into and settle all such disputes and complaints in such manner as justice may require, and to insist on the observation of the decision by the neighbouring state.\(^{28}\)

In April 1907 The Bhutanese chiefs unanimously decided to install Sir Ugyen Wangchuk as their hereditary Maharaja. White was invited by Wangchuk as a guest and as a representative of the British Government at his installation on 17 December.\(^{29}\) He

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\(^{27}\) FSEP June 1907: Nos 635 - 649
\(^{28}\) Ibid, White to Government, 8 April
\(^{29}\) Their decision was set out in a document which in translation reads: “There being no Hereditary Maharaja over the state of Bhutan, the Deb Rajas being elected from amongst the Lamas, Lopons, Councillors and the Chiolals of the different districts, we... with all the subjects, having discussed and unanimously agreed to elect Sir Ugyen Wang-chuk, Tongsa Penlop, the Prime Minister of Bhutan, as Hereditary Maharaja of the State, have installed him, in open Durbar, on the Golden throne... We now declare our allegiance to him and his heirs with unchanging mind, and undertake to serve him and his
left Gangtok for Punakha on 25 November with an impressive retinue. Till then he had been constantly urging upon the Government of India on the revision of the treaty, and the importance of closer relations with Wangchuk. He wanted his Government to recognize the new Maharaja and accord, as in the case of Sikkim, a salute of 15 guns. Five days before he proceeded to Bhutan White wrote to Minto’s Private Secretary to impress upon the Viceroy the need for the revision of the Treaty that he had earlier suggested. White’s views became a conviction with the reception he received at Punakha. Once again he makes this point on his Bhutan and Sikhim while describing the Maharaja and his people and the aid that should be given to Bhutan. Long though it is, his words deserve to be quoted in full:

The aid is required now, not in the distant future, and I hope the fact that I am no longer on the spot or able to press the matter on Government will not mean that the proposals made will be allowed to fall into abeyance, but that the Indian Government will give, and generously, what is required.

And further that:

I cannot pass over the fact that the present time is a critical one for relations between India and Bhutan, and that if we do not support the new Maharaja openly and generously, grave complications may be the result. At the present moment Bhutan and its people are thoroughly and entirely friendly to the English, and wish beyond everything to enter into close relationships with them, but since the withdrawal of the Lhasa Mission Chinese influence is more active than ever on this frontier, and Bhutan, from lack of active help and sympathy on our part, may, against her will, be thrown into the hands of the Chinese by sheer force of circumstances, for China, as we know, is not likely to lose an opportunity, when the expenditure of a few thousand rupees will gain her end, and such a departure is to be most highly deprecated from all point of view.

The Government of India could not have been totally complacent about a possible Chinese threat to Bhutan, but as yet there was no pressing need to impose on that country a new treaty. To do this when Ugyen Wangchuk was being installed as Maharaja would

30 Ibid
31 FSEP October 1907: No 206; FSEP January 1908; Nos 488 – 515. See Notes, P. 18
32 White, op cit, pp. 230 –31
have seemed that it was the guarantee of British protection that has brought about the political change in Bhutan. Above all, the Secretary of State, John Morley, was too sensitive about the Himalayan frontier to accept the proposed changes in the Treaty. After all, he had in May 1907 expressed himself against raising the question whether British Government. Whatever may have been the merits of White’s recommendations, it was not at all likely that they would have received a favourable hearing with the Government of India. The Viceroy, Lord Minto, like Curzon before him, did not entertain, as mentioned earlier, a favourable impression of White. The fact that the Maharaja of Sikkim wrote to the Government of India for an extension of White’s services as Political Officer led Minto to suspect that there had been “a great deal of disagreeable wire-pulling on the part of White on his own behalf both in Sikkim and Bhutan.”

Bell’s Recommendations

In October 1908 Charles Bell succeeded Claude White as Political Officer, Sikkim, in a substantive capacity. The Agency had not been upgraded into a Residency, nor was Cooch Behar added to the functions of the Political Officer. Bhutan and Sikkim remained his principal charge. But as adviser to the Government of India on Tibet that made the chief demand on his abilities and vision as India’s most important frontier officer in the north-east.

