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British India, Russia, and the Future of Neighborhood Diplomacy: Ekai Kawaguchi's Notes on 20th Century Tibet*

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Tibet and British India

Around the decade of 1880s, a substantial number of native Indians (usually pilgrims and priests visiting sacred places) were permitted to enter Tibet. Ekai Kawaguchi recalled his experience and understanding of the Tibetans and described them as inherently hospitable people, by and large. Assessing the relationship existing formerly between British India and Tibet, Kawaguchi acknowledged that British India was closely connected with Tibet since long. In the initial phase, Tibet's attitude towards the British Indian Government could not be termed resentful or hostile.

The English East India Company's relation with Tibet was initiated by Warren Hastings. During the last quarter of the 18th century, the first de facto Governor-General of India, Hastings, sent George Bogle to establish commercial trade arrangements between the two countries. The first contact in this regard was made by the Tibetans. Upon hearing the news of the defeat of Bhutan's King Desi Shidariva¹ by the British forces in the battle for Cooch Behar (1772-1774), Palden Yeshe (the third Panchen Lama) addressed a historic letter of mediation to the Governor General.² Hastings seized the opportunity, and while replying, proposed a general treaty of amity and peace

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* This is the fourth paper in a continuing series tracing the travels and journey of Japan's first successful explorer inside Tibet in 1900, Ekai Kawaguchi. The narrative, citations, and arguments of this paper are primarily excerpted and based on Kawaguchi's personal memoir published in 1909, titled *Three Years in Tibet*, [Theosophist Office, Vasanta Press, Adyar (Madras) British India.]

1 A. Deb, *Bhutan and India: A Study in Frontier Political Relations, 1772-1865*, (Calcutta Publication, 1976), pp. 72-74.

2 Panchen Lama's Letter, received March 29, 1774, cited in, Arabinda Deb, *Tibet and Bengal: A Study in Trade Policy and Trade Pattern 1775-1875*, available at https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/id/636937/bot_1984_03_03.pdf/

between Bengal and Tibet. Hastings wrote a letter for George Bogle to proceed to Tibet for negotiation of a treaty. Bogle's mission was to establish a mutual and equal communication of trade between the inhabitants of Bhutan (Bhote=Tibet) and Bengal.³

Apart from this, Hastings also sought information regarding the trade between Tibet and Siberia, Tibet and China, and, Kashmir and Tibet. Bogle, armed with a memorandum on the history, religion, and hierarchy of Tibet, ventured out for the first British mission to Tibet and Bhutan (1774-1775) making it an exercise in commercial diplomacy.⁴ Bogle, accompanied by his wife, failed to reach Lhasa, but remained at Shigatze in 1774. With his limited experience and reach in Tibet, he managed to record a graphic summary of the scope and pattern of Tibet's trade with other countries.⁵ The Tibetans traded with the Chinese, the Mongols, and the Kalmuks in the north, and Bengal, Assam, Nepal, and Bhutan bordering Tibet on the south.⁶ Bogle noted that no duties were levied on goods and trade was protected and free from exactions.⁷ This was a major reason for a large number of foreign merchants including the Kashmiris and the Nepalese to settle in Tibet.

Few years later, in 1781, Hastings once again dispatched a commissioner, Captain Turner, who stayed in Tibet for two years, although not necessarily in Lhasa. Subsequently, British India did not send more such commissioners.⁸ Kawaguchi refers to Bogle's account of his journey being extant in print, and notes that the

only English explorer to have reached Lhasa in 1811 from India was Thomas Manning.⁹ Around this time, trade between British India and Tibet had actively grown, but with the termination of Hasting's viceroyalty and subsequent return to England, trade began to register a steep decline, and ultimately ceased altogether. All channels of communications had since become almost closed between the two countries. Meanwhile, the movement and activities of Christian missionaries and other foreign propagandists put the Grand Lama's Government on its guard.¹⁰

During the years when Kawaguchi was in Lhasa (Tibet) and following his departure, the official relationship between Tibet and British India ceased. England's approach towards Tibet in the early phases could best be described as coercive. Kawaguchi attributed the oscillating curve of relations to the hasty policy adopted by England towards Tibet in the early years of the 20th century.¹¹ Moreover, he ascribed it to England's ignorance of the temper of Tibetans, and to the general state of affairs in their country. Kawaguchi argued in his memoir that if the British Indian Government had made some advances acceptable to Tibet, the former could well have succeeded in establishing cordial relations with the latter.

