



Impact of British Colonial Rule in the Modernization of Sikkim

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Abstract: Treaty of Titaliya in 1817 made Sikkim a peripheral state—colonial periphery of the British East India Company. Here the term—colonial periphery—has been used to describe the relation of Sikkim with Britain, and this paper also aims to position Sikkim in the larger framework of colonialism for analytical purpose by using post-colonial framework. So far, works carried on Sikkim have been dealt from the orientalist tradition, inherited from the British Raj. This paper is an attempt to analyse the British policy in the key areas of academic concern and is within the framework of post-colonial studies, the methodology used in this study is historical-analytical. It is also an attempt to measure British policy and practice on ‘semi-colony’ of Sikkim. The impact of colonization should be considered an important factor in understanding the present condition and status of Sikkim and its people. Therefore, a close scrutiny of the phenomenon of colonialism is necessary to understand the degree to which it influenced not only the economic and political development of Sikkim but also people’s perception of themselves.

Keywords: Sikkim history, post-colonial studies, modernization, Sikkim-British relations, colonial legacy.

Introduction

The interaction between Sikkim and British East India Company began in the early 19th Century, and subsequent signing of Treaty of Titaliya in 1817 made Sikkim a peripheral state—colonial periphery of the British East India Company. Here the term—colonial periphery—has been used to describe the relation of Sikkim with Britain¹, and also aims to position Sikkim in the larger framework of colonialism for analytical purpose by using postcolonial framework². So far works carried on Sikkim have been dealt from the orientalist tradition³, inherited from the British Raj. The significant point here is that Sikkim was never a colony, or a part of the British Empire, though it was heavily under the colonial influence and control. Therefore, Sikkim’s status can be better described as a ‘colonial periphery’.

The geopolitical and geo-economic significance of the Eastern Himalayan region played a crucial role in drawing the attention of the regional and global powers which sought to dominate the region and impose their political will over the local states (Abilov 2013, 33). The British saw the control of trans-Himalayan trade as a means of gaining access to untapped markets in the North (English 1985, 70). This paper is an attempt to analyse the British policy in the key areas of academic concern and is within the framework of post-colonial studies, the methodology used in this study is historical-analytical. It is also an attempt to measure British policy and practice on ‘semi-colony’ of Sikkim (Ferreira 1974, vi). The impact of colonization should be considered an important factor in understanding the present condition and status of Sikkim and its people. Therefore, a close scrutiny of the phenomenon of colonialism is necessary to understand the degree to which it influenced not only the economic and political development of Sikkim but also people’s perception of themselves (Khapoya 2016, 99).

The History of British Involvement in Sikkim

The history of the British involvement in Sikkimese affairs began positively with the collaboration during the Anglo-Gorkha war. The British signed a treaty with Sikkim in 1817, which restored the lands lost by Sikkim to Nepal in the preceding conflicts of 1770s-90s, and obtained the influence over the Sikkimese foreign relations. The treaty established complete British influence over Sikkim (Pradhan 1991, 154-56; McKay 2009/2010, 31-2, 7). They wanted to strengthen Sikkim as a ‘buffer state’ in the Eastern Himalayan region, as British developed a

¹ To uncover the nature of the relation of Sikkim with Britain, which was the major colonial power in the sub-continent.

² A new line of enquiry that was developed in western theory but yet to use in context of Sikkim.

³ See in Said 1977, 306, Orientalist tradition is a political imperialism which governs the entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, domination and of varying degrees of complex hegemony. It is hegemony or rather the result of cultural hegemony that gives birth to Orientalism. “Orientalism is an explanation in need of explanation”.

stronger awareness of the strategic role of Sikkim as a staging post for colonial expansion into Tibet. They found it to be in their interest to maintain political stability in Sikkim (Hamilton 1828, 549-50; Rao 1972, 5; Negash 1987, 152).