A member of the Indian Civil Service, he had a wider administrative experience than his predecessor. A series of illness in the plains had taken him to the hills, and during 1901 and 1903 he was at Kalimpong where he successfully carried out land settlement. This work involved the measurement and classification of lands, fixing of rates of rent or revenue, settlement of disputes, arrangements regarding grazing grounds and fuel reserves, enquiry into the agricultural system, in short, “all the arrangements,

33 Ibid
34 FSEP August 1907: Nos 300 -03
35 Quoted in Kapileshwar Labh, op cit, P. 160
which belong to a land settlement in India". This brought him for the first time into close contact with the Hill people, such as those of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and those of the Tibetan borderland. During the Youngusband Expedition, from March to May 1904 he was put in charge of a small pioneer party, his duty being to find a route suitable for a railway from India to Tibet. Thereafter, till October when White was with Youngusband, the administration of Sikkim was placed in his hands. Between September 1904 and December 1905 he held charge of the Chumbi Valley and from September 1906 to January 1907 and again in the following year when White had proceeded on furlough he was back in Gangtok. It was during this time that the political relations of the Government of India with Tibet as also with Bhutan was added to the functions of the Sikkim Political Agency. Charles Bell was thus no stranger to this part of the country and when he assumed charge as Political Officer in a substantive capacity, he was fully aware of the problems of Tibet and the frontier states.

Bhutan loomed large in the frontier environment when he assumed charge, and he was to pick up the threads of an evolving policy left over by White. Bhutan lay some two hundred and twenty miles along the northern border of Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam. Her hills bordered on tracts occupied by British capitalists and by prosperous villages where "almost every acre of land is fertile and capable of high cultivation". In both Sikkim and Bhutan the Nepalese population was rapidly increasing. In Sikkim it had already amounted to more than three-fourths of the entire population. Bell considered it "of first importance to keep the entire Nepalese population of these parts under control." But it was the fear of Chinese control over the Bhutan hills that was his

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36 FEAP, December 1908: Nos 16 - 19. Bell could speak Tibetan and Nepalese, having lived on the frontier for six years. Nepalese, he picked up during the two year's settlement work in Kalimpong and also on district work elsewhere in the Darjeeling district and Sikkim. Seeking confirmation of his appointment as Political Officer in August 1908 (when White was on leave preparatory to retirement) Bell wrote, "Sikkim involves a larger amount of administrative work, for the detailed administration will continue to be worked by the Political Officer for a considerable time owing to the backwardness of the Maharaja and the need for British control over this mixed frontier population, three-fourths of whom are Nepalese. This administrative work comes most naturally to a person who, while knowing Sikkim conditions, has had administrative experience especially in the Darjeeling district, where the country and people resemble those of Sikkim." See also Tibet, Past and Present, London 1924, Introductory, pp 1 - 4.

37 FSEP May 1910: Nos. 208 - 262, Bell to foreign Secretary.
principal concern and which was to absorb him in the next several years. The reason, in Bell’s words:

Bhutan is a very fertile country and when developed is capable of supporting about one and a half million persons by agriculture. It could then feed a large army of Chinese troops without difficulty. Stories were current sometime ago that China threatened to post 20,000 troops in Bhutan. There are at present no British troops and only two companies of native infantry near this frontier on our side. But if modern drilled Chinese troops were posted in Bhutan, tea gardens and villages over three hundred miles of border country would become untenable, except at great military expenditure and by posting troops in the adjoining plains country, which is one of the most unhealthy tracts in India. Tibet, on the other hand, being infertile, can never support many troops. The Chinese soldiers are rice eaters and would have to import this from Bhutan. The Chinese would naturally therefore have selected Bhutan as the best place for stationing Chinese troops, both on account of its climate and on account of cheapness of supplies there."

