

# **Routing the Commodities of the Empire through Sikkim (1817-1906)**

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# Routing the Commodities of the Empire through Sikkim (1817-1906)<sup>1</sup>

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They sometimes believe, justly perhaps, that commerce follows the flag, and sometimes the flag follows the commerce; therefore they [Tibetans] think that politics has something to do with trade.<sup>2</sup>

I begin this paper by juxtaposing Richard Temple's comment made in the late 1880s with a question-reply emerging from Tibet:

Why do the British insist on establishing trade-marts? Their goods are coming in from India right up to Lhasa. Whether they have their marts or not things come all the same. The British were merely bent on over-reaching us.<sup>3</sup>

This reply, given to the Maharaja of Sikkim during discussions over the Younghusband mission of 1904, was by none other than the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself, and he was not being alarmist. McKay's comment that the term 'Trade Agent' was a convenient fiction owing to the difficult political circumstances encapsulates this candidly:

Since, none of these appointed Trade Agents had a background in commerce or knew much about customs and trade-levies. They were disinterested in promoting trade and documenting trade-figures and submitting these in their reports.<sup>4</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trade and politics were not inseparable and trading privileges between nations were negotiated by both subtle political diplomacy and aggressive military campaigns. Trading in commodities routed and routed the British Empire, and commercial control over production and exchange of commodities facilitated political expansion globally. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Frederik Engels wrote:

[T]he cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it [British capitalism] batters down all Chinese walls, with which it faces the barbarians intense obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate...<sup>5</sup>

In an era when we constantly refer to borderless worlds and global villages, it is pertinent to trace the genealogy of transnational capitalism and the forces of globalisation to the complex exchange of commodities and services and multilateral connections established between places, and the technological improvements in communication and transportation links.<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork and archival research for this paper was conducted during 2000-4 and funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission and the Beit Fund for Commonwealth History, Oxford; and subsequent fieldwork in 2006-7 on the Nathu-la route has been self-funded. This paper improved with comments received from other participants of the 'Commodities of Empire' workshop (London, July 2007).

<sup>2</sup> R. Temple, *Travels in Nepal and Sikkim*, Kathmandu: Bibliotheca Himalayica, 1977, p.117.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in A. McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj: the frontier cadre*, London: Curzon, 1997, p.20; and A. K. J. Singh, *Himalayan Triangle: a historical survey of British India's relations with Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan, 1765-1950*, London: British Library, 1988, p.249.

<sup>4</sup> McKay (1997), pp.30-1.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx & Frederik Engels, 'The Communist Manifesto', in J. Timmons Roberts & Amy Hite (eds), *From Modernization to Globalization: Perspectives on Development and Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000 [1848], p.30.

<sup>6</sup> M. B. Steger, *Globalisation: a very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.32-3.

is evident in spread of British capitalism and imperial control of the Himalayan borderland of Sikkim and the rise of British Darjeeling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Marx and Engels wrote in 1848:

[T]he need of a constantly expanding market for its product chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish [connections] everywhere.<sup>7</sup>

While admitting that the new forces of industrial capitalism required a constantly expanded market, Marx was unable to resolve the problem of capitalist accumulation.<sup>8</sup> Critiquing Marx, Rosa Luxemburg forcefully argued in *The Accumulation of Capital* that capitalist accumulation required the expansion of capitalism into non-capitalist areas through imperialism.<sup>9</sup> The colonisation of pre-capitalist and non-capitalist economies was essential for capitalist accumulation and sustaining capitalism. Luxemburg's inflection that it is the invasion of pre-capitalist economies that keeps capitalism alive explains the East India Company's and later the British Raj's interest in developing Darjeeling and politically controlling Sikkim. Capitalism increases its profits not merely by acquiring new markets for commodities by various means, trading in the commodities of the new territories and investing its surplus in development of new territories, but also by the acquisition of its human and natural resources through imperialism.<sup>10</sup> Political control of Sikkim facilitated capital accumulation, expansion of capitalism and funnelled the British imperial engine into the Highlands of Asia.

Geopolitically, Sikkim occupies a significant position with Bhutan in the east, Nepal in the west, the Indian state of West Bengal in the south and the Tibet Autonomous Region in the north. Landlocked Sikkim was never a producer and a great consumer of commodities, but occupies a strategic geopolitical position on the Indo-Tibetan frontier. It is located directly on the inland trade route between British India and Tibet and China. Conspicuously, European travellers' reports written during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide strong indications of the British obsession to open trade routes and build roads between India and Tibet via Sikkim and Darjeeling. From the standpoint of the British government, the potentiality of the Sikkim route was magnified and that of the Nepal route was minimised.<sup>11</sup> Diaries of naturalists such as Hooker,<sup>12</sup> travelogues and expeditions to Sikkim and Tibet,<sup>13</sup> the writings of numerous British officers and trade agents posted in the region,<sup>14</sup> and

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<sup>7</sup> Marx & Engels (2000 [1848]), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Marx & Engels (2000 [1848]); and Karl Marx, *Capital*, London: Penguin, 1981 [1867-94].

<sup>9</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951 [1913].

<sup>10</sup> Luxemburg (1951 [1913]), p.370.

<sup>11</sup> J. Sen, 'India's Trade with Central Asia via Nepal', *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 1 (1972), p.35.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals*, London: Ward, Lock & Bowden, 1891.

<sup>13</sup> Temple (1977); J. Easton, *An unfrequented highway through Sikkim and Tibet to Chumolaori*, London: Scholartis Press, 1928; S. W. Buchannan, 'A Recent Trip to Chumbi Valley, Tibet', *The Geographical Journal*, 53:6 (1919), pp.403-10; D. W. Freshfield, 'The Roads to Tibet', *The Geographical Journal*, 23:1 (1904), pp.79-91; C. R. Markham, 'Travels in Great Tibet and Trade between Tibet and Bengal', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 19:5 (1874-75), pp.327-47; C. H. D. Ryder, 'Exploration and Survey with the Tibet Frontier Commission and from Gyantse to Simla via Gartok', *The Geographical Journal*, 26:4 (1905), pp.369-91; J. T. Walker, 'Four Years' Journeying Through Great Tibet', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, 7:2 (1885), pp.65-92.

