

PERCEPTIONS AND EFFECTS OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE ON THE INDO-TIBETAN FRONTIER

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The enormous diversities of interests contained within the external frontiers of British India—regional, racial, religious, class, social, political, linguistic, and geographic—are well known. These diversities ensured that there were a great variety of contemporary shades of opinion and reactions to the prospect of the Transfer of Power in India. While the British personnel who served the imperial Government of India were predictably dubious as to the merit of Home Rule for Indians, a desire for independence from Britain was by no means universal in Indian society either. (Most obviously it was opposed by the rulers of the majority of the Indian Princely States). Neither did India's neighbours necessarily favour its independence. Nowhere was this more obvious than among the imperial and indigenous elites in Sikkim and Tibet, where the prospect of Indian independence came to be accepted as inevitable, but was viewed with very little enthusiasm indeed.

This article, drawing on the records of the Oriental and India Office Library in London, the National Archives of India, and interviews with those who served on that frontier, seeks to examine perceptions and effects of Indian independence among the imperial and indigenous peoples of Sikkim and Tibet during the first half of the 20th century. Although these sources primarily reveal elite perspectives, they do disclose certain aspects of the thinking of other indigenous social groups, which enable us to partly reconstruct wider class understandings of the historical process.

The British imperial government was represented in this region by the Political Officer [for] Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet, who was based in the Sikkimese capital, Gangtok. The states with which he dealt varied in their official status. While Tibet enjoyed *de facto* if not *de jure* independence from 1912-50, and was thus an external state, Sikkim and Bhutan retained theoretical autonomy within British India, although they were in practice subject to the will of the imperial power.¹

After creating the Sikkim position in 1889, the British had established diplomatic posts in Tibet late in 1904, after a mission lead

by Colonel Francis Younghusband of the Indian Political Department² had fought its way to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, and forced the Tibetan government to enter into treaty relations with the Government of India. Three so-called 'Trade Agencies' were then opened on Tibetan territory, at Yatung, in the Chumbi Valley close to the Indian frontier, at Gyantse, in central Tibet, and at Gartok, in western Tibet. The most important of these was at Gyantse, until 1936 when a British Mission was established in Lhasa. These positions were all under the control of the Political Officer Sikkim.³

During the period 1904-1947, more than 100 British officers and men (including military escort, medical, and technical staff), served in Tibet. This cadre established a distinct institutional identity for the Tibetan service within the overall traditions of the frontier officers of the Indian Political Department and followed broad common lines of policy, which were developed from the ideas of Sir Francis Younghusband and his patron, Lord Curzon, and astutely refined by Sir Charles Bell, Political Officer Sikkim for most of the period from 1904-1920.⁴ The primary aim of these policies was to ensure the security of India's north-eastern frontier by the creation of an Indian-influenced Tibetan 'buffer state', strong, united, and preferably but not essentially, independent. This policy was seen as best serving the interests of India's security whether it was under British rule, or independent. The great merit of this policy, in the eyes of the imperial government at least, was that it was an economical solution to the problem of security on India's northern frontier. The alternative solution, garrisoning the frontier with troops, would have been an enormously costly undertaking, as India today has found.

A Political Officer's primary duty was to establish his own good relations with the local rulers of his area of responsibility, in order to be able to exert his personal influence upon them. In line with the general policy aims of the Government of India and the 'buffer state' policy, the Sikkim Political Officers sought to persuade the Tibetan Government to follow policies suiting British Indian interests. To a large extent, such success as they achieved in this aim was due to the personal influence of successive Political Officers and their Agents. Men such as Charles Bell developed close ties with the Tibetan leadership, constructing an alliance of interests between the ruling elites of both states which lasted until 1947, when it was abruptly severed by the imperial power.

The Political Officer's contacts were primarily with the local elites, but in developing their relations with Tibet, these imperial officers

developed a very real sense of mission, and their relationship with the Tibetans was akin to that which Lionel Caplan, in describing the relationship between British and Gurkha, describes as ‘paternal’.⁵ They were aware of cultural differences and that, as one officer put it, ‘My ideas...when I arrived in India...were subject to the inevitable limitations of an English (or Irish) environment and upbringing.’⁶ While relying largely on elite indigenous perspectives to overcome these ‘limitations’, the majority of these officers did make genuine attempts to understand the perspectives of other social groups within their district, and in particular they drew heavily on the understandings of a bureaucratic class of intermediaries drawn from among the Buddhist communities of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district.

As Buddhists, these intermediaries were thought by the British to have an inherent insight into Tibetan culture and mentality (despite the historical differences between Sikkimese and Tibetan culture and society). They were expected to act, therefore, as translators in the broadest sense, explaining one culture to the other, and seeking mutually agreeable solutions to inter-state problems. Most of these individuals were drawn from marginalized social groups, in order to ensure their independence from local factionalism, and they were promoted on merit, rather than caste or seniority. Educated and trained on the British model, with work and social patterns emulating those of their British employers, they came to form a distinct social group in the frontier regions. As the majority were Sikkimese, they did not regard themselves as ‘Indian’ and their primary loyalty was to the imperial government.⁷ In turn, the Political Officers, recognising that Sikkim had been taken within British Indian administrative frontiers largely for reasons of security, considered the Sikkimese to be a separate race from ‘Indians’.⁸

As agents of the British Government of India, the imperial officers and their local employees had a vested interest in the results of the Indian independence struggle. So too did the Tibetan government, which was increasingly drawn into the British Indian sphere of influence while seeking to establish an identity and status independent of China, which regarded Tibet as a part of its empire. The British saw Tibet as a bulwark against Russian and Chinese infiltration of India, and successfully encouraged the Tibetan leadership to see the British as their main supporter in their efforts to maintain Tibetan social and political structures free of external control. But the Tibetans were aware that an independent India was unlikely to be in a position to support them in their efforts, while in their concern with changes in India, the

British, Indians, and to an extent even the Tibetans, all failed to recognise the emerging threat from the communist forces in China.