The causes that completely altered Tibet's attitude towards British India and the outer world leading to the estrangement of the Tibetan Government from England were: 1) Sarat Chandra Das being disguised as a

3 Deb, n. 2.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Clements Markham, *The Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, (London 1876), p. 124.

8 Chapter LXXII, *Tibet and British India*, p. 515.

9 Chapter LVIII, *Foreign Explorers and the Policy of Seclusion*, p. 401.

10 Ibid.

11 Chapter LXXII, *Tibet and British India*, p. 509.

Sikkimese priest only to be revealed later; 2) the agitation that occurred within Tibet thereafter; and 3) the frontier trouble that followed these developments.¹² Tibet's adoption of the strict policy of exclusion and absolute seclusion were in fact direct fallout of the above. On the other hand, these developments directed the attention of the British Indian Government to the question of delimiting the boundary between Sikkim (its protectorate) and Tibet.¹³

According to Kawaguchi, it was at this stage that the Tibetan Government adopted a reckless measure, perhaps at the behest of a Nechung and proceeded to build a fort at a frontier position that distinctly belonged to Sikkim. Nechung priests—the oracle-mongers of Tibet, were regarded as guardian angels of the Lama Hierarchy. They were placed under the direct patronage of the Hierarchy. The Nechungs were not confined in their operations to matters of incarnation only, but exercised power even in small affairs. Nechung priests wielded real power in the Hierarchical administration. Rejecting the Nechung's words was considered contrary to the traditions of the country.¹⁴ The Tibetan Government was reportedly hesitant initially to follow the insidious advice, but the Nechung declared that his presence in the fort would disarm any troops that the British Indian Government might potentially send. He further argued that the presence of a fort would go far towards promoting Tibet's cause in settling the boundary dispute and that the fort would become a permanent boundary mark.¹⁵

Consequently, the fort was built at a point

lying beyond the legitimate boundary line of Tibet. The crumbled stone walls standing on a hill about 20 miles on the side of Nyatong (which marked the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet) indicated the short-lived stronghold built by the Tibetan Government¹⁶ – one, in which, the Tibetans suffered heavy casualties.¹⁷ Following this short skirmish, the frontier line was drawn through Nyatong. England's decision to send its forces changed the attitude of Tibet towards the former greatly. Tibet, resultantly, was closed up entirely since that time, not only for British India, but even for Russia and Persia.¹⁸

England, however, did take calculated measures thereafter to win a favorable opinion among Tibetans. The British Indian Viceroy endeavored to convey friendly impressions whenever Tibetans arrived in frontier towns such as Darjeeling and Sikkim. The children of these Tibetans were at liberty to enter Government schools without paying tuition fees, while deserving boys who displayed potential were sent at Government expense to higher educational institutions. It was well known that a number of Tibetan boys were employed by the Indian Government as surveyors, Post Office clerks and teachers, upon completing graduation.¹⁹ The Tibetans would often marvel seeing the roads in British India when they arrived for the first time. Public facilities such as hospitals, asylums, educational institutions, railways, telegraphs and telephones—were objects of awe to the Tibetans.²⁰ All the above notwithstanding, Kawaguchi noted that the policy and efforts of indirectly winning the

¹² Ibid., p. 516.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 515-516.

¹⁴ Chapter LXI, *The Tibetan Hierarchy*, pp. 422-424.