<sup>14</sup> W. F. O'Connor, 'Pari Jong to Gyantse', *The Geographical Journal*, 23:1 (1904), pp.89-91; D. Macdonald, *Touring in Sikkim and Tibet*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999; L. A. Waddell, *Among the Himalayas*, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1978; and J. C. White, *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-one years on the North-East Frontier, 1887-1908*, Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, 1971.

mountaineering expeditions to Mount Everest and other Himalayan mountains including Kanchenjunga,<sup>15</sup> were the main sources of information. These writings and reports furnished the imperial government with strategic information about routes and passages, travel conditions in different seasons, elite power structures and important personalities, and the local political conditions. Topographical and geographical surveys of Sikkim were conducted with the permission of the king only after 1861. Such information contributed critical inputs towards the imperial expansionist plans and strategies.<sup>16</sup>

A socio-historical analysis of international treaties and internal and external trade for the period 1817-1906, and the administration of trade routes, reveals the imperial concern for circulating the commodities of the Empire through the Jelep and the Nathu passes.<sup>17</sup> But some key questions are raised: what historic role did the Nathu-la,<sup>18</sup> the annexation of the Darjeeling Hills and the domination of the Sikkim Himalayas play in the expansion and consolidation of the British Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What were the main commodities exchanged on this trading route? What was the volume of trade in comparison to Nepal? How did the commodities of the empire provide an impetus and pretext for imperial control of the Eastern Himalayas? This paper seeks to provide answers to these questions. The first section analyses the importance of Sikkim for furthering Anglo-Tibetan trade and imperial expansion into Tibet in the eighteenth century. The second section traces the historical roots of imperial expansion and control of Sikkim's internal and external affairs after the Treaty of Titalia (1817), and discusses the formal establishment of the Empire with the annexation of Darjeeling from Sikkim in 1835. The appointment of J. C. White was a turning point as he effectively reduced Thutob Namgyal into a puppet. The various missions and conventions from 1885 onwards until the Younghusband Mission of 1904 are critically analysed in the third section. I discuss how these conventions subverted Sikkim's independence, facilitated trans-border trade and legitimised British Indian claims over Sikkim. The final section highlights the changes in Sikkim's polity and its incorporation into the British Indian Empire in 1906.

### **Locating Sikkim in the Imperial expansionist policy**

British imperial interests in the Himalayan region and particularly in the Eastern Himalayas were motivated by both mercantile interests with the numerous Himalayan passes of Western Tibet (Ladakh),<sup>19</sup> Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan presenting possibilities for using Tibet as the backdoor to China. Trade across the Himalayas and trade between China and Tibet was an expression of both politics and economics, and the Tibetan monasteries were actively involved in this.<sup>20</sup> Trade along these passes was both a commercial activity for numerous Indo-Tibetan groups, such as the Sherpa, Thakali and the Tromwo;<sup>21</sup> and a livelihood

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<sup>15</sup> Smythe, *The Kanchenjunga Adventures*, Varanasi, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> See Walker (1885); McKay (1997), pp.7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet: 1766-1910*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. *La* is a Tibetan word meaning a mountain pass. Jelep-la, meaning 'the lovely low pass' in the Tibetan language, is an all-season Himalayan pass, unlike the Nathu-la (or the Gnatui), which means the 'pass of the listening ear'.

<sup>18</sup> Located at 14,400 feet on the trade route from Sikkim and Chumbi valley towards Phari.

<sup>19</sup> The Ladakh route was favoured since both the king of Kashmir and the Tibet government did not levy any duty on the Leh-Lhasa route (B. G. Gill, 'India's Trade with Tibet', *The Tibet Journal*, 25:4 (2000), p.79).

<sup>20</sup> Lamb (1986), p.3; W. van Spengen, *Tibetan Border Worlds*, London: Kegan Paul, 2000, pp.137-38.

<sup>21</sup> Van Spengen (2000), p.144; Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Sherpas of Nepal: the Buddhist Highlanders*; and *Himalayan Traders: Life in Highland Nepal*, London: John Murray, 1975; Buchannan (1919); Freshfield (1904).

necessity with Tibet being the chief source of salt in the region. Tibet, famed as a land of abundant wealth, presented itself as an exporter of gold dust, borax, musk, wool, salt and sheep (meat) to India, and represented a potential market for importing British manufactured textiles, Indian tea, tobacco, grain and mechanistic tools. The Tibetans suspected that the British wanted to convert them into Christianity and desired gold.<sup>22</sup> The gold mines of Tibet were perceived to be the richest in the world, which alone made them commercially important to the British and reason enough to aggressively promote trade.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1770s, after the Gurkha conquest of Kathmandu, trade between British India, Tibet and China nearly ceased, and the need for finding an alternate route became urgent and paramount for capitalist expansion.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, all foreign trade in Tibet and with Tibet was subject to the strictest regulations in the eighteenth century, with the Tibetan and Chinese governments not permitting any geographical expeditions and trading representatives to reside in Tibet. Policymakers realised that improvements in terms of trade would enable the Company to sell British manufactured goods in China and Tibet, which would reduce the quantity of bullion required to finance tea imports into Britain.<sup>25</sup> Risley lucidly commented:

Tibet offers a great market for certain articles of English manufacture...and [it was believed that Tibet can] contribute to the currency problem by flooding the world with supplies of gold.<sup>26</sup>

Both Tibet and China actively resisted British efforts to foster Indo-Tibetan trade. Early attempts to open a trade route to Tibet can be traced back to Governor-General Warren Hastings's decision to send George Bogle (the young secretary to the Board of Revenue) to Tibet in 1774 to study the markets and resources of Tibet.<sup>27</sup> On his return from Tashilhunpo in 1775, Bogle recommended that by befriending the Tashi Lama:

the Company would derive much more than the profits of a flourishing trade across the Himalayas. Tibet was the back door to China and might well prove to be the way round the obstructions imposed upon British trade and diplomacy at Canton."<sup>28</sup>

In 1783, Warren Hastings sent Captain Samuel Turner on a mission to Tibet, but he failed to secure any trade concessions.<sup>29</sup> To initiate trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet from Bengal through Bhutan, Bogle concluded a treaty with the king of Bhutan in 1775.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless imperial commercial interests were repeatedly thwarted until they succeeded in controlling Sikkim.

Apart from the famed Nathu-la (Gnatui) and the Jelep-la passes, there exist more than twelve other passes (such as Cho-la, Lachen and Lachung) that connect Sikkim with Tibet, and through whom small-scale trade was regularly conducted. The kinship links between the Sikkimese royal family and nobility and Tibet's noble families, the religious affiliations

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<sup>22</sup> C. Bell, *Tibet: Past and Present*, London: Clarendon Press, 1924, p.60.

<sup>23</sup> Waddell (1978), p.vi.

<sup>24</sup> Lamb (1986), pp.3-6.

<sup>25</sup> Lamb (1986), p.10.

<sup>26</sup> H. H. Risley, *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1928, p.xii.

<sup>27</sup> Lamb (1986), p.7; and Markham (1874-75), p.332.

<sup>28</sup> Lamb (1986), p.9.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the British, the Gorkhas invaded Tibet in 1855 and secured important trade concessions including the right to establish an agency at Lhasa, free trade and extra-territorial rights.