The early period

Historically, the Himalayan mountain chain had formed an effective barrier between the two states, and Indo-Tibetan relations at government level were virtually non-existent. Neither party maintained official representatives in the other's capital, and there was no established means of inter-government communication. But there were religious ties, and Tibetan pilgrims visited the sacred sites of Indian Buddhism while Indian pilgrims visited both Hindu sacred sites within Tibet, such as Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, and the Buddhist monasteries of central Tibet, which traditionally offered hospitality to Indian renunciates.⁹ In addition to pilgrims, Indian and Tibetan traders regularly crossed the Himalayan frontiers, although whereas Indian traders were generally restricted to dealing with middlemen in the Tibetan border regions, such as the Tromowas who monopolised trade in the Chumbi Valley, Tibetan traders frequently ventured to Calcutta, the major centre of government and trade in eastern India.

While both trade and pilgrimage provided the opportunity for the gathering of political and economic intelligence, neither party found the need for regular diplomatic intercourse. But this traditional situation was incompatible with British imperial understandings of government, which required diplomatic links between neighbouring states. The failure of the Tibetans to respond to British initiatives aimed at establishing diplomatic ties had been one of the main factors behind the Younghusband mission, which had forced the Tibetans to accept British representatives within Tibet.

While primarily designed to protect India from external threats, the Trade Agencies also served as a listening post to protect the internal security of India, with the Trade Agents knowledge of Indian traders and pilgrims enabling them to prevent Tibet from becoming a base for anti-imperial activities. As early as 1908, the Trade Agent in Gartok reported rumours of a Punjabi agitator in western Tibet who was preaching the ideals of the *swadeshi* movement, urging the Indian Bhotia traders (who made annual visits to Tibet) to spin their wool at home rather than send it to the woollen mills in the service of British interests.¹⁰ Following this report, the Punjabi's activities were presumably curtailed by the Indian state authorities.

During World War One, Tibetan visitors to Calcutta returned with (often garbled) accounts of the progress of the war. Sir Charles Bell records how they reported that 'Turkey was growing in power and had driven out the French and recaptured large territories; and that India had rebelled against the British and introduced her own currency notes.'¹¹

By 1921, when Bell became the first European to be invited to Lhasa, the Indian independence movement had gained considerable strength and the figure of Mahatma Gandhi had become a significant one. Today, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet preaches a message of non-violence which specifically invokes the Gandhian model.¹² But at that time, the alliance of interests between Bell and the 13th Dalai Lama, who had established close personal ties, meant that any threat to one party was a threat to the other. Thus, in his meetings with Bell, the Dalai Lama demonstrated his concern with issues threatening the stability of the British position. He questioned Bell closely about Gandhi's activities, as he did the Irish question, expressing the hope that these issues would be resolved.¹³

David Macdonald, the Yatung Trade Agent from 1909-1924, noted in his annual report for the year 1921-22 that, 'There was much excitement in Tibet when the people heard about the doings of Gandhi in India, but now they are pleased that he has been imprisoned and that all the mischief has been stopped'. Macdonald added that the Tibetan Prime Minister had written to him, stating that 'When Mr Bell was leaving Lhasa, we told him that if these evil persons were not punished at once, trouble would increase'.¹⁴

While Bell and Macdonald's comments reflect the view—shared by the Tibetan elites—that Gandhi represented a threat to the security of British India, there was an alternative perspective developing amongst non-elite sections of Tibetan society. Tibetans revered India as the home of Buddhism; it was from India that Tibet had taken the texts and teachings which firmly established that religion in Tibet. Bell noted that, as a result, the Tibetans tended to credit Indians with supernatural powers and, when this was so, 'they gain the influence that fear bestows.'¹⁵ Gandhi thus came to be seen as an incarnation of Padmasambhava, the Indian Tantric master who was credited with successfully establishing Buddhism in Tibet. But Gandhi's message of non-violence lost something in the translation. Tales circulated among the Tibetan peasantry describing Gandhi as a warrior leading Indian armies to victory over the British forces!¹⁶

At the time, however, the British found it hard to take Gandhi seriously, regarding him with a mixture of incomprehension and derision. The idea that this ‘half-naked *fakir*’ could seriously threaten British power and prestige was almost beyond British understanding. A popular song carried the refrain ‘Oh Mr Gandhi, your legs are so bandy’. As a contemporary observer noted, ‘We were rather rude about Gandhi at that point, he wasn’t the sacred holy man then that he is now.’¹⁷

The Anglo-Tibetan alliance ensured that the Tibetan authorities actively assisted British attempts to restrict the activities of those struggling for Indian Independence. During Bell’s visit to Lhasa the Tibetans, presumably at Bell’s request, deported two Indian *saddhus* who had come to Tibet. One was reported to be active in ‘the east’, while the other, one Koramal Baba, stayed in the grounds of the Nepalese Agency in Lhasa, where he reported to be actively engaged in ‘anti-British propaganda.’ The Nepalese were persuaded to expel him from their embassy, whereupon the Tibetan Government deported both *saddhus* back to India.¹⁸ Yet there is evidence that not all Tibetans shared their government’s view. Bell was aware of the strength of anti-British feeling in India and he noted that it was ‘natural that it should spread to Lhasa also.’¹⁹

