

## EPILOGUE

From 1889 to 1914 the Sikkim Political Agency played a significant role in the formulation of the Government of India's policy in the eastern Himalaya. During those years the distinct features of frontier management took shape and were to outlive, for all their imperfections, British rule in India itself by several years. The driving force behind the Agency was its two successive Political Agents or Political Officers as they were styled, John Claude White and Charles Bell who, despite great odds, were able to get across to the Viceroys of the day and the Government of India, their ideas on the course to be followed in Tibet and the Himalaya frontier. These wide functions which they came to exercise in the first decade of the twentieth century was, however, not envisaged in 1899. The Foreign Department of the Government of India at least considered the creation of the Agency as a temporary expedient, the Political Officer to be withdrawn after the Chogyal returned from his self-exile in Tibetan territory and resumed the administration of his kingdom. The origins of the Agency thus can be said to lie not so much in the imperial concerns of the Government of India as in the North-West Frontier, but in the more immediate and practical need to establish control over the State whose internal problems was impeding trade.

The treaties of 1817 and 1861 had given a measure of control over Sikkim's internal and external matters and, by the terms of the latter treaty, the British obtained a defined right to trade through it with Tibet. Trade did not flourish. The major hurdle to any closer relations between the British and Sikkim was rooted in the latter's peculiar polity. The Namgyal dynasty and the ruling aristocracy were Bhutia or Tibetan. And lurking behind every British endeavour to establish closer relations with Sikkim and develop trade was a hostile Tibetan faction. This was particularly evident in the mid 1850s when the pro-Tibetan faction under the Dewan Tokhang Donyer Namgyal was

virulently hostile to the British. Matters came to a head in the 1880s when the Raja, or Maharaja as he was since then referred to, Thothab Namgyal under the influence of his Tibetan wife openly flaunted the Tibetan connection, placed his kingdom in subordination to Tibet, defied British directives, and by his prolonged stay in Tibetan territory virtually abandoned his charge. It was against this background that the Political Officer was appointed to “guide and control” the Maharaja. The Political Agency thus created was little different from many of the Residencies in Indian Native States and the first Political Officer, John Claude White, functioned no differently. He took over the administration, made revenue settlement, established forest regulations and promoted immigration (of Nepalese) to develop their resources, particularly agriculture, in the State.

The system of Residencies and Political Agencies in India was by then well established. What had been said of their functions in 1825 still held true:

There are (wrote Henry Prinsep, the Persian Secretary to the Government of India who was in charge of Residencies then) three forms in which the administration is held by or for the native states now remaining in India. First, the independent, where the prince manages his own estate with his own agents; Secondly, the ministerial, where the British Government, deeming the prince incompetent from minority, imbecility, confirmed vicious habit, or other cause of which itself only is the judge, appoints a native minister, who governs in his name; and thirdly, the residential, where the British Political functionary in person, and by officers of his selection, manages the territory for the native Prince.<sup>1</sup>

It was the third that is relevant to the Sikkim situation. That White belonged to Bengal's Public Works Department and not to the Political Service of the Government of India, underscored the status of the Sikkim Political Agency. Technically it was the Deputy Commissioner of the Darjeeling district who was Political Officer for Sikkim, but the man on the spot wielded actual authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael H. Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India. Residents and the residency System 1764 – 1857*, Delhi 1991, P. 34

The loopholes in the treaties of 1817 were plugged by the Convention of 1890 which finally laid to rest the vexed question of Sikkim status not just as a protectorate of the British but in reality as an Indian Native State. It was the Trade Regulations of 1893, which followed and was a part of the Convention, that, gave the Agencies new responsibilities and ultimately changed its character. In enforcing the terms of the Regulations in respect of the Indo-Tibetan trade and of fixing boundaries, White's functions extended to dealing directly with the Tibetans. The Bengal Government understood this development, and in terms of the Regulations, suggested that White's designation should be changed from Assistant Political Officer to the proper Political Officer for Sikkim. And while conceding the importance of the office to the Government of India in the changed circumstances, Bengal was not prepared to see Sikkim removed from the control of the Local Government since its internal administration, the primary function of the Political Officer, was still and very rightfully its immediate responsibility.

Meanwhile the new functions of the Political Officer brought White into direct contact with the Tibetans and development of his ideas about British policy that was first to have their impact upon Bengal and then on the Government of India. One of them was his recommendations that the trade mart at Yatung established by the Regulation ought to be moved elsewhere, to Phari; the second was that firm action against the Tibetans was necessary if their obstruction to trade and the demarcation of boundaries were to be removed. It was now clear that the Chinese control over Tibet had declined and that it was Tibetan, or rather the monastic establishment, that was opposed to trade concessions to the British. By 1898 the removal of the trade mart to Phari became White's principal objective, emphasizing at the same time that "we should endeavour to negotiate direct with Lhasa." But so long as Elgin remained Viceroy there was hardly any possibility of the change.

