

## When Bhutan got Caught Up in the Tug-of-War Between Colonial Britain and China

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India-China bilateral relationship has been largely looked at from the perspective of the 1962 war and the unresolved territorial dispute. Tibet has been at the very centre of this conundrum, which had its origin in the colonial period when India was under British rule. Literature produced in the last 58 years has extensively focused on this aspect and often projected this struggle between India and China as efforts to assert their dominance in the region. Likewise, scholarship on colonial India and Tibet's interactions emphasise on Britain's rivalry with China and Russia over the Tibetan issue. However, this was a contestation which engulfed the larger issue of vindicating power and dominance in the entire Himalayas and included even the smaller states of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. The part played by these states, by and large, has been presented as tangential to this contestation amongst the

giants over Tibet, or has been overlooked. This article focuses on the Bhutanese case to bring out the role played by these smaller states in this power struggle. In this article, an attempt has been made to present the Bhutanese factor in the Britain-China power struggle in the period before the 1914 conference at Shimla.

### **Bhutan- Is It or Is It Not a Chinese Vassal State?**

In 1910, when the Chinese army entered and occupied parts of Tibet including Lhasa, Britain grew concerned about the consequences of the Chinese occupation in Tibet on its northern frontier and particularly on the negative impact it would have in maintaining its geopolitical influence among the Himalayan kingdoms. Britain had been able to wrestle Bhutan to its side through its persistent diplomatic

maneuverings. The brilliant strategist Charles A. Bell, Political Officer in Sikkim, had been instrumental in bringing Bhutan within the ambit of Britain and British India's geopolitical influence. In fact, around the time when China had been making its military forays into Eastern Tibet and onwards to Lhasa, C.A. Bell was busy effecting a treaty with the Bhutanese Government known as the Punakha Treaty (NAI 1910).

In the aftermath of Chinese occupation, reports received in New Delhi and London attested not to a mere policing objectives in Tibet, as claimed by China but a gradual taking over of the administrative machinery. Although

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Britain's remonstrations had received assurances of no attempts being made at changing the *status quo* in Tibet, Britain could see that China was actively making her control over Tibet effective. It would not only imply a gradual waning of British influence over Tibet, but the continuance of Chinese military might in Tibet could directly affect its prestige vis-à-vis the other frontier Himalayan states of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. Moreover, there was also the likelihood that Britain's vacillation in resolving the Tibetan issue might have the effect of these Himalayan states sliding towards China.

The geopolitical implications of the actions of the Chinese government in Tibet on the Himalayan states was not lost on the British government.

It was to allay this possibility of Bhutan falling under the influence of China that Britain signed the Punakha Treaty with Bhutan in 1910. Drawn up by C.A. Bell, the treaty stated that the Bhutanese government would be guided by the advice of the British government in conducting its foreign relations. However, it also categorically mentioned that the British Government would not interfere in the internal administration of Bhutan. The treaty, which had been an amendment of the 1865 Sinchula Treaty between British India and Bhutan, also increased the annual allowance to the Bhutanese Durbar from fifty thousand to one hundred thousand rupees. After the signing of the treaty, the Secretary of State, John Morley, wrote a letter to the India office, congratulating C.A. Bell and appreciating his role in achieving the agreement with Bhutan. However, it was also a strongly worded statement on the British Government's obligations towards Bhutan. The correspondence said:

"The Treaty now concluded will, I trust, adequately achieve the purpose for which it was intended, viz, the security of that part of the Indian frontier from external aggression and intrigue... That Treaty marks no departure from the settled policy of His Majesty's Government upon all frontiers of India, which is to undertake no extension, direct or indirect, of the

administrative responsibilities of the Government of India, and to derogate in no respect, beyond the letter of our treaty rights, from that measure of internal independence which we have engaged to respect in the States concerned. I have no doubt that Your Excellency's Government keep this view of the question steadily present in your own minds and in those of your officers." (NAI 1910)