Bell retired after his visit to Lhasa, and subsequently wrote several books on Tibetan history and culture, works which formed the basis of his successors’ understanding of Tibet.²⁰ In his first work, *Tibet Past and Present* (first published in 1924), Bell discussed the possibility of Indian independence and its effect upon Tibet. He recognised that

It may be that the British race will in future withdraw from the task of administering Asiatic countries, whose peoples, both numerous and intellectual, are now too well educated in Western studies to permit, for long, the white man to order their forms of government. But a considerable time is likely to pass before the need for this withdrawal is fully recognized: recognition of the principle may long precede its translation into practice: and, even when she governs herself, India may well elect to enjoy the advantages which membership of the British Commonwealth of nations endows her.²¹

While he carefully avoided taking a position on independence, a detailed study of his official and private writings suggests that Bell had developed a certain sympathy with Indian aspirations as a result of seeing them in a wider context. In discussing his negotiations over Tibet with the Chinese, Bell wrote that

Without wishing to touch unduly on the thorny question as to how far or how soon Home Rule is desirable in India, I may perhaps be permitted to record how conscious I was of a certain weakness in my own position. I was continually urging our Government to press on China the need for Home Rule in Tibet, while I was aware that they could not point to Home Rule in India. The Chinese Government had not failed to make use of the discrepancy between the two positions.²²

Bell frequently quotes 'Tibetan' opinion, or at least that of the Lhasa ruling elite, whose position informed, and was informed by, Bell. Thus we read a Tibetan official quoted on the relationship between Tibet and a self-governing India in these terms;

Tibetans look upon Indians as religious people, and should be able to be friendly with them. But India by itself will not be strong enough to help Tibet materially against China unless India's support included armed British assistance. If therefore Indian Home Rule should mean that British soldiers leave India, Tibet would throw her lot in with any strong Power that would treat her well, or would perforce gravitate back to a closer relationship with China.²³

'A very eminent Tibetan authority' (who we may safely assume is either the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan Prime Minister), is also quoted as stating, 'I do not think the grant of self-government to India should affect Tibet, provided always that British military power is fully maintained there. Otherwise, civil strife will break out in India, which will be powerless to aid Tibet.' Bell goes on to state that 'The same authority did not think Hindus would harm Tibet, but distrusted Mahomedans. Deep down in the minds of most Tibetans lies an instinctive dislike of the Mahomedan religion.'²⁴

While the possibility that British troops would remain in India after independence was a never a realistic one, the opinions that Bell quotes were very much in line with his own thinking, and reflect his own role in influencing Tibetan elite perspectives; Bell himself had previously recommended to the Government of India that neither Muslims nor Hindus should be employed in the British positions in Tibet.²⁵ Contemporary imperial opinion held that Indian unity derived largely from British government, and thus Bell did not regard the Himalayan peoples, such as those of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal, as 'Indian'. In contrast to his discretion in regard to Indian independence, he strongly supported independence for the Himalayan states. He claimed that in those regions where the Himalayan peoples were in contact with Indians 'there is a great deal of anti-Indian feeling', and a belief that an independent India would cause 'trouble' on the north-east frontier, as

would other groups who would try to recover territory lost to the British expansion. Again quoting elite Tibetan opinion, Bell states that

A Government of Indians will not be as considerate of the feelings of Tibetans and others, as the British are. There will be friction between Indians and frontier peoples. Besides, Tibetans look on the British as powerful, and will accept decisions from them which will not from Indians.²⁶

Bell, writing in a work first published in 1946, quotes the 13th Dalai Lama as saying to him that

All nations should govern themselves, if possible. But in India, if the British left, the different religions and sub-races would strive for mastery. We Tibetans look on Indians as of one general race, but there are of course different sub-races, as in Tibet. In Tibet, however, we have but one religion, so we do not have this religious difficulty. And individuals would also strive for mastery; everybody would be as good as his neighbour; everybody would want to be a ruler ... Lawlessness would prevail; there would be great disorder. Everybody would want to be on top. The British Government is to India as the Dalai Lama is to Tibet. Nobody can be equal with either, and that keeps order in both countries.²⁷

The Dalai Lama warned that the Gurkhas would take Sikkim and Darjeeling and advance into north India, and that Russians would then invade India. Bell quotes him as saying that

When Gandhi was working his agitation and British goods were not being bought, we Tibetans thought that the Indians had got some other powerful nations behind them, supporting them. But later on we realised that this was not so, and we thought the agitation doubtful strategy on India's part, for we knew that she could not stand alone ... The Indians naturally want to rule their own country, but they will bring themselves into great trouble if they do so.²⁸

After their retirement both Bell and Macdonald remained in close touch with events on the frontier. In 1930, Macdonald, who had retired to Kalimpong, wrote to Bell that 'Tibet...is watching events in India keenly, and is...interpreting the lenience of the Government in dealing with the present unrest in that country, as weakness. This is a danger to the tranquillity of this frontier.'²⁹ In the following year, the Trade Agent in Gartok again warned of traders who were part of the 'non-co-operation movement', stating that three such agitators had visited Tibet that year.³⁰

Yet among the British officers serving on the Tibetan frontier, the freedom from communal and Home Rule troubles was part of the attraction of service in the Himalayas, and at that time it was felt that the British imperial presence was secure, at least in the short-term. As Colonel Weir, the Political Officer Sikkim 1928-33 wrote, in regard to talks between Gandhi and the British authorities, 'I don't know what the future will hold but I think India will last out till 1938 when I go.'³¹ This view prevailed for at least another decade. In April 1941, the Government of India renewed the lease of the land on which their Gyantse Trade Agency was situated for another thirty years!³²