¹⁵ Chapter LXXII, *Tibet and British India*, p. 516.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 517.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 509.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 510.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 511.

goodwill of Tibetans pursued by British India did not succeed grandly, since it failed to change the perception of England in Tibet's Government circles.²¹

Russia's Tibetan Policy

Russia's Tibetan policy went back (at least thirty years) from the time of Ekai Kawaguchi's memoir. It was the time when Russia's activity towards Tibet began attracting attention. Kawaguchi noted that Russia had selected an effective instrument in promoting its interests over Tibet. This was a Mongolian tribe named *Buriat*, whose people came from a district far away to the north-east of Tibet towards Mongolia. The *Buriat* tribe was originally feudatory to China, but over a period of time, came under the control of Russia.²² It came to be known later that many young priests from this tribe were sent to Tibet to pursue Lamaist studies.

Kawaguchi noticed that the young Mongolians mentioned above were found at the religious centers of Ganden, Rebon, Sera, and Tashi Lhunpo among others.²³ It was estimated that there were around 200 such students at those seats of learning. One of these priests, named Dorje became a high tutor to the 13th Dalai Lama while he was a minor. Dorje obtained the honorable priestly title, "Tsan-ni Kenbo" meaning "instructor in the Lamaist Catechism" from the Hierarchical Government.²⁴ When the 13th Dalai Lama became a major, Tsan-ni Kenbo returned home, only to return to Lhasa a few years later, and was regarded highly in the eyes of the Tibetans.

Shata, the eldest of Tibet's Premiers was a close friend of Tsan-ni Kenbo. Belonging to one of the most illustrious families in Tibet, the Shata's house stood in hereditary feud with the great monastery Tangye-ling whose head, Lama Temo Rinpoche, acted as a Regent before the 13th Dalai Lama had been installed. Kawaguchi describes that phase as one in which Shata's star was on a decline. He had to leave the country on a voluntary exile. As a wanderer he lived at times in Darjeeling, and, on other occasions, in Sikkim. It was during the period of his wandering existence that he observed the administration of British India by England, and learnt in detail as to how India came to be subjugated by the former. By those counts, Shata went on to becoming the most regarded authority in Tibet in reference to England's India policy.

It could be argued that to a far extent, Shata was overawed by Britain's power and was equally apprehensive of the possibility of it crossing the Himalayas and entering Tibet. He knew fully well that Tibet would hardly be able to resist the northward march of England.²⁵ Kawaguchi argues in his memoir that it could have well been during the years of his exile during which Shata thought that there might come a point when Tibet would have to choose between Russia and China in seeking foreign assistance against a possible territorial aggression by England.²⁶ When Tibet's internal political affairs became conducive enough for his return, and the supreme power was restored back to the Dalai Lama, Shata was nominated as the Premier.²⁷ At that time, Shata was the best informed man in Tibet, comparatively speaking, be it diplomatic affairs, or foreign policy. His

21 Ibid.

22 Chapter LXXI, *Russia's Tibetan Policy*, p. 495.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 496.

25 Ibid., pp. 501-502.

26 Ibid., p. 503.

27 Ibid.

pro-Russian tendency could be attributed to the close association he shared with Tsan-ni Kenbo.²⁸

Between December 1901 and January 1902, Kawaguchi went on a short trip on horseback to a place about 50 miles northeast of Lhasa. Here he noticed the arrival of around two hundred camels, fully loaded. The loads consisted of small boxes, two packed on each camel. After Kawaguchi returned to the house of his host, the Minister of Finance arrived and during the course of the conversation shared that a heavy load had arrived from Russia, unwilling to reveal anymore beyond that.²⁹ Later on, a Government officer known to Kawaguchi shared that the load consisted of small fire-arms and bullets. It was, in fact, the first time that Tibet appeared to be sufficiently armed to resist a potential attack which England might launch against it. Kawaguchi admitted inspecting one of the guns dispatched by Russia of which the stock bore an inscription attesting that it was made in the United States of America. Though, the Tibetans, being ignorant of Roman letters and English firmly believed that all the weapons were made in Russia.³⁰

Seeing all these developments, China was mortified. Tibet was gradually endeavoring to break off its traditional ties with China, and lean towards Russia.³¹ Having suffered a great loss of prestige in Tibet since the Sino-Japanese war, China was no longer respected, much less feared, by the Tibetans. Previous to the war, China had the penchant to interfere in Tibet's internal affairs, but was helpless now.³² The Tibetans, on their part, were fully aware of the powerlessness of China to take any action

against them and realized that China could no longer be depended upon.