Despite Whitehall's directive of not getting too involved in the affairs of Bhutan, numerous occasions presented itself where the terms of the treaty with Bhutan and the need to keep China at bay were in direct conflict. Such incidents occurred soon, in fact, within a few months of the conclusion of the treaty. In September 1910, C.A. Bell submitted to the Government of India the translation of an extract of a letter from the Chinese Len Amban to the Maharaja of Bhutan. The letter was dated 8<sup>th</sup> August 1910. In the letter, the Len Amban stated that he had been "always very pleased" by the "law-abiding" "subjects of Bhutan." Next, he addressed the soldiers of Bhutan in the following words:

"...for the defence of the country...therefore you need not be frightened. You must not listen to the bad instructions of other people and collect troops and make the country unsettled. If you stay peacefully as before, nothing harmful will happen to you. But if you unnecessarily act unlawfully, far from you being able to save your own lives, you will bring trouble to the

country....This is important and should not be disobeyed at all." (NAI 1910)

The Len Amban in the letter had not only ignored the Maharaja but addressed him as a subordinate to the Paro Penlop, who was the Governor of the province of Paro in the western part of Bhutan, hence the Maharaja's subordinate in hierarchical order. The tone of the letter implied that China had intentionally ignored the changes brought into effect under the auspices of the British Government, namely, the coming to the throne of the new Maharaja and the conclusion of the Punakha treaty.

To Bell, the Amban's letter amounted to a "claim of Chinese suzerainty over Bhutan" and thus an "attempt and no doubt, a purposeful attempt, to undermine our recent treaty with Bhutan." Bell further informed that the Maharaja was "considerably perturbed by the Amban's action" and asked his Government to take "prompt and energetic steps" to "put a stop to this menace of the Chinese." (NAI 1910).

He then cautioned with an alarming note that if urgent actions were not initiated to stall the advances of the Chinese,

"...not only those Bhutanese chiefs, whose pro-British feelings are doubtful, will look towards the Chinese for help, but the loyalty of the Maharaja towards our Govt will also be put to a severe test....I think the present is a most opportune time for settling matters with China

regarding British suzerainty over Bhutan. Later when the Dalai Lama's affairs are settled, it may be too late. Unless firm steps are taken now in such matters, our suzerainty over Bhutan may be endangered." (NAI 1910)

The Political Officer also reported the posting of Chinese troops of about 500 soldiers near the Bhutanese frontier. There had been no precedent of Chinese military presence in these places. The posting of Chinese troops on the Bhutan frontier was seen as a deliberate move by China with the objective of "menacing" Bhutan and such incidents of militarising the frontier, according to Bell was "indicative of Chinese aggressiveness." Bell suggested that the Chinese government be asked to withdraw its troop at the earliest from the Bhutanese frontier. In case of China disagreeing to call back its army, Bell demanded that the British government also "post troops at some convenient place near the frontier." With a word of caution, Bell noted that, "weakness on our part in this matter will but invite further Chinese aggression." (NAI 1910)

On Bell's suggestion, an official communication was sent to the Chinese government. In the response received, China stated that Bhutan had always been a "vassal state of China" and since the time of the emperor Yongzheng, the third Qing emperor (1723-36). Bhutan had paid tribute to China and in return had been bestowed with sealed orders from various Chinese rulers. In fact, the response stated that as recently as 1891, imperial seals

were bestowed on Bhutan by the Chinese empire. With regard to the recent treaty concluded between Great Britain and Bhutan, the Chinese government claimed that they had not received any information and had been unaware of any recent treaty between Great Britain and Bhutan. Moreover, even if a treaty had been signed, Great Britain could not make alterations in China's long established relations with Bhutan. Bhutan, like Nepal, was a vassal state of China and hence could not be regarded on the same footing as Sikkim, which in accordance with the treaty was under the protection of Great Britain. China, therefore, as far as Bhutan was concerned, would continue to act in accordance with the established precedent. (NAI 1911).