The imperial officers' view that the empire would continue was partly based on their belief that a British presence was necessary to the maintenance of good order and government in India. This belief that imperial government was the best option for the vast majority of Indians, particularly the peasant class, underpinned the British understanding of their own moral authority to rule India. They generally regarded those Indians agitating for independence as motivated by greed and self-interest. As one Gyantse Trade Agent wrote in 1944, concerning his discussions with an 'educated American', 'I tried to give him the angle of the British District official, who sees corrupt and incompetent municipal and district bosses who call themselves Congressman, rather than the fine phrases of the nationalist leaders in the papers.'³³

By the 1940s, however, the Tibetan government had apparently recognised the need for new structures to cope with the changes occurring in their relationships with foreign powers. In 1942, they created a Foreign Office, staffed by a secular official, Surkhang Dzasa, and a monk official, the Ta Lama. The establishment of the Foreign Office was also a means by which to demonstrate Tibetan independence. The Chinese representatives in Lhasa refused to deal with the Foreign Office, on the grounds that they were not a foreign power in Tibet, thus losing much of their influence on the Tibetan Government. Reading between the lines of British reports, it appears that the British were not overly keen on either Surkhang Dzasa or the new Foreign Office, which also restricted their direct access to the Tibetan government, but they did adjust to the new reality and found they were able to deal informally with the new Office, without the formalities required of dealing directly with the Dalai Lama and his Cabinet (*Kashag*).

It was clear that the Tibetan Foreign Office recognised that great changes were underway, changes which would affect Tibet's future.

Thus they explored new means of establishing an independent presence on the world stage, such as discussing the possibility of mutual diplomatic representation with an American agent, Ilya Tolstoy, who visited Lhasa in 1942.³⁴

In 1944, Surkhang Dzasa visited India and reported to his government that the British had promised India independence immediately after the war ended.³⁵ The Tibetans appreciated that the war kept the attention of the Chinese focussed on their struggle against Japan, although the wartime alliance between Britain and China, and British defeats such as their loss of Singapore, reduced British prestige in Lhasa. But the War was generally of little relevance to the Tibetans. The British reported that VE day was 'a matter of more or less indifference' to them, and the British Mission in Lhasa held a three-day party for Tibetan officials in order to 'combat this ignorance'.³⁶

The Tibetan Government, however, recognised the opportunity to be represented in the new world order which was emerging from the ruins of World War Two. They sent a 'Tibetan Goodwill Mission' to India and China, which arrived in Delhi in February 1946. This 'Goodwill Mission' included both Surkhang Dzasa's brother and the Dalai Lama's brother, although the latter was not a formal member of the mission. In Delhi, members of the Mission called on the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, and attended imperial victory celebrations, as well as passing on letters from the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Cabinet (*Kashag*) for President Truman (which they gave to the American *Chargé d'Affaires*). The Mission then travelled to China, where, in disputed circumstances, they took part in the Chinese National Assembly, before returning to Tibet in May 1947. Tibet also sent a delegation to the Inter-Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in March-April 1947, which met with Gandhi and Nehru. Yet none of these tentative steps succeeded in gaining official recognition of Tibet's sovereign status, an issue too complex to be resolved without, at the very least, strong British and Indian support, which was not forthcoming.³⁷

Intelligence and independence

Within British India, existing intelligence structures were strengthened to cope with the new political realities of post-war Asia. Frontier intelligence had, since 1936, been the responsibility of the Central Intelligence Officer, Eric Lambert, who was based in Shillong (Assam). In 1946, a new post was created in Kalimpong, that of Deputy Central

Intelligence Officer Shillong, to organise the collection of intelligence (particularly concerning Chinese infiltration) in Tibet and areas in Assam bordering on Tibet. The officer appointed to the post was Lieutenant Lha Tsering, who had served as an intelligence officer with the Gurkhas in Mesopotamia during the First World War.³⁸

The tiny Himalayan foothill town of Kalimpong had become of increasing importance during the war years. It was the centre for the wool and cloth trade, and was the main Indian staging post on the route from Calcutta to Lhasa. It was also a hive of intelligence activity. A Japanese intelligence agent recalled that in post-war Kalimpong there were Indian, Tibetan and Russian agents, as well as Chinese from three rival agencies, the Defence Department, the Transport Department, and the Tibetan-Mongolian Affairs Commission, whose rivalry was so intense that they even killed each other.³⁹

Of particular interest to British Indian intelligence was the 'Tibet Revolutionary Party', also known as the 'Tibet Improvement Party', which had been founded in Kalimpong in 1939. In reality a largely idealistic and naive group of intellectuals rather than an effective revolutionary movement, the party was under Nationalist Chinese influence from the beginning. In 1945 they produced a manifesto, 'redolent with Kuomintang rhetoric', which called for the overthrow of the 'existing tyrannical Government' in Tibet. Indian intelligence identified as one of the movement's leaders a Tibetan exile from an important merchant family. This was Pangda Ragpa, who had close ties to the Reting monastery incarnation who acted as the Regent of Tibet from 1933-43.⁴⁰

In June 1946, the British moved to destroy the Tibet Revolutionary Party, deporting individuals such as the Tibetan intellectual Gendun Chopel, as well as Pangda Ragpa, who went to China. Some degree of co-operation undoubtedly existed between the British officials and the Tibetan Government in this matter, with Surkhang Dzasa being informed of the actions, and of the Reting Regent's possible involvement.⁴¹

Arthur Hopkinson, the last British Political Officer in Sikkim, who had succeeded to the post in June 1945, wrote that