There was danger, Bell continued to say, “which cannot be regarded as a mere chimera that Bhutan might later on be a field for Chinese colonisation.” It was well known, he said, that strenuous efforts were being made to populate the inhospitable tracts around Batang with Chinese colonists and it appeared that China had begun to look towards South Eastern Tibet which is not very far from Bhutan with the same object in view. “Bhutan has an ideal climate for Chinese from Southern and Central China”, and travelling through Bhutan one could not fail to be impressed by the amount of fertile

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38 Ibid. That Bell considered these reasons extremely valid is borne out by what he wrote, in the same vein, in his Tibet, op cit, pp 100: “Possessed of a temperate climate and a fertile soil, less than a quarter of which was occupied by the Bhutanese themselves, it offered a tempting field for Chinese penetration. Not immediately, but later on by degrees, Chinese colonists might well have followed, for the climate and soil would have been appreciated no less by the Southern Chinaman than the plains of Mongolia are by the Chinese of the North.

“It would have been natural for China to have sought this relief for her overflowing population for she appears to regard the Mongolian people that border on her own and the Tibetan frontiers, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and even Burma as within her natural sphere. And with Bhutan inhabited by people of Tibetan stock and revering the Dalai Lama as their spiritual head, past centuries had given her a connection which might well have been magnified into a suzerainty of the shadowy Chinese type though any such claim at the present day would be unwelcome to the Bhutanese. And Bhutan garrisoned by Chinese troops, peopled more and more by Chinese colonists and overhanging the tea gardens of Assam and Jalpaiguri would have been a new and very disturbing factor on the Indian frontier.”
uncultivated land, which exceeded by five or six times that at present under cultivation and which would quickly respond to the touch of the Chinese agriculturists. And, finally:

That the Chinese designs on Bhutan were real admits of no doubt. Mr. Chang’s utterance as to the blending of the five colours (China, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan) and the resemblance between Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim as the molar teeth lying side by side in a man’s mouth showed the views of one who after being High Commissioner for Tibet was made the member of the Chinese Foreign Office in charge of Tibetan affairs. The Ambar subsequently wrote to the Maharaja and the Chiefs of Bhutan, that Bhutan was under the Chinese suzerainty and sent Mr. Ma Chi Fu, a Chinese Papon, to Bhutan to endeavour to establish the claim. 39

In April 1908 when he was in Gangtok, the Government of India had sought his advice on the course of British action that ought to be followed in Bhutan. On going through White’s proposal for the revision of the Treaty, it appeared to him that it would not counter the Chinese advance. For “we should have the right to intervene only in case of disputes. If Bhutan, at any time in the future, agreed to Chinese intervention in her affairs, e.g. by receiving Chinese agents in Bhutan, we could have done nothing.” 40 Bell was fully conscious of the fact that Bhutan, following the same religion as Tibet, venerated the Tibetan hierarchy and exchanged gifts with the Tibetan authorities. There was a natural sympathy of Bhutan, as of all Oriental countries, with their co-religionists, a fact that could cause inconvenience in the future. The Chinese were now in control in Tibet.

Bell accordingly advised that the Government of India should endeavour to persuade Bhutan to place her foreign relations under the British Government. 41 This of course was no new concept, it had been the focal point of arrangements for the defence of the North-West frontier. It was on these lines that Abdur Rahman, it may be recalled, was placed on the Afghan throne, when it was decided as a solution to the imperial problem of defence against a Russian advance, to build a strong, friendly and united

40 *Bell, Tibet, op cit, P. 101*
Afghanistan, which would serve as a buffer state between India and the Russians. By means of an annual subsidy, together with gifts of arms and ammunition a successful attempt was made to form a closer and more intimate alliance with the Amir of Afghanistan. “At the same time” says C. Collin Davies, long regarded as an authority on the North West Frontier problem, “the frontiers of Afghanistan were strictly defined by international agreement; and as long as we controlled her foreign affairs, any violation of the Amir’s northern frontier by Russia would be tantamount to a declaration of war.” Bell was developing such ideas for the North East Frontier problem.