<sup>30</sup> A. Deb, 'George Bogle's Treaty with Bhutan', *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 8:1 (1971), pp.5-9.

between Sikkim and Tibet's monasteries and a common Buddhist heritage,<sup>31</sup> presented a perfect corridor for facilitating trade between Bengal and Tibet. Sikkim's history of antagonistic relations with the neighbouring kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan who were politically and economically stronger made it vulnerable and prey to imperial greed. Himalayan Sikkim critically mediated in the routing of British trade interests in India, Tibet and China between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### **Routing the Empire through Sikkim and the importance of Darjeeling**

P. J. Marshall distinguishes between colonial expansion – including migration, commerce and diffusion of British culture – from 'empire' – defined as imperial rule and extension of political authority over territory and people.<sup>32</sup> He admits that many would dispute this distinction, and in many cases expansion preceded the empire.<sup>33</sup> In Sikkim, expansion and empire were interdependent processes and mutually reinforcing. The East India Company functioned not merely as a commercial body but a potential political power in India. Mercantilism and the desire to maximise revenue through trade via Sikkim surfaces prominently in all the international treaties and conventions signed between representatives of the British East India Company and later the British Raj, and the Namgyal dynasty that (formally) ruled Sikkim. The British [East India Company] entered the region as peacemakers between Sikkim and Nepal and negotiated the Treaty of Titalia (1817) demarcating Sikkim's border with Nepal. However, these trade interests were transformed gradually into imperial dominion over independent Sikkim, the annexation of the Darjeeling Hills and the curtailment of Sikkim's international relations and restrictions on its commercial and political relations with Tibet. Ostensibly to promote Anglo-Tibetan trade and commercial relations, the military campaign under Colonel Younghusband in 1904 proved to be the turning point, with Sikkim playing a key role in it.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Titalia, Sikkim "placed its foreign relations under a measure of company rule" in return for protection from the Gorkhas. Henceforth, the company acquired the right to trade on the Tibetan frontier using the inland route through Sikkim. The British were able to exploit these trade concessions only after 1861 since the Nepal route was an established one. Article 8 of this Treaty explicitly instructs the Sikkim king:

that he will afford protection to the merchants and trader's from the Company's province's and he engages and that no duties shall be levied on the transit of merchandise beyond the established custom at the several golas or marts.<sup>34</sup>

Politically this treaty transformed Sikkim into becoming a node for channelling Anglo-Chinese diplomacy.<sup>35</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century the Indian rupee became an acceptable currency in the Himalayas and emerged as the favoured medium for large commercial transactions.<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Mountainous Himalayan Sikkim abundant in natural resources is popularly famous in sacred Buddhist texts as the hidden valley of fruits where spiritual excellence is attainable without much effort.

<sup>32</sup> P. J. Marshall, *The Making and the Unmaking of the Empire*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.4.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall (2005), p.13.

<sup>34</sup> S. K. Sharma & U. Sharma, *Documents on Sikkim and Bhutan*, Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1998, p.2.

<sup>35</sup> Singh (1988), pp.175-6.

Darjeeling Hills played a critical role in furthering British interests in this part of the Himalayas. The Lepcha rebellion, following the murder of the Lepcha Prime Minister Bholod in 1826, led to civil unrest in Sikkim. Continual raids by disgruntled Lepcha based in neighbouring districts of Nepal provided the British with the perfect pretext to interfere in the internal matters of Sikkim in 1828 and force the king into acquiescence.<sup>37</sup> The hill tract of Darjeeling was discovered in 1827-28 by Captain Lloyd and J. W. Grant during their visit to settle a boundary dispute between Sikkim and Nepal. They advised Lord William Bentick to acquire it as a military outpost and as a sanatorium, while recognising its position as a military outpost and trading node. Control over this region enabled the British to drastically alter the demographic profile of the Eastern Himalayas.

The so-called grant of Darjeeling by the king of Sikkim to the British has been disputed and hotly debated in political and academic arenas. According to the deed given in the *Bengal District Gazetteers*:

the Governor-General having expressed his desire for the possession of the Hill of Darjeeling, on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling the servants of the Government, suffering from sickness, to avail of its advantages, I, the Sikkimputte Rajah, out of friendship to the said Governor-General, hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Company, i.e., all the land south of the Great Rungeet river, east of the Balasur Kahail, and Little Rungeet rivers and west of the Rungno and Mahanudhi rivers.<sup>38</sup>

It is popularly believed that the grant dated 1 February 1835 was purportedly signed between the king of Sikkim and Campbell, who in 1839 became the Superintendent of Darjeeling and in-charge of International Relations with Sikkim for nearly twenty-two years. Dating the Darjeeling grant to 1 February is difficult since the actual deed did not carry any date.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Captain Lloyd did not meet the Sikkimese king until 23 February 1835. The official history of Sikkim written by the king and queen contradicts and casts doubt on whether Darjeeling was given willingly in lieu of a fixed rent.<sup>40</sup> This is confirmed by an analysis of the original grant signed by Captain Lloyd, which is written in the Lepcha language.<sup>41</sup> Recent writings propose that the Darjeeling Hills were not gifted or rented out, but annexed by the British in 1835 and included in the Calcutta Presidency. Wangyal argues that Captain Lloyd deceived the Sikkim king into thinking that his three demands including the accession of Dabgong area of Nepal would be fulfilled. The king waited in vain for an equivalent tract of land being given to him while the Company acquired the Darjeeling hills, falling in the middle of the kingdom of Sikkim. The king vociferously protested against the Company's assumption of political rights over territory rightfully belonging to him.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> N. G. Rhodes, 'The Development of Currency in Tibet', in M. Aris & K. Aung San Suu Kyi (eds), *Tibetan studies in honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies*, Oxford & Westminster: Aris & Phillips, 1979, p.263.

<sup>37</sup> R. K. Sprigg, '1826: The end of an era in the Social and Political History of Sikkim', *Bulletin of Tibetology*, Seminar volume (1995).

<sup>38</sup> Cited in R. K. Sprigg, *Shedding Some Light on the History, Language and Literature of the Lepchas*, Kalimpong: Lepcha Tribal Association, 2005, p.33.

<sup>39</sup> S. B. Wangyal, *Sikkim and Darjeeling: Division and Deception*, Phuentsholing, Bhutan, 2002, pp.59-60.

<sup>40</sup> Yeshey Dolma & Thutob Namgyal, *History of Sikkim*, Gangtok, Sikkim: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Library, 1908, p.56.

<sup>41</sup> Sprigg, 'The Lepcha text of the deed of grant of Darjeeling', *Achuley*, 2 (1998), pp.4-10.

<sup>42</sup> Wangyal (2002), p.86.

British Darjeeling rapidly developed into a critical commercial node of British imperialism by offering immense opportunities for commodity exchange and free trade to merchants. Originally inhabited by a hundred Lepchas in 1835, Darjeeling was inhabited by nearly 10,000 people in 1849. Under Dr. Campbell's administration, this quiet and relatively unknown hill-tract became the hub of commercial activity and a frontier town:

In 1839 the first Darjeeling hotel was built; three years later the settlement was linked to the plains by a military road. In 1848, a Convalescent Depot for British troops was established there. In 1850 the town became a municipality.