The great excitement for [Eric Lambert] is that we have just been having a round-up of naughty Tibs., the Tibetan Revolutionary Party, but this is very hush hush. One of the revolutionaries keeps a diary, sometimes in English ... Needless to say the would be revolutionaries were inspired and financed by my mincing Chinese colleague (now in China) of this the diary obligingly supplies proof.'[sic]⁴²

Around this time Hopkinson was also reporting the presence of other 'undesirable Tibetans' in India, principally women engaged in prostitution in Calcutta, a circumstance reflecting the instability of the period and the fluid state of the Indo-Tibetan border.⁴³

As unrest in India grew in the immediate post-war period, Tibetans visiting India witnessed events such as the communal riots in Calcutta and the Naval Mutiny in Bombay. Their reports doubtless contributed to the Tibetan Government becoming increasingly concerned at the possible changes in India's future status. But in June 1946, when Surkhang Dzasa visited the British Mission in Lhasa to enquire about the effect of Indian independence on Indo-Tibetan relations, he was warned of the likelihood of British withdrawal and of the consequent necessity for Tibet to establish direct relations with independent India.⁴⁴

Some indication of the Tibetan Government's reaction to this may be seen from their taking concrete measures towards their defence. In March 1947, they requested that India supply them with 42 two inch mortars, 144 Bren guns, 168 Sten guns and 1,260 rifles, along with their shells and ammunition. In India, Pandit Nehru, as head of the interim government, was consulted and agreed that India would continue to supply ammunition for these weapons after the Transfer of Power.⁴⁵

Within the Political Department there was also a growing recognition that Indian independence was imminent and that new strategies were required. Within the exception of the somewhat peripheral activities of the isolated Gartok Trade Agent (an Indian Hindu from the neighbouring Punjab Hill States), the principal positions within the British posts in Tibet had always been occupied by British officials. But from 1936 onwards, and in increasing numbers in the 1940s, the Buddhist intermediaries from Sikkim and Darjeeling began to be appointed to the more senior positions of Trade Agent Yatung and Head of British Mission Lhasa. But while a handful of Christian Anglo-Indian or Anglo-Sikkimese officers (such as David Macdonald) had served in Tibet, no Hindu, Sikh or Muslim had ever been appointed to a responsible post there. Changing this situation was now considered. Hugh Richardson, the Head of the British Mission in Lhasa for much of the period from 1936-1947, suggested in 1946 that a Hindu be appointed Trade Agent in Gyantse, to spend the summers at the Lhasa Mission training to assume that post.⁴⁶ But the suggestion was not acted upon.

In the lead-up to the Transfer of Power, the British frontiersmen redoubled their efforts to strengthen Indo-Tibetan ties. Political Officer Arthur Hopkinson explained the purpose of these efforts in regard to trade matters

for the past three years through the system of cloth procurement and by every other means we have deliberately set out to demonstrate to the Tibetans the economic and commercial advantages of the connection with India; in order that, when changes should come, the economic and commercial bonds should hold firm, preserving the Indian connection intact against all other stresses and strains.⁴⁷

But Whitehall and the British Government were largely preoccupied with security and central government issues. Tibet was a peripheral concern to which little thought was given. Arthur Hopkinson later described how

There was what seemed to us terrible delay in informing the Tibetans of our future intentions and it was only in July 1947, less than three weeks before the actual Transfer of Power in India, that I was informed that India would succeed to the rights and obligations of His Majesty's Government in Tibet, though H.M. Government would continue to be represented through the High Commissioner in New Delhi. We were instructed to convey the assurance of India's goodwill to the Tibetan Government.⁴⁸

Hopkinson passed to the Tibetan Government the news that

After August 15th the close and cordial relations which have existed for so many years with themselves and the Government of India will continue with the successor Indian Governments upon whom alone rights and obligations arising from existing Treaty provisions will thereafter be devolved.⁴⁹

The Tibetan Government telegraphed its congratulations to India on its independence and were informed that

The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Tibetan Government to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached on matters that either party may wish to bring up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited treaty relations from His Majesty's Government.⁵⁰

One aspect of this devolution of power which passed without comment was that all matters involved in the British Indian relationship with Tibet passed to the responsibility of India; there was no mention made of Pakistan. The Tibetan Muslims who went into exile in India in the

1950s thus remained with the Tibetan exile communities in centres such as Dharamsala, and do not appear to have had contacts with Pakistan (or Bangladesh).⁵¹

The British Government had, at the last moment, given thought to their post-independence representation in Lhasa. Captain James Guthrie, the Medical Officer at the British Mission, had offered to stay on when the Mission changed hands; a suggestion rejected on the grounds that 'Pandit Nehru has made clear on several occasions that no Government of India Mission abroad will have a British European on its staff in any capacity'.⁵² The British Lhasa Mission Head, Hugh Richardson, thus informed the Tibetans that on the Transfer of Power he would be replaced by an Indian official. But there were no Hindu Indians qualified to fill the senior positions on the frontier. While Lha Tsering took over from Lambert as intelligence chief on that frontier, Political Officer Hopkinson carried on for another year in Gangtok, and Richardson stayed on until 1950 as the Head of Indian Mission Lhasa, probably the last imperial official to remain in Indian government service.

Richardson's continued presence must have reassured the Tibetans that no radical changes were taking place. As Alastair Lamb has pointed out, the Tibetans presumably continued to associate Richardson with the British, rather than the Indian government.⁵³ The only immediate change at the Trade Agencies and the Lhasa Mission was in the flag. As Richardson reported from Lhasa

The National Flag was hoisted in the morning and its significance explained to the staff who are mostly Tibetans. Eleven years after its establishment the Mission became the Indian Mission. May it have a long, prosperous and beneficial life for the common good of India and Tibet.'