Bell at the same time was emphatic that, as in the Afghan case, the British Government should agree to abstain from interference in the internal administration of the country. This promise, Bell insisted, was “of prime importance”, as, he added, from his long residence in the frontier had convinced him of both the “justice and expediency of Home Rule wherever such was possible”. Ardent administrators usually with the best of motives, he went on to say, introduced changes in the government of what are somewhat arrogantly termed backward races. Such changes, unless desired by the people themselves, do more harm than good in the long run. On this vulnerable section of the frontier they would promote resentment against the British.

**Recommendations Approved: Treaty Revised**

Bell’s ideas and proposals were accepted by the Foreign Department headed by Harcourt Butler. On 1 October 1908 the Government of India addressed the Secretary of State proposing in their long dispatch that in view of the policy pursued by China in Tibet, negotiations should be opened with Bhutan for a secret Treaty by which the external relations of the state should be placed under British control. A draft revised treaty was submitted for consideration. The proposals were that Bell should proceed to Bhutan for the purpose at an early date. The Political Officer should commence by discussing the question of the industrial development of the districts of Bhutan and the

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44 FSEP October 1908; Nos. 116 – 197.
adjoining British territory and that if a satisfactory understanding was arrived at on this point he should proceed to open negotiations for a treaty on the lines of the draft. The first article, which proposed that “the external relations of Bhutan shall be controlled by the British Government.” The others provided that Bhutan shall not, without consent of the British Government either enter any agreement with a Foreign Power, or permit the residence of the Agent of a Foreign State or part with land to the representative of a Foreign State. These, the Government of India’s letter said, would be left to the discretion of Bell to secure, if Bhutan were willing. It was further proposed that the Political Officer would be authorised to add to the treaty a guarantee against aggression should this be insisted upon. The existing subsidy of Rs. 50,000 would be increased if necessary to two lakhs.45

Lord Morley was in no particular hurry and it was not before another ten months when he finally replied to these proposals. Meanwhile India Office discussed the problem with the Foreign Office. In April 1909 the Secretary of State addressed his colleague the British Foreign Secretary on the subject.46 It was pointed out that in the past the Government of India had no reason to concern themselves actively with the relations of Bhutan and Tibet, which had not been of a nature to cause serious trouble between the two countries. A clear necessity alone, said Morley, could justify a departure from the policy of non intervention in the affairs of regions as distant and inaccessible. That justification was now provided, as the Government of India had shown by the gravity of change that had taken place in the political situation in this section of the Indian border owing to recent developments of Chinese policy. In April 1908 for instance, the Chinese Amban made an attempt to assert sovereign rights in Bhutan, and the circumstances in which the Dalai Lama left Peking in December (1908) on his return to Lhasa, clearly indicated that the attitude of the Tibetan Government towards the adjoining states of Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal would be governed in future by considerations of Chinese policy. “The time has therefore come,” Morley told the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey:

45 Ibid.
46 FSEP May 1910 Nos. 208 – 262; A Godly to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 22 April 1909
to take such steps as may be practicable to maintain Bhutan in its present state of independence as regards China and Tibet. The establishment of effective Chinese suzerainty in Bhutan might not only necessitate expensive arrangements in the immediately adjoining British districts for the protection of the valuable tea estates situated along the frontier from Jalpaiguri to Tejpur, but would produce a disturbing effect on the mind of the Nepalese Government. Our present friendly relations with Nepal, which it is of utmost importance to maintain, would certainly be shaken if the Durbar had reason to think that we are indifferent to the absorption by China of their neighbor Bhutan.47

Morley pointed out that the friendly attitude of the Maharaja of Bhutan was clearly shown by the part he played as the Tongsa Penlop in the latter stages of the Younghusband Mission to Tibet. And this was confirmed by his dealings with the Government of India since his installation as the hereditary ruler of Bhutan in December 1907. He had sought the assistance of the Government in opening up the resources of the southern portion of his state adjoining the British border. More recently on the occasion of the dispute at Phari, which was settled to Bhutan's satisfaction, the Maharaja wrote spontaneously to the Political Officer, Sikkim, that the Bhutanese were encouraged, by the favour they received in the past from the British Government to hope that "consideration will be bestowed on whatever reasonable prayer we shall be obliged to make." The present state of affairs thus afforded a suitable opportunity of approaching Bhutan for an agreement as to the external affairs of the State.48

Relations with Bhutan, Morley said in justification of the Government of India's proposal, was governed by the Treaty of Sinchula, 1865, the provisions of which conclusively established the right of the State to enter into diplomatic engagements, and their effect was to vest in the Government of India a certain measure of control over the external relations of the State, limited, however, to those interests which were more immediately of concern to the Government of India.49 The Secretary of State also ruled out complications, if the new treaty were concluded, in British relations with China.