As events unfolded, Tibet's prejudices against England grew. It was seen to be turning naturally towards Russia, whom they knew was England's bitter foe.³³ The Tibetan Government looked hopefully towards St. Petersburg essentially for its spectacular expansion in the 19th century. That notwithstanding, Russia remained a distant power. The nearest station on the Trans-Siberian Railway was a five to six months' march through an extremely hostile terrain. This made supply lines for an occupying force virtually impossible to maintain. Despite the close connect between the Shata and Tsan-ni Kenbo, there were few inside the Tibetan Government who continued to remain cautious about Russian motives. For that matter, Russia's influence in the ruling circles of Tibet failed to make deep roots beyond the Dalai Lama and Shata.³⁴ However, according to other accounts, the real advantage and edge that Russia enjoyed was that Russian goods found in Tibet were of a far higher quality than those which came from British India, whose products were cheap in quality and mass-produced.

The Future of Tibetan Diplomacy

Early years of the 20th century primarily witnessed three countries affecting the territorial and political future of Tibet from a security perspective. These were England, Russia, and Nepal. In this reference, China, as explained earlier, did not count to be of much significance. The prospect of an Anglo-Nepal combination was at variance with Russia's purported objective of bringing Tibet under its control and making

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., pp. 505-506.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., pp. 506-507.

32 Ibid., p. 504.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

it a base of operation in Himalayas' southern side. The circumstantial and political realities of Nepal seemingly confined it to push for its interests alone in Tibet, peacefully, irrespective of Tibet's future vis-à-vis England or Russia.³⁵ Kawaguchi described then ruler of Nepal as 'too intelligent a statesman' who perceived that it would be England that would stand to gain with a lion's share of victory in case of any future trouble between Tibet and Nepal.³⁶ The ruler of Nepal seemingly confined himself to making arrangements with Tibet by means of which the Nepalese could enter and settle in Tibet to carry on profitable economic and trade-related undertakings and establish their influence. This would also result in countering any potential advances of Russian influence in Tibet.³⁷ Nepal's own internal political mess kept it deeply absorbed and it could not spare either energy or money for pursuing any consistent policy towards Tibet.³⁸

Perhaps based on all these pressing geopolitical realities, the future of Tibetan independence as a nation was perennially under question. In his analysis, Kawaguchi refrained from providing a definitive and reassuring answer to the above. Although, he did state that "...during the long period of more than a thousand years, the Tibetan people... maintained the idea of relying upon one or another great power, placing itself under the protection of one suzerain State or another..."³⁹ According to Kawaguchi's notes, the 13th Dalai Lama maintained an oscillating posture towards England, which, at times, was favorable, and hostile, on other occasions. The hostility was

attributed by a few to Tibet's conclusion of a secret treaty with Russia.⁴⁰ It soon started becoming visible that with the passage of time, Tibet was sure to be absorbed by a strong Power sooner or later. There, indeed, was no hope of it continuing to exist as an independent country.⁴¹

Of not much significant consequence was Bhutan, an independent country under the nominal rule of its King, whose power did not go beyond the various tribes of his Kingdom. Kawaguchi mentioned that each tribe directly paid a tribute to Tibet, and not through the King's Government. In return, the tribe received a present from the Tibetan authorities.⁴² Further, the natives of Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim were allowed to travel in neighboring Nepal, as long as they possessed a passport issued by the Commander-in-Chief of Beelganji—a Regent acting authority in the absence of the Nepalese King. No other foreigners were allowed admission into Nepal unless armed with the King's own pass. Nepal possessed two Kings, a *de jure* King and a *de facto* King (named *Panch Sarkar* and *Tin Sarkar* in the Nepali language). The *de facto* King was the real Ruler of Nepal exercising actual sovereignty of the nation, while the *de jure* King was a mere figure-head, who maintained his court by means of a civil list, along with a pension granted by the former.⁴³

Kawaguchi—widely referred to as *Serai Amchi* (the doctor of Sera) began his departure from Lhasa (situated 12,000 feet above sea level) by foot in the summer of 1901 passing through Calcutta by rail and arriving at Kathmandu,

35 Chapter LXXIV, *The Future of Tibetan Diplomacy*, p. 526.

36 Chapter LXXIII, *China, Nepal and Tibet*, p. 523.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 524.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 525.