The report noted that the wheel symbol on the new Indian flag resembled one of the Tibetans most auspicious symbols, and was thus considered a good omen.⁵⁴

Soon after the Transfer of Power, the Tibetans invited the new British High Commissioner to India, apparently without response.⁵⁵ In general, however, the Tibetans were facing up to the new realities and distancing themselves from the British, investigating such possibilities as an airlink with India.⁵⁶ One observer had noted that as early as 1944 that

In Lhasa, I got the impression that the British had many friends among the officials, but the latter were extremely discreet in their

views. They seem to feel that the most they could hope for in a crisis with China is diplomatic assistance. Thus, they are doing nothing to antagonize the Chinese.⁵⁷

The Tibetans were left with a number of territorial problems when the British withdrew. Major disputes such as that over the demarcation of the border in the Assam Himalayas remained unresolved, while other more traditional territorial arrangements, such as Sikkimese and Bhutanese state enclaves within Tibet, continued despite being inappropriate in the age of the nation-state.⁵⁸ There were more human problems as well, such as the status of retired Indian soldiers living out their days in Gyantse.⁵⁹

Nor did Indian independence recognise the perspectives of local Himalayan identities. Although the Bhutanese were able to maintain a quasi-independent status which they have retained to this day, the Sikkimese were drawn firmly within India's borders, and in 1975 they lost any claim to separate status. While the intermediaries who had served the British continued in Indian service, and many of their descendents now occupy senior positions in Sikkim, none were promoted to the principal post of Political Officer Sikkim, and they found that the Indians did not follow the British recognition of their separate identity. A certain nostalgia for the British period thus lingers on in Sikkim today, albeit mitigated by the obvious comparison of their situation with the fate of the Tibetans.

After the Transfer of Power, the remaining British frontier officers—Hopkinson and Richardson—were cautiously optimistic about the future. Hopkinson wrote to another retired Political Officer that 'At first the Congress showed signs of completely selling out the Tibs (sic), but we persistently combated this...[although] we seemed to get no help encouragement or guidance from HMG or the officers at Delhi'. Hopkinson even noted 'how harassing the last British year was...[with]...a moribund secretariat, intent on their next jobs'—and how much improved the situation was when the Indians took over.⁶⁰

Hopkinson's eventual replacement in Gangtok, Harish Dayal IAS, had gained experience in dealing with Tibetan affairs at the Political Department secretariat, and was considered sympathetic to Tibet, as was the new Indian Foreign Minister, K.P.S. Menon.⁶¹ Dayal, who took over from Hopkinson in September 1948, visited Lhasa in late 1949, the last Political Officer to do so. Richardson, meanwhile, was finally replaced by a Dr S. Sinha in September 1950.

The Chinese Threat

What is apparent from a study of events surrounding Indian independence on this frontier is the extent to which governments and individuals in India and even in Tibet failed to recognise the radical change underway in their neighbour, China. Indo-Tibetan understandings of China were largely based on their experience of a weak, divided, and corrupt empire at the end of centuries of decline. Allied support for the Chinese in the war against Japan had then created a wide-spread perception of Chiang Kai-shek's regime as an ally, which, while likely to seek power over Lhasa when it had established a solid base, was a state with which bi-lateral relations could be conducted in the established diplomatic manner. Even among the British and Tibetan officials who had struggled to restrict Chinese influence in Tibet, there was absolutely no comprehension of the extent to which the Chinese communists represented a radical new force in Asia, one which was to play by very different rules.⁶² As John Lall IAS, Prime Minister to the Maharajah of Sikkim for five years from 1949, recalled 'No one had seriously thought that the Chinese would take military action in Tibet...the milieu was shattered by the Chinese invasion.'⁶³

Richardson recalls, however, that 'Even in 1948 when no one in Lhasa or elsewhere foresaw the speed with which the avalanche was about to descend, the Tibetans were greatly disturbed by a number of baleful portents...a great comet...monstrous births...the canopy of an ancient stone pillar at the foot of the Potala [which] fell...inexplicably, to the ground.'⁶⁴ These omens became more significant when Peking fell to the communists in January 1949. When this was followed by the fall of Nanking in April and Shanghai in May of that year, the fall of the Kuomintang regime in China became inevitable.

In July 1949 the Tibetans expelled all of the Chinese in Lhasa and central Tibet in the hope that this would insulate them from events in China. But October 1949 saw the formal proclamation of the People's Republic of China by Chairman Mao, and in January 1950 India formally recognised the new Chinese government. Richardson at least realised Tibet was now likely to fall to the Chinese. 'It is', he wrote, 'merely a question of when the Communists choose to come...the only possible line I can recommend for the government to pursue is to arouse moral feelings for Tibet.'⁶⁵

In October 1950 Chinese forces entered Tibet, and the Tibetans have remained under Chinese rule since that time, with the British government acquiescing, for all practical purposes, in China's actions. India, in the first flush of enthusiasm for a new post-colonial world order, was equally muted in its protests, despite Nehru's statement in the Indian Parliament on 7 December 1950 that; 'Since Tibet is not the same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments...the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and of nobody else.'⁶⁶ But India refused to supply further arms to Tibet and soon entered into negotiations with China which implicitly recognised their rule over Tibet. These talks resulted in the status of the Trade Agencies and the Indian Mission in Lhasa being agreed in the Sino-Indian Agreement of 29 April 1954.⁶⁷

The new post-war era which saw the Transfer of Power in India and the communist take-over in China thus spelt the end of Tibet's most recent period of independence, one in which their failure to establish an independent identity on the world stage and to confront the problems of modernisation was to prove fatal to their freedom. Just as the Tibetan Government and their British imperial allies had feared, India was unable, and unwilling, to support the Tibetans against Chinese imperialism. India, in its idealistic attempts to construct a new post-colonial world order, abandoned the imperial frontier policy which had kept their north-eastern borders secure at minimal cost and kept the Tibetans in relative freedom. Instead they opted for a policy of co-operation with the Chinese communists, at the ultimate cost of Tibetan independence and a frontier heavily garrisoned to this day.