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid
49 Ibid
There was no evidence of the existence of any definite Chinese rights of which the conclusion of a treaty of the suggested kind by Bhutan would contravene, while the history of past relations clearly hold the right of the State to enter, if it chose, into such a treaty with the British. This would be no more than extending the right they have given the British under the existing Treaty of controlling a portion of its foreign relations. Lord Morley had agreed with the Government of India that any treaty that may be concluded must be kept secret, unless circumstances made it necessary for Bhutan to invoke British aid under the provision. It may be that no questions involving risk to the status of Bhutan as against China and Tibet would arise. In that case there will be no reason to disturb the existing state of affairs under which Bhutan itself deals with the affairs of that portion of the frontier. Should encroachment necessitate British intervention, the Government of India would be in a better position to deal with the questions if its actions were based on a formal agreement with Bhutan. Besides, the Maharaja himself was desirous of British support against Chinese encroachments.\(^5^0\)

In these circumstances the Secretary of State said he agreed with the Government of India and told the Foreign Office that Bell should be allowed to proceed to Bhutan on an opportunity presenting itself to discuss with the Maharaja the question both of the industrial development of Bhutan and the external relations of the state. If the Maharaja agreed to place his foreign relations under British Government, Bell would be authorised to affirm non-interference in Bhutan’s internal administration and a promise to increase the subsidy to two lakhs. The Treaty would substitute a fresh Article VIII of that Article of the Treaty of 1865, and could run thus:

The British Government undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Bhutanese Government agrees to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations. In the event of disputes or causes of complaint against the Rajas of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, such matters will be referred for arbitration to the British Government which will settle them in

\(^{50}\)Ibid.
such manner as justice may require, and insist upon the observance of its
decision by the Rajas named. 51

The Foreign Office raised no objections, and three months later the sanction of the
Secretary of State for India was conveyed to the Government of India. 52

In October Bell was authorised to proceed to Bhutan to negotiate with the
Maharaja the substitution of the new Article VIII for the old one in the Treaty of 1865. 53
He was told that if he found the maharaja and his advisers inclined to agree to place
Bhutan’s external relations under the direction of the Government of India to assure them
of the Government of India intention of strict non-interference in the internal affairs of
the Kingdom. The implications of placing the country’s external relations under the
British, that without the consent of the British Government he could not enter into any
agreement with any foreign power or permit their agents or representatives to reside in
Bhutan or part with land to any foreign state, explained to the Maharaja. Bell was also to
promise an increase to the subsidy up to one or even two lakhs of rupees in the event of
the Maharaja agreeing to the new treaty stipulations; that the British Government would
help in the development of his resources. A stand of one hundred Martini-Henry rifles
was to be presented to the Maharaja along with expensive personal gifts. Bell was
cautioned that in the event of the Maharaja declining to accept the Government of India’s
new treaty terms he was to refrain from expressing an option or in any way committing
himself but to report to the Government the Maharaja’s objections for consideration. 54

Bell on his own decided to sound out the Maharaja before proceeding to Bhutan.
Just as Bengal did during the Tibetan difficulty Bell decided to utilize the services of
Ugyen Kazi. 55 As the Vakil of the Bhutan Government the Kazi was close to the

51 Ibid. See Appendix I.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid. No. 212
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid. No. 235. Bell like White before him, but unlike Curzon, entertained a favourable opinion of Ugyen
Kazi. In 1906 when he was merely officiating for White, Bell recommended him for the award of the
title of Rai Bahadur. He had said that Ugyen had served the British in the past, and if treated graciously
would continue to serve the Government of India.
Maharaja. Bell briefed him in detail about the British proposals, and held out the hope that should he succeed his pay would be increased. In the following month Ugyen Kazi was on his way on what can be described as his Bhutan Mission, and on 15 December conveyed the Maharaja’s acceptance of all the terms the British had offered.