A dispute between Sikkim and Nepal regarding the jurisdiction over a piece of land called Ontoo, situated on the eastern side of the Mechi River (Singh 1988, 177), provided British with the opportunity to intervene into the Sikkimese affairs. In 1828, to settle the issues between the two countries, East India Company deputed British Officers to investigate the matters. While settling the border disputes, they come across a land probably with a hundred of population and considered it appropriate for the prospect of developing it as a health resort for the British soldiers (Namgyal 1908, 61; Bhanja 1993, 2-3; Rao 1972, 7; Kotturan 1983, 60). Their findings suggested that the place would not only make an ideal health resort but that its possession would confer Company a considerable benefits (Pradhan 1991, 158; Rao 1972, 7). The Company opined they should open up negotiations with Rajah of Sikkim⁴ for the transfer of Darjeeling and it would also serve their strategic interests. British were looking for Darjeeling as an ideal sanatorium and to install the troops in such a commanding height, from where they could keep an eye on all the Eastern Himalayan states (Rao 1972, 7; Pradhan 1991, 159).

After annexing a part of Sikkim (Darjeeling), the British developed there the prospects of trade and cultivation. The local administrators tried to turn the hills of Darjeeling into a commercial hub and persuaded to promote tea cultivation. British envisage the immense potentiality of the place as a suitable trade post and a strategic zone which would better serve their interests in the region (Kotturan 1983, 60; Rai 2015, 93; Novati 2005, 54; Sodter 1991, 152). Thoroughly untamed Darjeeling hills became the centre of the colonial project. The excellence of its climate, its fertility, its wholesomeness, and its riches were all guarantees of success for colonising ventures in the hills. The British visualised the use of Darjeeling as a strategic base for the defense of the trade route to Tibet through Sikkim (Kotturan 1983, 60; Sodter 1991, 152). Darjeeling was the important foothold of the British from where they could successfully operate their policies and control larger Eastern Himalayan region. The annexation of Darjeeling proven to be very lucrative because of its commanding height and its strategic location in the Eastern Himalayan region. Darjeeling was a less revenue producing estate with the only hundred of population and was a dense forest. The age-old desire of the British to open up commercial relations with Tibet saw materializing after annexing Darjeeling hills and developing it as a stable trade post. After it's takeover, the intention was to increase the zone of influence over 'independent Sikkim'. Darjeeling's strategic function as a base for regional expansion resulted in an attempt to introduce social changes in independent Sikkim and minimize conflicts between the colonizers and the colonized to maintain Sikkim as a stable strategic base (Killion 1989, 128-29).

Restructuration of Sikkim According to the British Needs

After advancement towards Sikkim, the final domination of Sikkim occurred in 1888 (Mullard 2011, 184), when the British entered Sikkim with military forces, destroyed Lingtu fort and occupied the city of Gangtok (Meyer 2005, 20). The offence between the British and the Tibetans in 1888 manifested that if British neglect their relations with Sikkim, then they would lose their control over Sikkim. After the conflict, the establishment of British Residency in Sikkim, one year before Britain and China settled their issues in 1890 led to the complete consolidation of Sikkim by the British. In the Convention, it was decided that the Teesta river watershed would be the border between Tibet and Sikkim. The watershed flowing north would be Tibetan territory while that flowing south would be Sikkim territory. With this agreement, the Raj obtained effective control over the gateway of Sikkim towards Tibet, whose importance had been demonstrated by the 1888 Lingtu affair (ibid, 52).

The Governor of Bengal had been entrusted to administer the British interests in Sikkim, on behalf of the Viceroy, but, by 1889 the British could not ignore a growing awareness that the trade routes through these mighty mountains offered a potential military access to India; from the north through the route from Gyantse in Southern Tibet, crossing across Chumbi Valley to Sikkim and onward to India. An alternative route also existed from Shigatse in Tibet to Sikkim, and from Sikkim to Darjeeling and finally to Calcutta (the official heart of British India at that point of time) (Meyer 2005, 50, 19; Jha 1985, 30). John Claude White was called upon as the first British Resident in Sikkim, it was decided to rearrange the administration of Sikkim according to the need of the British and to oversee the building of infrastructure, namely roads and bridges that would support the movement of the Indian army into the area, if necessary. Maharajah was deposed for the period of three years (Jha 1985, 29; Namgyal 1908, 113; Meyer 2005, 20) and White took the affairs of Sikkim in his own hands.