In retrospect, official British support for Tibet, and indeed Sikkim, was never more than a tool of wider imperial interests, to be withdrawn when necessary. The frontier officers recognised this, Basil Gould, for example, the Sikkim Political Officer from 1935-45, reported to his government that on a visit to Lhasa he had 'given assurances of continued diplomatic support without committing ourselves to writing.' Thus, when Britain withdrew from India, they abandoned any official contact with, or support for, Tibet and left the Tibetan problem to the new Indian Government. But as Bell had warned many years before, if British India did not support Tibet the result would be that

'Sheep that trusted in the pasture; – O'er the precipice were hurled.'⁶⁸

ENDNOTES

- 1 British relations with Sikkim were regulated by the Treat of Tumlong in 1861 and with Bhutan by treaties in 1865 and 1910. The British did not maintain a permanent presence in Bhutan.
- 2 The service underwent several name changes; the term 'Political Department' was that commonly used by the officers themselves.
- 3 Although the isolated Gartok position was under the control of the neighbouring Indian Punjab Hill States until 1942.
- 4 Re the 'Tibet cadre', see McKay, A.C., *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904-1947*, London, 1997.
- 5 Caplan, L., "Bravest of the Brave": Representations of "The Gurkha" in British Military Writings', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 25.3, *passim* esp. p.590.
- 6 O'Connor, W.F., *On the Frontier and Beyond: A Record of Thirty Years Service*, London, 1931, pp.21-22.
- 7 McKay, *op cit*, pp.122-131. For studies of intermediaries elsewhere in India, see for example, Rudolph, S.H. & L.I., *Essays on Rajputana; Reflections on History, Culture, and Administration*, New Delhi, 1984.
- 8 McKay, *op cit*, p.124-26.
- 9 The issue of Indian ascetics at Tibetan monasteries is as yet unexplored by scholarship.
- 10 National Archives of India (hereafter NAI) FD., 1908, External B May 65, Government of United Provinces to Government of India Foreign Department, 29 January 1908.
- 11 Bell, C.A., *Tibet Past and Present*, Oxford, 1924, p.199. Bell notes that the currency rumour apparently refers to those circulated by the Khilafat Committee, on which, see for example, Niemeijer A.C., *The Khilafat Movement in India 1919-1924*, The Hague, 1972.
- 12 See for example, *My Land and My People*, by H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama, first published 1962, Potala (N.Y.) edition 1985, p.146.
- 13 Oriental and India Office Collection (hereafter OIOC), 1999 E.121, Dr Kennedy's Lhasa mission diary, entry of 28 July 1921.
- 14 OIOC L/P&S/10/218-2134, Yatung Annual Report, 1921-22.
- 15 Bell, *op cit*, p.199.
- 16 Taring, R.D., *Daughter of Tibet*, 1970, New Delhi edition, 1983, p.170.
- 17 Author interview with Mrs J-M. Jehu (who visited Lhasa in 1932 as the daughter of Sikkim Political Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R.Weir), 26 March 1993.
- 18 Bell, *op cit*, p.199; OIOC L/P&S/11/210-4102, Bell (in Lhasa) to Government of India Foreign Department, 12 May 1921; L/P&S/11/201-4756, British Trade Agent Yatung to Government of India Foreign Department, 19 September 1921.
- 19 Bell, *op cit*, p.199.
- 20 McKay, *op cit*, pp.209-17.
- 21 Bell, *op cit*, p.244.
- 22 Bell, *op cit*, p.200.
- 23 Bell, *op cit*, p.244.