At about this date the cultivation tea also began.<sup>43</sup> All these immediately alarmed the king who realised that a sovereign state had developed in his territory.<sup>44</sup> The British policy of encouraging the settlement of immigrant labourers from neighbouring Nepal pushed the indigenous Lepchas numbering over a hundred into hilly pockets, thereby transforming Darjeeling into what has today become a Gorkhaland.<sup>45</sup> Both Tibet and Bhutan reprimanded and accused Sikkim of selling the tract of Darjeeling to the Company. Tibet restricted Sikkim's access to its traditional grazing rights on the Tibetan frontier. Tsugphud Namgyal (the Sikkimese King) forbade his subjects from visiting the trade marts and made it difficult for others to use the Sikkim route.<sup>46</sup>

Relations between the king of Sikkim and Dr. Campbell deteriorated in the late 1840s after the British subjects faced numerous obstructions in trading through Sikkim and Tibetan merchants faced difficulties in visiting Darjeeling. Consequently, the king's compensation for the loss of Darjeeling was increased to Rs 6,000 annually. In 1848, Botanist Joseph Hooker (President of the Royal Society) arrived in Darjeeling and after initial refusal was allowed to visit Sikkim on the insistence of Dr. Campbell. This expedition was immortalised in Hooker's travelogue *The Himalayan Journals* (1891), which documents not merely the flora and fauna of the region but a detailed narrative of his tour, the difficulties his team faced, and provides vital insight into the region and its people. The extensive botanical and topographical information recorded by Hooker was subsequently used by the British to make maps for their later military campaigns.

It was Dr. Campbell and Dr. Hooker's trespassing into Tibet from the Cho-la pass that precipitated their arrest on the frontier in 1849 by T. Namguey, the intelligent pro-Tibetan Sikkimese Prime Minister who was termed the *Pagla Dewan* in British records. A military expedition was despatched to release them, and the British ceased the king's allowance and annexed the Morung tract of Sikkim, which restricted Sikkim's access to the Indian plains to just through Darjeeling.<sup>47</sup> However, the critical political and commercial breakthrough came with the signing of the 1861 Treaty at Tumlong between Sir Ashley and Sidekyong Namgyal, Tsugphud Namgyal's successor. This treaty not only imposed an indemnity of Rs 7,000 for instigating the British into invading Sikkim but also permitted the British to intervene in the internal affairs of Sikkim. Under Article 8, the government of Sikkim was enjoined to abolish all restrictions on travellers and monopolies in trade between the British territories and Sikkim. Article 13 gave the British the right to construct a road through Sikkim. No duties would be imposed on British goods imported into Sikkim or exported by Sikkim into British territories, although the government of Sikkim was entitled to levy a customs tax (not

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<sup>43</sup> Lamb (1986), p.71.

<sup>44</sup> F. Pinn, *The Road to Destiny – Darjeeling Letters 1839*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Vibha Arora, 'Being Nepali in Sikkim', *Contemporary India*, 4:1-2 (2005), pp.127-48.

<sup>46</sup> Singh (1988), pp.180-4.

<sup>47</sup> Singh (1988), pp.187-8.

exceeding 5 percent of their value) on goods passing through Sikkim into Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Henceforth, it was lawful for any British subject to enter Sikkim for trade, travel, topographical or geological surveys, and any other purpose. The treaty unequivocally stated that the king of Sikkim would not object but extend his full cooperation to any road-making activity for encouraging trade through Sikkim.

The British never contemplated annexing Sikkim at this juncture, as they did not wish to be embroiled in any long-drawn expensive wars in the region. Tibet was not actively interfering in the internal affairs of Sikkim nor was Sikkim formally acknowledging Tibetan suzerainty. Europeans travelling to Sikkim were cordially received and freer intercourse with Darjeeling brought about the extinction of slavery in Sikkim; and many British subjects acquired landed property within Sikkim.<sup>48</sup> Indo-Tibetan trade continued to preoccupy the British who wanted to sell Darjeeling tea and other manufactured goods to Tibet. In 1869, after his return from Tibet, T. T. Cooper (who described himself as a pioneer of commerce) read a memorandum to the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce wherein he publicised:

Tibet consumes annually 6,000,000 lb of Chinese brick-tea mainly produced in Szechuan province. Could this be replaced by tea of India, and here there would be a market of great value? This idea, that Indian tea could find a ready sale beyond the Himalayas, was an attractive one.<sup>49</sup>

The difficulties in finding that niche were not anticipated. The British envisioned that importing Indian tea to Tibet could prove beneficial and supply them with gold. Many constituencies, including Edgar, Waddell and White, impressed on the Company that the Sikkim route via Chumbi Valley was the shortest and the most direct road between British territory and Tibet.

The Sikkim route was doubly beneficial since it connected the tea-growing districts of Darjeeling and the Bhutan Duars to the profitable markets of Lhasa and Tibet. This prompted the British in 1873 to depute J. W. Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner at Darjeeling, to explore the possibility and desirability of making a road or roads through Sikkim and the best routes to be taken. His account documents the subsistence trade and describes the geography of the region in great detail, along with the persistent refusal of the Tibetans in letting him cross the Sikkim border.<sup>50</sup> At Jelep-la, Edgar noted that “while the majority of our subjects are not allowed to enter Tibet for the purpose of trade, crowds of Thibetans are constantly pouring into our bazaars”.<sup>51</sup> He wrote:

[T]here was scarce a day during my stay in East Sikkim when I did not meet people either coming from, or on their way to Darjeeling with goods, the value of which at first sight seemed disproportioned to the labour that had been undergone to take them to the market; but I have no doubt that the traffic pays them.<sup>52</sup>

In his report, he acknowledged that he had not been able to collect any reliable statistics regarding trade of Tibet with China, but noted that it was much lower than expected

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<sup>48</sup> Risley (1928), p.v.

<sup>49</sup> Lamb (1986), p.97.

<sup>50</sup> J. W. Edgar, *Report on a Visit to Sikkim and the Thibetan Frontier: in October, November and December 1873*, Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishers, 2005, p.13.

<sup>51</sup> Edgar (2005), p.18.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar (2005), p.32.

due to the difficulties of road and the political insecurity constantly faced by the merchants.<sup>53</sup> He observed that there was a great demand for broadcloth in Tibet. The chief articles imported into Tibet from Bhutan and Darjeeling were rice, sugar, dried fruits, tobacco, stic-lac, indigo, sandalwood, ivory, peacock feathers, rhinoceros-horns and different varieties of cloth.<sup>54</sup> In return Tibet exported tea, salt, blankets, silk-piece goods, pies, mules, yaks tails, musk, turquoise, coral and gold. Chinese brick-tea, despite being inferior in quality to the Darjeeling variety, was being consumed by the natives of Darjeeling. He opined that the construction of a road would encourage export of wool, ghee (clarified butter) and sheep meat into India.

