

Western History
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ASHELY EDEN MISSION 1864

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Sir Ashley Eden (1831–87), a British administrator, in 1863, was sent on a mission to conclude a treaty of peace and friendship with Bhutan. Eden's mission failed and was followed by the outbreak of the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864–65 (also known as the Dooar or Duār War), in which Bhutan was forced to cede several border regions to the British.

Background

The British Government suppressed the Indian revolt by 1858 and settled down to the work of consolidating its hold on India. The direct assumption of authority by the Crown marked no significant change in British policy in India. Some of the methods and policies which were put into force after 1858 in India had already been adumbrated and initiated by the officials of the Company. (1) This was certainly true in respect of the policy towards Bhutan. The decision made by the Company in April 1857 to take punitive measures against Bhutan in the event of the latter's refusal to agree to its demands was endorsed by the Government of India and implemented in 1860. Then happened the Annexation of Ambari Falakata by Col Jenkins and further deterioration in Indo-Bhutanese relations.

Decision to send a Mission

The dispute on revenue of Ambari Falakata led to sending of a mission to Bhutan by the British Govt of India. The Government of India in its letter to the Government of Bengal dated 23 January 1862, conceded to the proposal to dispatch a mission to Bhutan in order to explain to the Bhutanese authorities the demands of the government of India and the consequences that would follow in the event of their being rejected and to apprise them of the new understanding reached in 1861 between the Government of India and Sikkim.

Instructions given to Ashley Eden

Ashley Eden was appointed envoy to Bhutan on 11 August 1863. He was directed to explain to the Government of Bhutan clearly and distinctly, but in a friendly and conciliatory spirit the reasons for the British withholding the revenue of Ambari Falakata. He was asked to accompany this explanation with a demand for the rendition of all captives detained in Bhutan and the restoration of all property carried off from the British territory or from Sikkim or from Cooch Behar. If the Bhutanese authorities showed themselves to be inclined to meet the British demands,

Eden was to inform them that, while retaining the management of the tract, the British would pay an annual sum of Rs 2.000, or such sum as might be equal to one-third of the net revenue on condition that the Bhutanese Government restrained its subjects from committing outrages on Indian territory or in the states enjoying the protection of the Government of India.

Further Eden was to explain to the Bhutanese Government the position of the two protected and dependent states, namely Sikkim and Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese Government was to be warned that any aggression on these states would be considered by the Government of India as an unfriendly act, that it would be proper for the Bhutanese Government to refer to the Government of India any disputes that it might have with these states and that such disputes would be settled by the Government of India. Not being convinced of the propriety of placing an agent in Bhutan, the Government of India chose to await the return of the mission from Bhutan. Eden was, however, directed to ask the Bhutanese Government to let the Government of India appoint an agent in Bhutan and also depute from time to time a mission to Bhutan to deal with the Government directly. Eden was instructed to arrange for free commerce between the subjects of the Indian and Bhutanese Governments, and for protection to travellers and merchants. He was, moreover, entrusted with the task of obtaining all the information available regarding the nature, population, and resources of the country. The result of the mission was to be recorded in the form of a treaty.

Composition of the Mission

Besides Eden, the mission consisted of a military officer, an assistant to the envoy, a medical officer, and the Cheebo Lama. It had an escort of about 50 Gurkha and Sikh sepoy and a detachment of Darjeeling Sappers. In addition to his duties as the Commandant of the escort Captain W. H. J. Lance was entrusted with the task of making sketches and surveys of strategic routes and places of Bhutan. Captain H.H.G. Austen was appointed assistant to the envoy. B. Simpson was the medical officer. Besides performing his medical duties, he was to assist the head of the mission in obtaining information as to the nature, population and resources of Bhutan. He was also directed to report on its natural products and on matters of scientific interest. The Cheebo Lama was considered helpful to the mission with his knowledge of the language and the customs and manners of Bhutan.

The Mission at Dalimkote

On 4 January 1864, Eden left Darjeeling and entered Bhutan without the consent of the Government of Bhutan. The mission had not moved far into Bhutan when it came across a local Bhutanese official who having received no instructions from the Bhutan Durbar as to the British mission, forbade it to move into the country. Later, however, he relented and allowed it to proceed. On 12 January 1864 the mission reached Dalimkote, where it was received with honour. Being on the British-Indian frontier the Dalimkote Soubah knew very well that it would not do to antagonize the British in his own interest as the revenue of the Ambari Falakata was being remitted to the Government of Bhutan through him. The attitude of the Dalimkote Soubah towards the mission was, however far from friendly and helpful. It is possible that the Dalimkote Soubah restrained himself because of the larger, more vital interests at stake. At one stage Eden even warned him that "he must now make up his mind either to help me or bear the responsibility of my turning back". Eden was, nevertheless forced to leave all his tents, most of the baggage and stores, and about half of his escort at Dalimkote for want of coolies and transport facilities.

In his letter dated 22 January 1864 from Dalimkote Eden wrote to Sir Cecil Beadon, Governor of Bengal. "You cannot conceive the trouble, annoyance and obstruction each day brings forth. I am determined to go on in spite of all and get what I want. His success in bringing the Dalimkote Soubah under his "thumb" made him feel confident that he would prevail over the authorities in the Bhutanese Court. He was convinced that the Bhutanese would have to swallow the bitter pill" despite their hesitation and obstruction.