- ²⁴ Bell *op cit*, p.244, also see anti-Muslim sentiments expressed on pp.260-61. Despite this stated prejudice, however, there was a Tibetan Muslim community of around 1,000 people in Lhasa, mostly traders with close ties to Ladakh and Kashmir, but including many of Tibetan ethnic origin. There is no evidence that they suffered any undue treatment from the Tibetan authorities or people. For details on this community, see the articles by Ataullah Siddiqui and Abdul Ghani Sheikh in *The Tibet Journal*, XVI.4, 1991.
- ²⁵ OIOC L/P&S/7/229-923, Gyantse Annual Report, 1908-09, cover note by Bell, 11 May 1909; NAI FD, 1909 Establishment B, December 318-321, Bell to India, 29 July 1909.
- ²⁶ Bell *op cit*, p.245.
- ²⁷ Bell, C.A., *Portrait of a Dalai Lama: The Life and Times of the Great Thirteenth*, Wisdom edition, 1987, p.137-38.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*.
- ²⁹ OIOC Bell collection, MSS Eur F.80, 5a 92, Macdonald to Bell, 8 July 1930.
- ³⁰ OIOC L/P&S/12/4163-2202, Report of British Trade Agent Gartok, 13 September 1931.
- ³¹ Weir papers, Lt-Col. J.L.R.Weir to his wife, 9 March 1931, collection of the late Mrs J-M Jehu.
- ³² NAI EAD, 1943 Index, File No 11-A. While Indian archive files relating to Tibet after 1913 are restricted, valuable information may be obtained from the unrestricted indexes concerning these files.
- ³³ Mainprice papers, Cambridge University Centre for South Asian Studies, diary entry of 10 July 1944.
- ³⁴ NAI EAD, Index 1944, File No 191 C.A. Secret. The idea of diplomatic relations with America had been raised by US consular officials as early as 1921, when they met Tibetan officials in Derge; NAI F&PD, Index 1921, External Dec 170-183A, Part B. Tolstoy was a grandson of the Russian author. He served in the OSS, forerunner of the CIA.
- ³⁵ OIOC L/P&S/12/4166-3395, Yatung Annual Report, 1944-45.
- ³⁶ OIOC L/P&S/12/4201-2859, Lhasa Mission Report, week ending 13 May 1945.
- ³⁷ Lamb, A. *Tibet, China and India 1914-1950: A History of Imperial Diplomacy*, Hertingfordbury, 1989, pp.494-98.
- ³⁸ NAI EAD, Index 1946, File No 304 C.A. Lha Tsering was the son of Bell's confidential clerk, A-chuk Tsering.
- ³⁹ Kimura, H., with Berry, S., *Japanese Agent in Tibet*, London, 1990, p.150.
- ⁴⁰ Lamb, *op cit*, pp.499-500. In April 1947, the Reting Regent attempted to regain his position in a *coup d'état*. He died in prison on 8 May 1947. The two events may not be unconnected.
- ⁴¹ Indian Political Intelligence files recently de-classified by the India Office library, but unavailable to me at the time of writing, may shed more light on these events.
- ⁴² OIOC, Hopkinson collection, MSS Eur D 998/18, Hopkinson to his wife, 30 June 1946.
- ⁴³ NAI EAD, 1946 Index, File No 1 (53).
- ⁴⁴ Taring, *op cit*, p.164; Goldstein, M., *A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*, Berkeley, 1989, pp.560-61.
- ⁴⁵ OIOC L/P&S/12/2175, British Mission Lhasa to Government of India, 27 March 1947.

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- ⁴⁶ OIOC L/P&S/12/4197-6072, Richardson's Report on 1946 Mission to Lhasa.
- ⁴⁷ OIOC Hopkinson papers, MSS Eur D 998/39, 'Report on Tibet August 1945 to August 1948', by Arthur Hopkinson.
- ⁴⁸ Hopkinson, A., 'The Position of Tibet', in *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 37.3-4, 1950, p.234.
- ⁴⁹ OIOC L/P&S/12/4197, Government of India to Political Officer Sikkim, 23 July 1947.
- ⁵⁰ Shakabpa, W.D., *Tibet: A Political History*, N.Y. 1984, p.294: 'Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed by the Governments of India and China', Vol.2, 1959, p.39; quoted in Kumar, A., (ed.), *Tibet. A Sourcebook*, New Delhi 1995, p.39.
- ⁵¹ The Indian border regiments who have engaged Pakistan forces in the various conflicts in Kashmir have included numerous soldiers of Tibetan stock; whether these include Muslims is an interesting question.
- ⁵² OIOC L/P&S/12/4197-7218, UK High Commission in New Delhi to India Office, 2 July 1947.
- ⁵³ Lamb, *op cit*, p.511.
- ⁵⁴ OIOC L/P&S/12/4202, Lhasa Mission Report, week ending 17 August 1947.
- ⁵⁵ OIOC L/P&S/12/4197-7982, British High Commission New Delhi to Commonwealth Relations Office, 28 August 1947.
- ⁵⁶ Foreign Office, 371/84449-170649 'Notes on a conversation with Mr J.Reid of the General Electric Company' by G.D.Anderson, 19 January 1950. Reid had spent seven weeks in Lhasa advising the Tibetan Government on a hydro-electric scheme.
- ⁵⁷ Steele, A.T., *In the Kingdom of the Dalai Lama*, Sedona (Arizona), 1993, p.76; this work reproduces Steele's original newspaper reports from his visit to Lhasa in 1944.
- ⁵⁸ Re extraterritoriality, see Bray, J., 'Ladakhi and Bhutanese Enclaves in Tibet', paper presented at the 7th Conference of the International Association for Ladakhi Studies, Bonn, June 1995; Datta-Ray, S.K., *Smash and Grab. Annexation of Sikkim*, New Delhi, 1984, p.42.
- ⁵⁹ Sinclair, W.B., *Jump to the Land of God*, Caldwell (Idaho), 1965, p.76.
- ⁶⁰ OIOC Bailey collection, MSS Eur F157-258, Hopkinson to Bailey, 5 December 1949.
- ⁶¹ Hopkinson, *op cit*, p.239.
- ⁶² In the 1920s, Indian military intelligence had considered the possibility of a Chinese communist government leading to an invasion of Burma and India. But it concluded that this posed no major threat to Tibet; OIOC L/Mil/7/19395 – undated military report on Central Asia, circa 1927.
- ⁶³ Author interview with John Lall IAS, 19 October 1993.
- ⁶⁴ Richardson, H. *Tibet and Its History*, Shambala edition, Boston, 1984, pp.176-77.
- ⁶⁵ OIOC, Bailey collection, MSS Eur F157-259, 5 December 1949.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Kumar, *op cit*, pp.7-8.
- ⁶⁷ The text of the 1954 Agreement and attached notes, along with the Sino-Indian Trade Agreement of 14 October 1954 may be found in Richardson, *op cit*, pp.293-300. The Indian positions were finally closed as a result of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962.
- ⁶⁸ OIOC L/P&S/12/4197-8904, Political Officer Sikkim to Government of India EAD., 12 December 1936; Richardson, H., 'My Direct Experience of Independent Tibet 1936-1949', undated 'Information sheet' available from the Tibet Society U.K.; Bell, *Tibet...op cit*, p.270.