It was Elgin's successor Lord Curzon who picked up White's proposals. From here Curzon was to develop his Tibetan policy. What irked the Viceroy most was the absence of any direct communication with the Dalai Lama at Lhasa. The failure to get

letters across to the Tibetan Pontiff soon acquired an ominous ring when it was discovered that there were contacts, and missions, passing between Tibet and Russia. Bengal's poor intelligence gathering, particularly when Curzon learnt about the Tibetan missions to Russia passing through British India and Indian ports about which the Local Government could provide no information, led to the Viceroy to consider the transfer of the Sikkim Political Agency to the Government of India. This was already brought out forcefully by White's stand in, Captain E. LeMesurier in September 1899, when Curzon was already more than a year and a half in office. Owing to Bengal's lukewarm response the matter was deferred. Nonetheless the idea of moving the trade mart to Phari, of direct negotiations with Lhasa, the occupation of the Chumbi to force Tibetan acquiescence, all White's suggestions at one time or the other, and finally a mission to Tibet, recommended by Darjeeling's Chaplain, the Reverend Graham Sandberg, formed the foundation of Curzon's policy. The expulsion of the Tibetans from Giaogong by White in 1902 marked the beginning of the execution of that policy.

Unfortunately for White, the Younghusband Mission that followed undermined his reputation as a frontier officer. This was largely due to Colonel Francis Younghusband's unfavourable impression of him, an impression that seems to have influenced Curzon. His role in the formulation and execution of the Viceroy's Tibetan policy was quickly forgotten. He left office in 1908, but not before drawing attention to the vulnerability of Bhutan to Chinese control and paving the way for the revision of the Treaty of 1865. The only significant outcome of the Tibet episode so far as it involved the Sikkim Political Agency, was its removal from the hands of the Local Government and placing it under the Foreign Department from April 1906. The Political Officer concurrently became the Government of India's adviser for Tibet affairs. With this the Agency acquired, in addition, the character and functions of a frontier political agency – the watch dog of imperial interests on a strategic Tibet border. The Maharaja had returned to his post and was given full charge of the administration, the Political Officer becoming only a guide to him.

Charles Bell took up the threads of the Bhutan question where Claude White had left them. By now the impact of the self denying policy of the Home Government in Tibet was in full view: China was able to turn her shadowy suzerainty over the Dalai Lama's country into a sovereignty. The Dalai Lama fled Lhasa, Tibetan appeals to India for assistance was turned down at the direction of London. Worse still China began to make claims upon Bhutan itself. At Bell's advice the old treaty with Bhutan was revised to place her foreign relations under the control of the Government of India.

Bell was an ardent advocate of an active policy towards Tibet. His idea was to create a strong, friendly Tibet to act as a buffer against the Chinese, and the Russian, in India's northern borderlands, much in the way Afghanistan was a buffer in the North-West in the late nineteenth century. The failure to obtain this in the face of the opposition of Home and Indian Governments he fell back upon the southern Himalaya. The revised Treaty turned Bhutan into a buffer state. An indispensable ingredient of this policy was the strict non-interference in that country's internal affairs. When reports of Chinese encroachments in the tribal areas north and north-east of Assam during 1910 – 11 began to pour in Bell suggested the same policy towards this region. The October Revolution in China in 1911 and the removal of the Chinese authority in Tibet provided an opportunity to carry out the policy. The creation of an autonomous Outer Tibet fringed on the Chinese side by Inner Tibet, achieved by Sir Henry McMahon and Bell at the Simla conference during 1913 – 14, must, therefore, be interpreted in this light. Equally, the definition and delineating of the northern borders of what came to be called the North-East Frontier, and the administrative contrivance called Loose Political Control conformed to Bell's ideas of a buffer. Even the administrative set up, the grouping of the tribal area and the appointment of two Political Officers followed the recommendations made by Bell in August and September 1910.

The first twenty five years of the Sikkim Political Agency under review thus shows its importance to the future of the Himalayan States and the North-East Frontier. Much depended upon the abilities of the Political Officers: both White and Bell were

capable men. That later Political Officers like Sir Basil Gould, were unable to impress upon the Government of Assam and the Government of India on the importance of extending British administration to the McMahon Line areas shows the extent to which successful frontier policy depended on individuals. In the event it was under independent India that the old buffer policy was given up and administration of the North-East Frontier made good.