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### **Bhutan's Solicitations to China**

However, the situation took a different turn in a year's time. In late December of 1911, the Political Officer in Sikkim reported that the Maharaja of Bhutan had enquired whether the Government of India would help him if the Dalai Lama punished the Bhutanese monastery of To-lung Tsur-po in Tibet. The 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, some 200 years ago had apparently taken away most of the lands belonging to the monastery, as

the Dalai Lamas are of the Gelugpa sect of Lamaism and the monastery in question, like most other Bhutanese monasteries, of the Kagyu sect. The Maharaja of Bhutan, as told to Bell, had approached the Len Amban to give him back the land before the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who had fled to India in 1910, returned to Tibet. Subsequently, upon retrospection, the Maharaja feared that his actions might invite the wrath of the Dalai Lama and thus in anticipation, he had appealed to Bell for Britain's help (NAI 1911).

The issue raised was a new one for Britain, that of the protection of Bhutanese interests in Tibet. Under the Punakha Treaty, the Bhutan Durbar had thrown in its lot with the British. The Maharaja of Bhutan had even made a 19 day journey to attend the Delhi Durbar in March 1911 to pay homage to the King Emperor, George V. This matter opened up two difficult questions for Britain, first- to what extent Britain could or should support and protect Bhutanese interests vis-à-vis Tibet and secondly, if the Bhutanese Maharaja's action of directly addressing the Chinese Amban was in line with the agreement of the Punakha Treaty. The Foreign Department considered the Maharaja's application to the Len Amban a breach of the understanding against direct correspondence with the Chinese and opined that the Maharaja should not "have gone behind our backs" in "begging the Chinese Amban to restore lands". Further, because of the actions of the Maharaja, the Government of India stated, "we cannot be surprised that the Chinese insist on

corresponding direct with him, and treating him as a subject of China." (NAI 1912). Bell was asked to submit the reasons for the Bhutanese Maharaja's omission to consult him in the matter. Bell reasoned that the Maharaja was remiss in his action of contacting the Len Amban directly without consulting him first. However, he pointed out to the government that despite the recently concluded treaty, Britain was, according to him,

"...in an exceptionally difficult position as regards Bhutan since we have no British Agent or troops of our own in the country and have to depend mainly on the good will of the Maharaja and the subordinate chiefs for maintaining and increasing our control over his foreign relations. We have to detach what was not many years ago a hostile state from its neighbors of the same race and religion as itself and to draw it to ourselves. One has to be very careful therefore not to rub the Maharaja up the wrong way."(NAI 1912)

To put to rest the probability of Bhutan joining sides with China, Bell advocated that Britain should "gradually increase" its "hold" over Bhutan by taking further conciliatory actions (NAI 1912). Likewise, arrangements for additional concessions to Bhutan were set in motion. Thus, we see that China like Russia had been perceived as a persistent threat to British India and the case of Bhutan and the use of Bhutan as a gambit in this tussle between Britain and China showed the significant place that

Bhutan was accorded by the British political strategists in securing its northern frontier from the Chinese threat.

The emphasis on the activities of the larger empires have muted the role and agency of the smaller players like Bhutan, such that they have often been depicted as silent spectators to the power contestations.

## Conclusion

In recent years, as China has increased its stakes in South Asia with more and more investments in South Asian countries, it is interesting to draw parallels between the contemporary strategic activities of the People's Republic of China in South Asia with that of colonial Britain. Britain had realised the potential of the small Himalayan states in securing its northern frontier and thereby consolidating its power and influence in India. Bhutan, a small landlocked Himalayan kingdom, seemingly geopolitically irrelevant, found itself at the very center of this power struggle between two empires. Not only did Britain understand the significance of Bhutan as a buffer state but it also made efforts to appease Bhutan so that it did not change sides and join China.

The Punakha Treaty was a means to that end. It also reveals the involvement of both the larger

empires and the smaller states thus showing the multifaceted character of the geopolitical struggle over influence in the Himalayas. The emphasis on the activities of the larger empires have muted the role and agency of the smaller players like Bhutan, such that they have often been depicted as silent spectators to the power contestations. This article, by bringing out the importance of the Bhutanese role in the tug-of-war between colonial Britain and China, has tried to challenge such predispositions. Bhutanese rulers not only understood and recognised their special position in the conflict between the great powers but often utilised it to push their agendas.

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