Sikkim Council was established to govern the State. According to Grover "A rudimentary administration was created to assist Maharajah in governing the state" (1974, 24). The Council's function was to collect revenues, listen to appeals of subjects and to manage day-to-day affairs of the state. White found himself unexpectedly inserted in the middle of the political and diplomatic melange (Jha 1985, 33; Meyer 2005, 52). With the setting up of Council, it was enlarged to include Nepali *Thikadars* (Landlords) also from the traditional Council. Claude White introduced a new land tenure system by making changes in the land ownership patterns. The *Dzongpons* (Governors), the main agents of the state government at the regional level were replaced by Bhutia/Lepcha *Kazis* (ministers) and the Nepali *Thikadars* (Sharma 2011/2013, 126). In November 1895, the Government of India restored Maharajah to his throne, however with the limited power in the administration and it was affirmed that in a course of two or three years the powers on internal administration would be restored (Namgyal 1908, 114-5; Jha 1985, 25). With the creation of Political Office in Sikkim in 1889, Sikkim entered into the threshold of the modern state.

Establishment of British Indirect Rule in Sikkim

By 1889, the British colonialism had reached its apogee of consolidated power in Sikkim. The British Administration of 1889-1947 in Sikkim was at least juridically not a colony (Negash 1987, 147). Between 1889 and 1947, the British colonial policy hinged around the problems of defining and implementing the system of 'indirect rule' with the local elite as an integral part of the machinery of Government in Sikkim (Negash 1987, 92-3). The indirect rule refers to the areas under the administration of indigenous rulers but defence and foreign policies were completely controlled by the British but enjoyed considerable autonomy in matters of internal administration (Iyer 2010, 693). This strategy involved the incorporation of traditional or indigenous structures and institutions into the colonial politico-administrative machinery. This model of colonial rule entailed the use of indigenous power structures and institutions, including local kings, chiefs, village elders and lineage heads to discharge colonial government duties. These duties included the maintenance of law and order and tax collection. British ideal of indirect rule was the natives were ruled by their own leaders and the interference of the colonial officer was to be limited to 'persuasion in all possible circumstances' given their interests had been secured. As a colonial politico-administrative strategy, indirect rule was cleverly designed to give the 'ruled' the false impression that they were meaningfully involved in the colonial governance process (Akiwumi and Njoh 2012, 211; Negash 1987, 107).

⁴ Sikkim was under Namgyal Dynasty. They ruled Sikkim for 333 years from 1642-1975.

The British had created a zone of influence in Sikkim by establishing it as a 'protectorate' in 1861. By 1889 British influence gradually turned into full control in foreign affairs and internal administration (Cajani 2013, 72). Under the terms of the Convention of 1890, the Indian government obtained the right to make administrative decisions on Sikkim's internal affairs, frontiers and foreign relations (Meyer 2005, 52). This convention was followed by a protocol between the two countries (China and British India) regarding trade, communication, and pasturage which was signed at Darjeeling in December 1893 (Kotturan 1983, 76-7). The British government came to a series of agreements on behalf of Sikkim that gave them great autonomy (Cajani 2013, 73). The period from the late 1880s to the late 1940s marked the zenith of colonial rule in Sikkim (Khapoya 2016, 99). Sikkim was subdued by British in instalments and through stages (Desai 1948, 162). The British took around 70 years in occupying the relationship between British India and Sikkim (McKay 2009/2010, 46). The subsequent section of this paper shall try to explore some of the ways in which the colonial administration policies affected the organisation, directions to the indigenous society through the control of land and the structure of political authority (Sodter 1991, 152).

Evolution of Administrative Set-up in Sikkim

The British evolved the administrative apparatus in Sikkim even penetrating the remotest village in Sikkim. The whole of Sikkim was divided into 90 estates owned by *Kazis*, *Thikadars*, and *Lamas*, who were called as *Ilakadars*. Each *Ilakadars* had several *Mandals* or headmen under him who were responsible for the collection of rents and taxes from the villagers. The number of the houses under each *Mandals* varied from 5 to 60, but the average number of the houses under each *Mandal* is not known and may be estimated at 15 to 20. Each *Mandal* had to keep simple accounts, but many were illiterate and each illiterate *Mandal* employed a man called a *Baidar* or *Kamdari*, who could read or write and kept the accounts for him. It was not known how many *Mandals* were in Sikkim, but the number was estimated in 1910 at 800. There was a list of the estates in the Judicial Secretary's office; the list showing the number of houses in each *Ilakadars* 'estate'⁵.