Within a fortnight, on 28 December, Charles Bell, accompanied by Captain Kennedy, the Medical Officer of Gyantse left Sikkim, reaching Punakha on 7 January. On arrival he had a series of meetings with the Bhutan Council, but found most of them were reluctant to place their external relations under the Government of India. A guarantee of British non-interference in the internal administration of Bhutan soon won them over. The doubts of the Council thus overcome Bell that night rested easy prepared four copies of the Treaty in Bhutanese and in English. The following day, on 8 January 1910, the four copies of the Treaty were duly signed and sealed. The Bhutanese seals included those of the Maharaja, each member of the Council and the ecclesiastical representatives. At the head of them all was put the Seal of the Dharma Raja, who presided over Bhutan as the Dalai Lama did over Tibet, but with the differences that the former was confined to spiritual functions, though his seal was necessary for Government actions of prime importance. Thus with the consent of all and with the blessings of its powerful priesthood Bhutan became a part of Britain’s Imperial system. After the treaty was signed the Maharaja announced that Bhutan was entirely satisfied with the terms.

The Treaty and China

The importance of the new arrangement with Bhutan, in particular its timing, can be seen in the turn of events in Tibet where China began to pursue an unusually active policy with a view to establishing effective dominion. In the early part of 1908 Chao Erh Feng, whom the Tibetans feared and hated on account of the severity with which he suppressed the rebellion in the Batang and Litang districts in 1905, was appointed

*Interestingly, near Punakha Bell noticed a spot which he thought would have been ideal for a hill station had it been in British territory. Bell also wrote about five Chinese spies who were on the road ahead of him. They were not encountered, but Bell thought it necessary “to push on by double stages and in three days arrived within six miles of Pu-na-ka”, where he was received by the Maharaja’s escort and band.
Warden of the Tibetan Marches and Minister Resident in Tibet. His instructions were to prepare plans for the training of troops, the promotion of education, mining and industries, the improvement of the means of communications, and the increase in the number of officials and the form of government. He began to display great military activity; the garrison in Lhasa was increased and considerable additions were made to the Tibetan army, the new recruits being placed under direct Chinese instructors. Chao Erh Feng, who was acting Viceroy of Szechuan was relieved of his duties about the middle of the year when he was free to take up his new duties.

Tibetan attempts to prevent Chao from moving towards Lhasa failed, and by the close of 1909 it was obvious that the Chinese control over Tibet would soon be consolidated. Friction between the Chinese and the opposing Tibetans turned in open hostility. The Dalai Lama, who after five years exile in Chinese territory during Younghusband expedition, was obliged once again to flee, this time towards the south into British territory. At the end of January 1910 he was over the border, and finally in Darjeeling. Thus the flight of the Dalai Lama followed within days of the signing of the new Treaty with Bhutan. “We have fortunately negotiated our treaty with Bhutan just in time.” said the Government of India’s new Foreign Secretary, Harcourt Butler, but that was not the end of the problem. The Paro Penlop had not quite reconciled himself to the new treaty, and was more inclined towards the Chinese. Butler even toyed with the idea of sending Bell to Bhutan to prevent the growth of a “Chinese party” headed by the Paro Penlop. The whole problem was brought out by him in a note for the Viceroy, Lord Minto, on 24 February 1910:

In any case we must assume that China will consolidate her position in Tibet. What we have to consider now is how to consolidate and strengthen our position along the frontier. Bhutan is the most vulnerable point, because it is quite likely that China will not recognize our treaty.