39 Chapter LXXIV, *The Future of Tibetan Diplomacy*, p. 528.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 529.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 529-530.

42 Chapter LXXXIV, *Five Gates to Pass*, p. 619.

43 Chapter XCIV, *The Two Kings of Nepal*, pp. 683-684.

covering a distance of more than 2,490 miles.⁴⁴ Reaching the boundary of Tibet, or Tsarang, in the Himalayan ranges, Kawaguchi stopped at the town of Boetong. This town was located in the center of the rich and fertile Himalayan plain. Many people from Nepal had immigrated to the town's neighborhood. Though it was under the dominion of England with taxes being paid to the Government of British India, most people residing here were Nepalese, alongside a small number of Sikkimese people.⁴⁵ Further, upon reaching Kalimpong - a thriving town situated around 30 miles east of Darjeeling across a large valley, Kawaguchi noted that the total amount of trade carried out in Kalimpong exceeded that of Darjeeling. The merchants from Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan generally exchanged goods in Kalimpong, and Tibetans, Hindus, Sikkimese, Bhutanese, Nepalese, and Europeans were found to be residing here.⁴⁶ Characteristically, Kawaguchi was prodded by the local English officers posted in these districts regarding details on Tibet in general, and Lhasa, in particular.⁴⁷

On his return journey to Japan from Tibet, Kawaguchi arrived at Raxaul, a border station in Nepal in January 1902.⁴⁸ In his meeting with Kawaguchi, His Majesty Chandra Shamsher (*de facto* King of Nepal) enquired about the powerful personage in Tibet. In response, Kawaguchi identified them as the Dalai Lama himself, and, Shata (Paljor Dorji Shata, whom Kawaguchi believed to be the most powerful among the Dalai Lama's ministers). The King further asked about the position of the Chinese representative in Tibet in relation to the Lama Hierarchy. Kawaguchi confirmed the decadence of that influence. Nepal's King also wanted

to know about Tibet's equation with Russia, especially whether Tsan-ni Kenbo enjoyed the confidence of the Dalai Lama, and that of other high officials. Kawaguchi replied that the Shata along with the Dalai Lama seemed to place infinite confidence in Russia, however, this was much to the distrust and dislike of others in the Government.⁴⁹

During the course of an interaction with the acting Prime Minister of Nepal, Kawaguchi was asked what had induced Tibet to conclude a treaty with Russia, and, if there was any evidence of the same. To this, Kawaguchi responded that since the return of a Tibetan envoy from a mission in the court of St. Petersburg, the Tibetan Government had begun to display greater resolve and firmness in dealing with any country. This could have been a pointer to the Russo-Tibetan treaty in question. He further elaborated that China's ending credit and power stature in Tibet along with the maneuvers of Tsan-ni Kenbo inside Lhasa, had become major drivers for Tibet's changing stance towards British India. However, Kawaguchi simultaneously clarified that there was not any definite proof⁵⁰ of this, and that his analyses and assessments were premised on his long stay, close observations, and multiple vital conversations in Lhasa.

44 Chapter LXXXIX, *Good Bye Tibet*, p. 652.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 656-657.

46 Chapter XC, *The Labche Tribe*, p. 660.

47 Chapter XCII, *My Tibetan Friends in Trouble*, p. 672.

48 Chapter XCIV, *The Two Kings of Nepal*, p. 682.

49 Chapter XCV, *Audience of the Two Kings*, p. 686.

50 Chapter XCVIII, *Interview with the Acting Prime Minister*, p. 698.