Each bazar had a block, the six state bazars at Gangtok, Pakyong, Rangpo, Singtam, Rambi and Naya Bazar formed a special circle under the supervision of Bazar Inspector. Other houses under each *Mandal* formed one block, and one enumerator would deal with one or more blocks, for example, the number of houses in each block, their distance from one another, and the number of literate men available such as the *Mandal*, his *Baidar*, or some other person. The blocks were grouped into circles, each circle consists of one or more estates. There were no villages outside the few bazars, but only scattered houses. In preparing the census reports, the supervisors were supposed to be men of understanding English and they received the manual of instructions in English and a copy for enumerators adopted for British India⁶.

Although White's appointment was made for political and military reasons, it also had a substantial effect on Sikkim's socio-economic and internal political situation (Meyer 2005, 52). Sikkim state was impoverished and lacking in most of the structures of modern government. There were no police, courts, or public works and no secular education or public health system (McKay 2007, 87-8). British rule initiated some of the basic changes in the social physiognomy of Sikkimese society, though to subserve their own interest (Desai 1948, xvii). White⁷ reorganized the entire system of administration in Sikkim (Grover 1974, 24). After surveying lands, he divided them into parcels and was instrumental in offering to leading families of Sikkim to manage under a well-codified land tenure system. The agriculture was developed on a large scale, primarily rice and cardamom, by using the techniques of terrace farming. The forest areas were scheduled to be protected and private cultivation tracts were legally described. Land and mineral surveys were conducted, unoccupied wasteland was developed including the land occupied by the monasteries. The land-use changes under White were the beginnings of the gradual decline of the absolute power of the *Kazi* aristocracy in Sikkim. The feudal structure of landholding was partially replaced through the introduction of private ownership and the capitalist methods (Meyer 2005, 52; Grover 1974, 24; Novati 2005, 54).

Claude White brought a new face to the administration in the kingdom by modifying the land tenure system, establishment of forest department and stopped the reckless destruction of valuable Sal forests in South Sikkim and established tea gardens across the border (Pradhan 2011/2013, 220). White initiated revenue-raising measure to obtain the finance necessary to create structures. A land revenue settlement was made, forestry, excise measures were introduced acting through the Durbar (McKay 2007, 88). He also established the police department with its first police post at Aritar, Rhenock (present-day East Sikkim). He also introduced apples from England in Lachung and Lachen valley in North Sikkim (Pradhan 2011/2013, 220).

British brought various villages, towns, and districts into a single politico-administrative unit (Desai 1948, 119). However, the work of colonialism as 'state-maker' was not only confined to the demarcation of frontiers. The primary contribution of the British colonial rule was to establish a system based on capitalist principles and to establish a hierarchically structured organization in the context of a center-periphery scheme that would engender the creation of a common identity (Novati 2005, 54).

The education system was widened and the indigenous people were educated in the English (Novati 2005, 54), the missionary organizations played an important role in spreading modern education in Sikkim (Desai 1948, 129). By 1880s, there were Western model schools in Sikkim itself (McKay 2007, 219). The expansion of education and the political liberalization led to the effective transformation of a feudal society into the modern society (Novati 2005, 55). The aristocratic family managed to reap the maximum benefit generated by the introduction of English education in Sikkim (Aloysius 2008, 41). The British brought up the sons and daughters of the leading aristocratic families of Bhutia/Lepcha into English education. Since *Kazis* and *Lamas* were the indigenous aristocrats of Sikkim and by bringing up their sons and daughters into English education, British wanted to create a section of pro-British aristocrats (Jha 1985, 50).