Edgar surveyed many passes including the Gnatui pass (now known as Nathula) during this visit, where he found Tibetan traders using it to visit Darjeeling.<sup>55</sup> Alerted about the advantages of establishing a mart at Guntuck (Gangtok), and the construction of the royal residence there, he assessed its suitability along with the possibility of using the Gnatui pass. However, he recommended the establishment of a trade mart at Gnatong near the Jelep-la, and the construction of a road linking the region with bridges over the river Teesta.<sup>56</sup> Transportation linkages between Calcutta and Darjeeling, Siliguri and Gangtok, Darjeeling and Sikkim acquired a new urgency to make trade profitable.

Kalimpong was the largest entrepot of the Indo-Tibetan trade, and was annexed from Bhutan in 1865 and included in British Sikkim or Darjeeling. The route from Kalimpong to Lhasa passes through the Jelep-la.<sup>57</sup> While plans were being formulated to further commercial opportunities afforded by the Sikkim route, concurrently the British undermined Sikkim internally on the administrative, social and political fronts:

[The] mass settlement of Nepalese and the deprivation of the traditional lands held by the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the Tsongs (Limbu) proved to be the most effective method of destabilizing the king's authority.<sup>58</sup>

In 1875, a major dispute occurred between Sikkim's state and nobility. These nobles had settled Nepali persons and leased rights to collect revenue to a Newar in Namchi, South Sikkim.<sup>59</sup> Other Sikkimese nobles were furious and in 1876 they referred this dispute to Sir Eden Ashley who intervened sympathetically on their behalf. For his part, the seventh *Chos-rgyal* of Sikkim, Tsugphud Namgyal instructed his successors that "not a single person belonging to either state of Nepal and Bhutan will be allowed to settle down in Sikkim." A circular prohibiting the settlement of any Nepali person in Sikkim was issued in 1871.<sup>60</sup> In the introduction to the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, Risley openly admitted the objective of the imperial policy:

...our position will surely be strengthened by the change which is insensibly but steadily taking place in the composition of the population of Sikkim...The influx of these hereditary enemies [Nepali] of Tibet is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence...in Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will surely cast out

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<sup>53</sup> Edgar (2005), p.45.

<sup>54</sup> Edgar (2005), pp.48-9.

<sup>55</sup> Edgar (2005), pp.31-3.

<sup>56</sup> Edgar (2005), pp.78-9.

<sup>57</sup> Bell (1924), p.93.

<sup>58</sup> Singh (1988), p.224.

<sup>59</sup> Dolma & Namgyal (1908), p.66.

<sup>60</sup> Dolma & Namgyal (1908), pp.65-6.

Buddhism, and the praying wheel will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman.<sup>61</sup>

In 1889, the unpopular appointment of Jean Claude White as the first Political Officer epitomised Sikkim's transformation into a British protectorate during the reign of the Sikkimese king, Thutob Namgyal. White functioned as the *de facto* ruler of Sikkim. During his tenure (1889-1908) he followed a conscious policy of settling Nepali immigrants into Sikkim in order to increase revenue and economically develop this region. These immigrant Nepali were perceived to be the most loyal supporters of British interests in the region, who would counter the pro-Tibetan leanings of the Lepcha and the Bhutia groups in Sikkim.

Infrastructural development and capital works were integral components of capitalist expansion into the colonies in order to maximise resource extraction and accumulation by the investment of the surplus generated from the colony itself.<sup>62</sup> It is not surprising that White channelled a major proportion of Sikkim's revenue-earnings into road building, construction of bridges and other infrastructure necessary for transforming it into profitable trade route between Bengal and Tibet.<sup>63</sup> By 1879, a cart road to the Jelep-la and thereupon to the Chumbi valley was completed, bringing Darjeeling close to the Tibetan border. By 1881, Darjeeling was connected by a narrow gauge rail with Siliguri. It took less than a week to reach the Tibetan border from Calcutta.<sup>64</sup> Improvements in roads and transportation were critical for reducing costs.

An analysis of trade-reports reveals the imperative underlying the imperial political missions to Tibet including the Younghusband Mission of 1904. The opening paragraph of the *Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan for the year 1880-81* optimistically opined that henceforth "frontier trade would be recorded separately and not as part of the internal trade of Bengal". The second paragraph summarised that the registered imports from Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim exceeded exports by Rs 4,836,509 in 1880-81, and the bulk of this import was through Nepal.<sup>65</sup> During this period, trade between Bengal with Sikkim and Tibet was registered at Pheydong and Runjeet in the Darjeeling district with imports standing at Rs 167,960 and exports being Rs 80,898. The principal items being imported from Sikkim were horses, cattle, food grains, vegetables, salt and other manufactured articles such as planks; while piece-goods (European) and tobacco were the main items that were exported by Bengal into Sikkim.<sup>66</sup> The Deputy Commissioner, in one of his monthly reports, commented in April 1881 that "trade with Tibet continues to be at a standstill. I have been informed that many traders have returned from Phari in despair"; while monthly reports for later months state that there was no improvement and "the Tibet trade, such as it is, is still confined to Chumbi Valley inhabitants".<sup>67</sup> These obstructions paved the way for sending the Macaulay Mission in 1885.

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<sup>61</sup> Risley (1928), p.xxi.

<sup>62</sup> Luxemburg (1951 [1913]), p.352.

<sup>63</sup> White (1971), pp.28-9.

<sup>64</sup> Lamb (1986), p.121; and Singh (1988), p.203.

<sup>65</sup> India Institute Library Archives, Bodelian Library (Oxford), *Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan* (ETB), 1881, p.1. England.

<sup>66</sup> The list of items is much longer for trade between Bengal and Nepal.

<sup>67</sup> *ETB*, 1881, p.11.

## Missions and Conventions of British India, Sikkim and Tibet 1890--1904

In 1884, Colman Macaulay, the Financial Secretary of Bengal, convinced and obtained support from Lord Randolph Churchill, the Secretary of State, to undertake a mission to Tibet. Macaulay was briefed to explore and discuss with the king of Sikkim the possibility of opening the trade route to Tsang in Tibet via the Lachen valley in North Sikkim. The British believed that Indian tea and British textiles would find a ready market in Tibet, which could supply them with gold dust, musk and wool. Macaulay assured the Sikkimese king that all expenses for road and bridge construction would be borne by the British while Sikkim would only need to supply labour. The Tibetan authorities perceived the 1885 Macaulay mission (which included Sarat Chandra Das) to be a first step towards a British invasion of Tibet and thwarted all their efforts. The persistence of the British made the Tibetans suspicious and in 1886 provoked Tibet into reclaiming Jelep-la from Sikkim in order to assert their overlordship over Sikkim. The Tibetans imperiously wrote to the Sikkimese king commanding him to defend his own territory and stop his officials from acting as guides for the British and coolies in opening roads from Sikkim into Tibet. Furious at the Sikkimese king in allowing the British to make roads and bridges up to Jelep-la, they decided to occupy Rhenock and Jelep-la asserting that it constituted the Sikkim-Tibet boundary.<sup>68</sup> The British countered Tibet with a military campaign and advanced up to Lingtu on the Tibetan frontier.