56 FSEP September 1908: Nos. 113 – 34; Encl to No 114
because the Paro Penlop is Chinese in his proclivities and only signed the treaty for fear of the Maharaja who has him under his thumb, and because the treaty is quite new and the force of the Chinese and the flight of the Dalai Lama will no doubt impress the people. 58

In the event China did not accept the Treaty. Though outwardly there was no opposition or even comments, there followed a series of events suggesting attempts on their part to subvert its terms. In June 1910 the Chinese Amban reportedly sought an explanation from the Maharaja for allowing certain followers and the property of the Dalai Lama to pass through Bhutan on the way to India. The Maharaja was also said to have asked to ensure the circulation of Tibet – Chinese currency in his Kingdom. The Secretary of State, when informed, directed that the Maharaja, in the event of receiving such letters from the Chinese should hand them over to the Political Officer in Sikkim who would either draft a reply in consultation with the Maharaja or refer them to the Government of India for instructions. 59 Bell was instructed to inform the Chinese that since the external relations of Bhutan were controlled by the British Government all letters intended for Bhutan should be routed through the Political Officer in Sikkim.

Far from being chastised, the Amban in August again sent a letter to Bhutan in tone and language that amount to a Chinese claim of suzerainty over the country. The letter was in fact addressed to the Deb Raja, an office which had become defunct on the establishment of the hereditary monarchy, clearly indicating that China had not recognized the political change of 1907. The Government of India protested, but to their protest note the Chinese Government vindicated their Amban’s actions on the grounds that Bhutan was a “vassal state of China.” 60

In December 1910 the Secretary of State took up the matter with his colleague at the Foreign Office and reminded him of the circumstances and the implications of the Treaty. Bhutan had concluded it on her own free will and this was communicated to

59 Letter dated 8 July 1910 from Secretary of State to Viceroy, quoted in Kapileshwar Labh, op cit, P. 176.
60 FSEP January 1911 Nos. 124 – 207 (No. 131)
Peking which therefore had no reason to ignore the relations so established between the Government of India and Bhutan. This relationship was no different from that which governed British relations with Sikkim. The Government of India was firm that it was not prepared to allow China to extend its influence over Bhutan, which was remote from direct Chinese interest but in close relationship with India. The Governor General in Council rejected the claims of China of suzerainty over Bhutan, and made it clear that it would resist any attempt on its part to impose its authority on or in any way to interfere with Bhutan.

India's firm stand had the desired effect in the attempted intrigues of the Chinese in Bhutan. But it was soon transpired that the Himalayan Kingdom was not the only area over which they had their covetous eyes.
APPENDIX I.
TREATY BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND BHUTAN, 1910.

Signed at Punaka, Bhutan, on the 8th January 1910
Ratified at Calcutta on the 24th March 1910.

Whereas it is desirable to amend Articles IV and VIII of the Treaty concluded at Sinchula on the 11th day of November 1865, corresponding with the Bhutia year Shing Lang, 24th day of the 9th month, between the British Government and the Government of Bhutan, the under mentioned amendments are agreed to on the one part by Mr. C. A. bell, Political Officer in Sikkim, in virtue of full powers to that effect vested in him by the Right Honourable Sir Gilbert John Elliot-Myurray-Kynynmound, P.C., G.M.S.I., G.M.I.E., G.C.M.G., Earl of Minto, Viceroy and Governor-general of India in Council, and on the other part by his Highness Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, K.C.I.E., Maharaja of Bhutan.

The following addition has been made to Article IV of the Sinchula Treaty of 1865.

"The British Government has increased the annual allowance to the Government of Bhutan from fifty thousand rupees (Rs. 50,000) to one hundred thousand rupees (Rs. 100,000) with effect from the 10th January 1910"

Article VIII of the Sinchula Treaty of 1865 has been revised and the revised Article runs as follows:-

"The British Government undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Bhutanese Government agrees to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations. In the event of disputes with or causes of complaint against the Maharajas of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, such matters will be referred for arbitration to the British Government, which will settle them in such manner as justice may require, and insist upon the observance of its decision by the maharajas named"

Done in quadruplicate at Punaka, Bhutan, this eight day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ten, corresponding with the Bhutia date, the 27th day of the 11th month of the Earth-Bird (Sa-ja) year.