By introducing modern education in Sikkim, the British brought Sikkimese people in contact with the extensive and profound achievements of the modern west in the sphere of scientific and social scientific knowledge and with the western democratic ideologies, through that education (Desai 1948, 126, 289). Many families were able to advance their social and economic status as a result of granting modern education (McKay 2007, 237). The introduction of modern education in Sikkim was a progressive act of the British rule. It was secular in character, liberal in essence and open to all. It was the key which opened the great treasures of rationalist and democratic thought of the West (Desai 1948, 145). The introduction of modern education was an event of the great historical significance for Sikkim. It was definitely a

⁵ National Archives of Bangladesh, Census—Administrative Report, Bengal Miscellaneous Schedule no. 17, 98. The author visited Bangladesh in the spring of 2016 and summer of 2018. During the late 18th century the Rangpur Collector (present Northern Bangladesh) was the main source of political and commercial information about Sikkim, as well as Bhutan and Tibet. Bangladesh is now not only open to scholars but - Islamic fundamentalism aside - increasingly stable and easily accessible, while the scholastic value of such regional archives is now widely recognised, published in Rai, R. (2017): "East India Company Archives", The IIAS Newsletter | No.76 | Spring, 11. Leiden.

⁶ Ibid, 98-9

⁷ White was an officer in the Public Works Department of British Government.

progressive act of the British rule (ibid, 128). Its anti-authoritarian liberal note, individual liberty, social equality the essential core of modern education, and the collective progress constituted the cornerstone of the western education and its rejection of blind faith and the stress on the modern natural sciences. The first contact with modern western culture through new education was electrifying (ibid, 132-33). The legal system introduced was on a whole equalitarian in contrast to customary law prevalent in the pre-British period. The new legal system was based on the democratic conception of equality of all citizens before the laws of the state (ibid, 155).

However, the introduction of modern education in Sikkim was primarily motivated by the politico-administrative and economic needs of the British in Sikkim. Sikkim was strategically important as the gateway to Tibet and beyond, as the imperial stepping-stone with their regional Political Officer resident in Gangtok and the British inevitably became involved in the internal affairs of Sikkim. It, therefore, became necessary to establish schools and colleges to turn out educated people who would staff the administrative apparatus of the British rule. The British government entrusted the key posts in the state machinery to the British and filled the subordinate posts with educated Sikkimese (Desai 1948, 129; McKay 2007, 174).

In spite of the limitations and distortions of the education imparted, the fact remains that Britain by spreading modern education, liberal and technical, even due to its own needs, objectively played a progressive role (Desai 1948, 129). It should be recognised and remembered that all these changes were taking place to suit the needs of various phases of British capitalism and to subserve the basic interests of the British capitalism (ibid, xviii), not only the British capitalist interests but the military-strategic interests also played a major role in these restructuration (ibid, 119).

British colonialism was first and foremost pragmatic, intended to serve the Empire; and to this end, it was willing to go to any length to accommodate local forces. As time elapsed the liberal ideas began to percolate through the education (Aloysius 2008, 46-8). Through his well-calculated moves and policies, White made Sikkim a well integrated and peaceful corner of British India (Meyer 2005, 54). The colonial administration had sufficient time to carry out in-depth institutional and social reorganization. British Raj undertook the delineation of boundaries, introduced the bureaucratic administration and territorial centralization promoting law and order (Novati 2005, 53). British kept this region as an integrated zone of influence because of the fear that Russia would penetrate into India from the Eastern Himalayan region. The British kept these states as 'colonial peripheries'. In other words, these states were made to be dependent on British India through various schemes.

After White, Charles Bell became the Political Officer of Sikkim⁸ (Pradhan 2011/2013, 220-21). By 1908, the British government had consolidated its position over Sikkim to such an extent that Government of India experienced no trouble either from the Maharajah or from the outside powers like Tibet and China (McKay 1997, 413). Claude White laid the path to economic exploitation and development in the first decade after the establishment of a political office in Sikkim (Novati 2005, 53). Within a decade, Sikkim State revenue had increased from just over £ 500 to £ 150,000 per annum. This income enabled White to begin instituting the development of state structures on the British model and to encourage the introduction of modernity by financing the education of Sikkimese youths in British India (McKay 2007, 88).