This alarmed the Chinese who wanted peace restored. In 1890, a convention was signed between the British and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet at Darjeeling on 17 March between Lord Lansdowne and the Chinese Amban, Sheng Tai. This treaty settled Sikkim's status as a British protectorate while Tibet was projected as part of the Chinese Empire. Article 1 of this document defined the boundaries of the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier as the watershed between the Teesta river system in Sikkim and the Tibetan Mochu and the rivers flowing northwards into Tibet. Article 2 of the 1890 Convention stated:

It is admitted that the British government, whose protectorate over the Sikkim state is hereby recognised, has direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of that state, and except through and with the permission of the British government, neither the ruler of the state nor any of its officers shall have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country.<sup>69</sup>

In 1886-87 trade was registered at 27 stations for Nepal, and three each for Sikkim and Bhutan. Increase in trade was registered for Nepal that continued to dominate the external trade of Bengal. The report documents the diversion of trade from Kalimpong to Gangtok, and from 1885 a blockade on the Tibetan frontier (at Lingtu).<sup>70</sup> The blockade did not obstruct any of the traders belonging to the great Lhasa monasteries from going to Calcutta while their trade was not being registered.<sup>71</sup> On the Sikkim trade registered at Pheydong, Runjit, Rhenok and Kalimpong,<sup>72</sup> the Deputy Commissioner notes that "a good deal of this goes to Tibet by

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<sup>68</sup> Dolma & Namgyal (1908), p.80.

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Sharma & Sharma (1998), p.56.

<sup>70</sup> *ETB*, 1887, pp.9-10.

<sup>71</sup> *ETB*, 1887, p.13.

<sup>72</sup> Kalimpong was included to avoid a double record of trade at the stations of Kalimpong and Rhenok.

other passes than the Jeylep, but cannot be distinguished in the returns of the local Sikkim trade".<sup>73</sup> The main imports registered (Rs 265,832) included silver, yak-tails musk, raw wool and manufactured wool, while the cotton-piece goods of European and Indian manufacture comprised the bulk of the exports to Sikkim and Tibet (Rs 336,097). The withdrawal of the blockade in Tibet led to an increased registration of trade in 1890-91. The maximum revenue-earners continued to be English cloth (cotton and wool) with indigo appearing in the list of exports to Sikkim and Tibet.<sup>74</sup>

After three years of discussions, in December 1893, the Regulations concerning Trade, Communications and Pasturage were appended to the 1890 Sikkim-Tibet Convention, which concluded that a trade mart would be established at Yatung in Tibet where British subjects would be allowed travel freely to trade and maintain accommodation and storage of goods. The Chinese did not agree to Phari being a trade mart. A list of goods was agreed while trade in arms, ammunition, military stores, salt, liquors and intoxicating drugs was prohibited. Tibet was permitted to import Indian tea at the same rate as the Chinese tea, although not for a period of five years after the enactment of this treaty.<sup>75</sup> The Tibetans were not a party to either of these treaties and did not sign them.<sup>76</sup> Since no steps were undertaken to involve them in any of the negotiations, the treaty became a liability and merely a paper convention. The Tibet question can be traced to this blunder of the imperial policy since the Sikkim-Tibet Convention and the Trade Regulations gave:

recognition to Chinese authority over a people whom the Chinese had not the power to control, and bound the British in any future crises along this frontier to deal with a government which was disliked and weak in Lhasa.<sup>77</sup>

Yatung was found to be an unsuitable location after a cess of 10 percent duty was levied at Phari in Tibet. Trading was curtailed with even the Tibetan traders being denied free access to Yatung. The Tromwo/Chumbiapa held a transport monopoly over carrying goods southwards from Yatung and controlled all trade between Kalimpong and Phari: "[t]hrough Chumbi valley as through the neck of a bottle, is poured half of the entire trade between India and Tibet".<sup>78</sup> White, who visited Yatung in 1894, gave a very unfavourable report and preferred the opening of the Lachen route. He wrote:

[T]he Chinese had built a wall across the valley about a one-third of the valley lower down, and posted sentries on the gate and no one was allowed to come to the 'Mart' to buy or sell any goods whatever.<sup>79</sup>

The Tibetans refused to accept the demarcated Sikkim-Tibetan frontier, destroyed the erected boundary pillars, and 'encroached' into Giaogong in Sikkim.<sup>80</sup> The Indian government argued that the objective of establishing a trade mart at Yatung was to improve trade, which had been done to an extent. The trade through Yatung continued to remain a small portion of India's

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<sup>73</sup> *ETB*, 1887, p.11.

<sup>74</sup> *ETB*, 1891, p.10.

<sup>75</sup> Singh (1988), p.223.

<sup>76</sup> Bell (1924), p.61.

<sup>77</sup> Lamb (1986), p.164.

<sup>78</sup> Bell (1924), p.78.

<sup>79</sup> White (1971), p.32.

<sup>80</sup> Lamb (1986), pp.168-70.

foreign trade due to Tibetan obstructiveness. Despite Tibetan government restrictions, “trade at Yatung increased because Tibetans are keen traders”.<sup>81</sup>

Personal enterprise and the conventions explained the increase in the volume of trade into British India by nearly 20 percent in 1897, as compared to 1894-95. The number of stations on which trade was being registered increased to 41 in 1897, with the bulk of these posts being for Nepal (34), with 4 for Sikkim,<sup>82</sup> and 3 for Bhutan. The value of imports from Nepal registered at Rs 14,449,393, from Sikkim and Tibet at Rs 1,345,087 and from Bhutan at Rs 119,713; while the exports from British India indicates a rise to Rs 12,174,517 for Nepal, Rs 729,096 for Sikkim and Rs 144,471 for Bhutan.<sup>83</sup> Paragraph 25 of this 1897 report recommended that trade with Tibet should be registered at Guntok and Yatung.<sup>84</sup> Timber, spices, fresh fruits and vegetables, gram and pulses, cattle, sheep and goats, hides of cattle, horses, ponies, and mules, rice, and some cloth comprised the bulk of the imports from Sikkim; while husked rice, cotton-piece goods, salt, provisions, cattle, tobacco, indigo, mineral oil, cotton yarn, sugar and iron were the main goods exported to Sikkim. British India continued to import wool, musk, yak-tails, mules and horses from Tibet and exported silver, indigo, cotton-piece goods of Indian and European manufacture, tobacco, wool, iron, brass, provisions, sugar and husked rice to Tibet.

The Commissioner of Rajshahi division was instructed to collect statistics at Yatung from 1 January 1898 and to establish a registration post at Guntok.<sup>85</sup> The total number of stations rose to 43 in 1898, with 34 posts for Nepal, 2 for Tibet, 4 for Sikkim and 3 for Bhutan; and the increased trade volume was attributed to accurate registration at the new stations.<sup>86</sup> Raw wool was cited as constituting nearly 63.6 per cent of the total imports with English cotton-piece goods forming the bulk of the exports.<sup>87</sup> By 1904, the trade had again declined considerably, with the Director-General of Statistics explaining it in the following words while hoping for an increase after the Younghusband mission:

[T]he obstacles to the expansion of trade of Tibet have hitherto been the difficulties and expenses of transport, the trading monopoly enjoyed by the lamas, which accounts for the exclusion of Indian tea, and their hostility to everything promoting the growth of commercial relations with India.<sup>88</sup>

The objective of the 1904 Younghusband mission was overtly to resolve the boundary question and discuss with the Tibetan authorities their non-observance of treaties and consequent injury to the trade between India and Tibet. The Russian involvement in Tibet and their free access to trade marts raised British suspicions and Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, deputed Francis Younghusband to go to Tibet with White and Captain O'Connor.<sup>89</sup> Curzon believed that British authority had to be ostensibly asserted on the frontier after the King of Sikkim's diplomatic interventions on their behalf to negotiate with Tibet failed. Colonel Younghusband was permitted to proceed as far as Kampa Dzong across the Sikkim-Tibet border. On 17 November 1903, *The Times* carried the report of the Younghusband

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<sup>81</sup> Bell (1924), p.61.

<sup>82</sup> Pedang, Ranjit, Laba and Singla in the Darjeeling district, which were kept open throughout the year (*ETB*, 1897, p.13).

<sup>83</sup> *ETB*, 1897, p.1.

<sup>84</sup> *ETB*, 1897, p.13. Guntok (Gangtok) became Sikkim's capital in 1894

<sup>85</sup> *ETB*, 1898.

<sup>86</sup> *ETB*, 1899, p.1

<sup>87</sup> *ETB*, 1899, p.7.

<sup>88</sup> *ETB*, 1904, p.2.

<sup>89</sup> Bell (1924), p.66.

Mission under the title 'Thibet to be invaded'. When the Tibetans refused to negotiate, the mission took an overtly aggressive stance towards Gyantse and transformed into a military expedition, ending in the British occupation of Lhasa. Despite fighting valiantly, Tibet lost heavily in the battle culminating in the flight of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to Urga in Mongolia.<sup>90</sup> The ostensible purpose was to negotiate an Anglo-Tibetan treaty, but the deep-seated motivation was to squarely check the growing Russian influence on the Tibetan government. This Convention comprising nine articles was signed on 7 September 1904 at Lhasa by Colonel Younghusband acting as the British representative, Lo-Sang Gyaltsen, the Gaden Ti-Rinpoche (Dalai Lama's regent) and representatives of the three monasteries Sera, Drepung and Gaden, and of the Ecclesiastical and lay officials on behalf of the Tibetan government. The war indemnity of Rs 7,500,000 payable in yearly instalments was much lower than the cost incurred by the British. In the absence of the Dalai Lama's signature and seal, it was adorned by his spiritual seal (which had no value on temporal documents such as political treaties) that he had left in haste while fleeing from Lhasa.<sup>91</sup>

In brief, the Convention ratified and recognised the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier as demarcated in the 1890 treaty and negotiated the further opening of two trade marts. The treaty began by highlighting:

Whereas doubts and difficulties have arisen as to the meaning and validity of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, and the Trade Regulations of 1893, and as to the liabilities of the Tibetan government under these agreements; and whereas recent occurrences have tended towards a disturbance of relations of friendship and good understanding.<sup>92</sup>

The 1904 Treaty enjoined the Tibetan government with the responsibility of keeping the roads clear of any obstructions and facilitating easy communication between the British, the Tibetan and the Chinese governments (see Appendix).

By including the representatives of the three powerful Tibetan monasteries, the British sought to overtly overrule any monastic opposition to the treaty. The Tibetan monasteries controlled a large volume of the tea trade and had vested interests in controlling and restricting Anglo-Tibetan trans-Himalayan trade. The British had wanted Phari, which served as the main Indo-Tibetan trading centre, although they were not able to negotiate this successfully. These marts were sited at Gyantse south-west of Lhasa, at Yatung in the Chumbi Valley across from Sikkim, and Gartok in western Tibet and a British representative was allowed to reside there.

The Younghusband Mission achieved the distinction of transforming Tibet into a piece on the imperial chessboard. Articles VI, IX and the separate article authorising the Gyantse trade agent to visit Lhasa caused considerable controversy in India, England, China and Russia such that the details of the convention were reported by *The Times* in September 1904. The British occupation of Chumbi Valley was perceived as tantamount to an annexation. The war indemnity was reduced to Rs Twenty-five lakhs (2,500,000) payable in three instalments; and the separate article about allowing the trade agent at Gyantse to visit Lhasa to settle commercial matters was renounced by Lord Amphill (acting as Viceroy in Lord Curzon's absence) despite strong protests voiced by Younghusband himself. It was

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<sup>90</sup> Singh (1988), pp.24-7.

<sup>91</sup> Lamb (1986), p.243.

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous, 'Convention between the Government of Great Britain and Tibet 1904', *American Journal of International Law*, 1:1 (1907).

argued that Article IX ignored Chinese claims, and constituted British designs to make Tibet its protectorate as had happened in the case of Sikkim. In the absence of Curzon, who was then on leave, the 1904 Treaty was regarded as a violation of Younghusband's original brief.<sup>93</sup> The 'hero' Younghusband was downsized since the British wanted to maintain Tibet as a buffer-zone, and left on the backseat. Younghusband himself tried to offset the negative publicity by writing an autobiographical account of this 1904 mission, and on the Central Asia and the Himalayas.<sup>94</sup>

### **Sikkim an Indian State**

In 1906, a Convention was signed between Great Britain and China wherein it was mutually agreed to continue the agreement concluded in the 1890 Convention and the Regulations of 1893, and the trade concessions extended to Great Britain in the 1904 Convention would be denied to any state other than China. The most controversial element was embedded in the framework of Article 1:

The Government of Great Britain engages not to annex Tibetan territory or to interfere in the administration of Tibet. The Government of China also undertakes not to permit any other foreign State to interfere with the territory or internal administration of Tibet.<sup>95</sup>

The Chinese did not lay claims to Sikkim at any point and recognised it to be part of British India. On 1 April 1906, political control over Sikkim was formally transferred to the Government of India by the Bengal government in recognition of the fact that the main trade route to Tibet passed through Sikkim. The Political Officer of Sikkim was entrusted with the administrative control over Sikkim, Bhutan, Chumbi and the trade agency at Gyantse. Captain O'Connor was appointed as the Trade Agent at Gyantse. To show appreciation of his role, the king and queen of Sikkim were invited to the Calcutta Durbar in 1905 on the occasion of the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Here Thutob Namgyal asked of His Majesty that he be given greater control over Sikkim's internal administration and permission to visit Chumbi Valley, but both his requests were turned down by the Government of India.<sup>96</sup> Despite opposition from Thutob Namgyal, White insisted on installing Sidekyong Namgyal, a recognised reincarnate monk, as his successor.