According to McKay, 'Maharajah Thutob Namgyal was increasingly supportive of modernization' (2007, 99). And Maharani in a private interview with Lady Minto stated, "..... Mr. White taught us how to collect rents, and taxes, to administer justice, and in every way improved the condition of Sikkim and shed the light of knowledge in the benighted little State" (Namgyal 1908, 140-41). In a time of White, Sikkim for the very first time witnessed how a modern state system work and the structural changes were made to modernize the state. Access to consumer goods as well as the adoption of western values and etiquette were the litmus tests for modernization, but only an insignificant section of the population, mostly in the aristocratic family would pass for being "modernized" (Novati 2005, 54-5). It is evident from the above discussions that, within a decade of the establishment of Political Office in Sikkim, the Government of India (British) consolidated its authority in Sikkim to such an extent that it was able to meddle with liberty in important affairs concerning the royal family (Rao 1972, 123).

Sir Charles Bell with less dictatorial and more persuasive as the Political Officer (McKay 2007, 99; Grover 1974, 28), followed a policy of befriending the local elites and encourage them to gradually transform their state through the development of modern institutions such as schools and hospitals (McKay 2007, 112). Sir Charles Bell encouraged the education of the Sikkimese students. The documents in Sikkim State Archives tell us how cordial the relation was in the reign of Sir Tashi Namgyal, the 11th Maharajah of Sikkim. As per the document No.777/E, dated, 27th March 1916⁹, the Government of India directed Political Officer to give control of the several departments, namely; Excise, Income tax, Police, Jail and Judicial and Revenue Stamps, which was held by the British-Indian government in the time of Maharajah Thotub Namgyal. It shows the trust of Government of India on Maharajah that it agreed to transfer the full powers to Maharajah over the internal administration of Sikkim.

In another letter, the Viceroy of India invites Maharajah to take part in the Chamber of Princes and in other ceremonies in 22nd November 1920, where Field Marshall the Duke of Connaught had been coming to inaugurate the Chamber of Princes. It shows the cordial ties between British Government and Sikkim after 1914. The exchange of letters between Governor General and the Maharajah of Sikkim reflects the same concern. In the reign of Sir Tashi Namgyal the British government did not experience any trouble in governing the state and it lasted till the end of their rule in South Asia.

Conclusion

The organised political and social activity in Sikkim came forth after the inception of colonial rule and this outcome was made possible largely by the accumulated changes and pressures reflecting the transformation process that Sikkimese society underwent under the British colonial rule, whether reality or invention, the state was the colonial "artefact"¹⁰. Britain's time as a colonial power in Sikkim lasted approximately 130 years, its highpoint for Sikkimese administration came afterward of the 1890s when John Claude White was called upon as the Political Resident in Sikkim. Whatever euphoria this elicited was short-lived as Britain was dispossessed of its colonies in the course of the World War II; officially, British colonialism came to an end in South Asia in 1947 with the independence of India (Duncan and Derek 2005, 9). The emergence of the new society after the British takeover of Sikkim was paralleled by the growth of a new outlook among the Sikkimese people (Desai 1948, 229). It was not a mere accident that the pioneers and all subsequent leaders in Sikkimese politics came from the educated classes of the Sikkimese society (ibid, 145). Modernization began because of the penetration of the western ideas in Sikkim (Chatterjee 1993, 116).

⁸ He was a diplomat par excellence and his Tibet Policy was followed throughout by all his successors till the independence of India.

⁹ This is a letter from C. A. Bell to His Highness the Maharajah of Sikkim.

¹⁰ Giampaolo Calchi Novati (2005), "National Identities as a By-Product of Italian Colonialism: A Comparison of Eritrea and Somalia", Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds), 63.

The posting of a Political Officer in Gangtok marked a significant step in the northern advancement of imperial power towards its ultimate regional goal, Tibet. Sikkim was ruled by the British through the Political Office resident in Gangtok but was not under the direct colonialism of Britain, it manifests in many areas—relations between races, historical memory, religion etc.—in the case of religion the British did not intervene in it, religious processes occurred, which continued to patronize religious leaders, at an intensified rate. The contact with the British turn the feudal character of the state into a modern state, the state structure was enhanced; the positive changes that came about in the realm of society and polity were largely by-products of the pursuance of the main objective of the British exploitation of the land and its people. As Ashis Nandy rightly points out that, ‘psychological contours of colonialism in the rulers and the ruled, colonialism may not always begin with the establishment of alien rule in a society and end with the departure of the alien rulers from the colony’ (1983, 2).

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