In 1908, Sir Charles succeeded White as the second Political Officer of Sikkim. In 1906, Sidekyong Namgyal, the heir apparent after gaining permission from the British, enrolled at Pembroke College at Oxford University. On his return from England, Sidekyong Tulku tried to modernise the feudal land-revenue system, but faced stiff opposition from the nobility. In 1914, he succeeded Thutob Namgyal as the Chogyal, but Sidekyong Tulku Namgyal reigned for barely eight months and was succeeded by his younger brother, Sir Tashi Namgyal who ruled Sikkim until 1963. As a Political Officer of Sikkim between 1908 to 1921 and 1919 to 1921, Sir Charles did not try to superimpose himself on the Sikkimese king. He made sincere efforts to offset the tensions caused by Nepali immigration to Sikkim and check Marwari influence and local indebtedness towards them by restricting them to the

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<sup>93</sup> Lamb (1986), pp.244-7 & 255.

<sup>94</sup> F. E. Younghusband, *India and Tibet*, London: John Murray, 1910a; and *Our Position in Tibet*, London: John Murray, 1910b.

<sup>95</sup> Younghusband, *India and Tibet*, p. 444.

<sup>96</sup> Singh (1988), p.250.

bazaar areas. Both Land Revenue Order no. 1 (issued by Charles Bell in May 1917) and Tashi Namgyal's proclamation on North Sikkim (30 August 1937) protected the Lepcha and Bhutia rights in land ownership and affirmed their indigenous status. These laws prohibited the sale and mortgage or subletting of lands belonging to a Lepcha or a Bhutia person to any Nepali person. The proclamation on North Sikkim prohibited the settlement of outsiders, including the Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim, within North Sikkim. Charles Bell authored several influential books on Tibet, religion and the people of Tibet, and established a friendly relationship with the Dalai Lama and even visited Lhasa.<sup>97</sup> After Bell and under Tashi Namgyal's able administration, Sikkim acquired greater autonomy in conducting Sikkim's internal affairs. During his reign Sikkim joined the Indian Council of States in 1935, and Tashi Namgyal was enjoined to represent as the ruler of this Princely state. As an Indian state, Sikkim had no right to separate external relations whatsoever and the Political Officer was permitted to conduct Sikkim's political relations, a practice that continued until 1975 when Sikkim was incorporated into independent India.

## Conclusion

Capitalist expansion and its incessant search for newer markets and goods for trading were the driving force behind the spread of the British Empire in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands such as Sikkim. Sikkim's geographical location was critical for the expansion of British capitalism and imperialism into Tibet. Improvements in roads, transportation and communication networks in both Sikkim and Darjeeling served both commercial and military interests, and provided the necessary infrastructure for empire. I began this paper by juxtaposing two comments about trade and imperialism; and this paper has demonstrated the relationship between these, and the politics of expansion and empire. The extension of the East India Company's – and later the British Raj's – control into the Eastern Himalayas and Tibet would not have been possible without such political domination.

It is this imperative of routing the commodities of the British East India Company that explains the annexation of Darjeeling Hills from Sikkim in 1835, the transformation of Sikkim into an imperial colony of Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and finally into a state of British India. The various treaties concluded between Sikkim, East India Company/British Raj, Tibet, Nepal and China established the contours of this imperial outreach and overturning of local political economy and demography in the Eastern Himalayas. The provisions of the 1904 Treaty, concluded after the Younghusband Mission, explicate the intermingling of capitalism, imperialism and globalisation in this region – a relationship that may have ongoing relevance. Trading posts have functioned as listening posts in Asian geopolitics in the past and may perform similar facilitative functions in the present. Perhaps there are lessons that need to be remembered from the imperial expansion of the British in the Himalayan kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan, and into Tibet. Moreover, these have continued relevance for understanding the contemporary globalisation of trade, capital, knowledge and people. In 2005, China formally recognised Sikkim to be an integral state of India and depicted this admission in its official map of South Asia. After a series of talks, trading formally resumed in July 2006 between the Asian giants after the closure of the Nathu-la for nearly 44 years. Resumption of Sino-Indian inland trade concurrently validates Chinese rights over Tibet and Indian claims over Sikkim.

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<sup>97</sup> Bell (1924); C. Bell, *The People of Tibet*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924; and *The Religion of Tibet*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [1931].

## **Appendix: Relevant Provisions of the 1904 Treaty**

(Anonymous, 'Convention between the Government of Great Britain and Tibet, 1904', *American Journal of International Law*, 1:1 (1907), pp.80-3)

*Article II.* The Tibetan government undertakes to open forthwith trade marts to which all British and Tibetan subjects shall have free rights of access at Gyantse and Gartok, as well as at Yatung...

In addition to establishing trade marts at the places mentioned, the Tibetan government undertakes to place no restrictions on the trade by existing routes, and to consider the question of establishing fresh trade marts under similar conditions if development of trade is required...

*Article IV.* The Tibetan government undertakes to levy no dues of any kind other than those provided for in the tariff to be mutually agreed upon.

*Article VI.* As an indemnity to the British Government for the expenses incurred in the despatch of armed troops to Lhasa, to exact reparation for breaches of treaty obligations, and for the insults offered to and attacks upon the British Commissioner and his following and escort, the Tibetan government engages to pay a sum of pounds five hundred thousand – equivalent to rupees seventy-five lakhs [7,500,000] – to the British Government.

The indemnity shall be payable at such places as the British Government may from time to time, after due notice, indicate whether in Tibet or in British districts of Darjeeling or Jalpaiguri, in seventy-five annual instalments of rupees one lakh each on the 1<sup>st</sup> January in each year, beginning from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1906.

*Article VII.* As a security for the payment of the above-mentioned indemnity, and for the fulfilment of the provisions relative to trade marts specified in Articles II, III, IV, and V, the British Government shall continue to occupy the Chumbi valley until the indemnity has been paid and until the trade-marts have been effectively opened for three years, whichever date may be later.

*Article IX.* The Government of Tibet engages that, without the previous consent of the British Government:

- no portion of Tibetan territory shall be ceded, sold, leased, mortgaged or otherwise given for occupation, to any Foreign power;
- no such Power shall be permitted to intervene in Tibetan affairs;
- no Representatives of Agents of any foreign Power shall be admitted into Tibet;
- no concessions for railways, roads, telegraphs, mining or any other rights, shall be granted to any Foreign Power. In the event of consent to such concessions being granted, similar or equivalent concessions shall be granted to the British government.

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropolises and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropolises;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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