Despite discouragement and clear non-cooperation from Bhutanese authorities at Saybee, Paro, Haa, and facing desertion by coolies and forced to leave behind almost all the baggage, Eden took the risk to cross too high passes i.e. Taigaon and Choolah. The mission had to march through deep snow continuously for fifteen hours without food. As the mission advanced from Haa the snow became deeper and deeper, and the men and the horses were sunk most of the time up to the neck. Eden himself writes "Evening began to draw on whilst we were still on the Pass, and the coolies became frightened and desponding and many wanted to be allowed to lie down and die." After reaching Paro, he was advised by Paro Penlop

to return but despite meeting deputation from Bhutanese court asking him to return to frontier, he continued further to Punakha.

The Mission at Punakha

The mission reached Punakha on 15 March 1864. A few days after its arrival, the Bhutanese authorities sent for the Cheebo lama and abused him in unmeasured terms" for conducting the mission into their country. On 17 March 1864, when the members of the mission were granted an interview with the Amlah or Council" of Bhutan, they were received by a disorderly crowd of sepoys and servants" of Bhutan armed with "several stones and pieces of wood", and were kept standing out on a plain in the burning sun exposed to the jeers and impertinences of several hundred persons. The Tongsa Penlop, Governor of Eastern Bhutan, who was the dominant member of the Bhutanese ruling hierarchy, acted as the spokesman of the Bhutanese Government. The talks between the Bhutanese and the British were carried on through the Cheebo Lama, for he alone knew the languages of both sides. The draft treaty embodying the demands of the Government of India was submitted for deliberation. The Bhutanese authorities studied it for two days. The Tongsa Penlop raised objections to Articles VIII and IX. Article VIII related to the appointment of an agent at Punakha and Article IX to free commerce between the two countries. The Tongsa Penlop also referred to the return of the Assam Doors".

Eden was not granted an audience either with the Deb Ra or with the Dharm Raja till 20 March 1864. The interview, when it was finally granted turned out to be unsatisfactory. Eden was not received with the dignity and decorum becoming an envoy of the British Empire. Instead of being received inside the palace he was taken into a small tent and the members of the mission were directed "to sit on mats in the sun". Every opportunity was taken to humiliate the mission. After going through the treaty all over again, the Tongsa Penlop stated that a clause should be added to the treaty restoring the Assam Dooars to the Bhutanese. He said that unless it was done nothing else can be discussed or agreed to. Eden retorted that the Assam Dooars would in no circumstances be returned to the Bhutanese, and that it would be advisable for them to forget them altogether and take steps to prevent the loss of other parts of their territory which would inevitably follow on refusal to comply with the British demands. The policy of holding out threats followed by Eden had been quite effective in overcoming the opposition of the local Bhutanese officials on his

way to the Bhutanese Court, but it utterly failed in the Court. Eden's threatening rejoinder to the demand of the Tongsa Penlop infuriated the latter, who took up the draft treaty; crumpled it up, and said that he would have nothing to do with Eden and would resort to war to regain possession of the Assam Dooars.

Eden in Trouble

Eden had expected to control the affairs in the Bhutanese Court in the same way that he had brought the Dalimkote Soubah under his thumb. But he caught a Tartar in the Bhutanese capital. On 24 March 1864, when Eden refused to accede to the Tongsa Penlop's demands he was publicly insulted and derided. Eden had to pocket all these insults. He did not have enough troops with him to overawe the Bhutanese. On 26 March he was asked to sign an agreement by the Bhutanese authorities by which the Government of India was to restore the Assam Dooars and to deliver all Bhutanese slaves and political offenders who had taken refuge in India, and to agree not to encroach on Bhutanese territory. Eden pleaded that he had no authority from the Governor General of India to enter into such an engagement as had been proposed by the Bhutanese authorities. He was, nevertheless, informed that he "must sign and seal the papers." Eden replied that he would do nothing more than convey the Bhutanese demands to the Governor General of India. On receiving that message, the Tongsa Penlop told the Cheebo Lama that unless Eden agreed to sign the treaty, he would imprison both Eden and the Cheebo Lama. Another Bhutanese chief, said that no good would result from any negotiation with the British and that war should be commenced with them by killing all those who were in their hands. On the evening of 26 March Eden consulted the members of the mission. He said that in order to avoid the difficulty in which the mission was placed, he could adopt one of three courses, he could either allow the Bhutanese authorities to detain the Cheebo Lama and himself on condition that the rest of the members were allowed to return to India or make an attempt to escape at night; or sign the treaty which had been forced upon him. Eden thought that his detention would place the Government of India in a very difficult position. It would have to send a force to secure his release, but it would find it no easy matter as the season would soon turn unfavourable, and all Bhutanese rivers would be flooded. Besides, Eden reasoned that if a British force entered Bhutan, the Bhutanese would threaten to take his life unless the force was withdrawn. As for effecting his escape, he saw little chance of eluding the Bhutanese with a small escort of fifteen Sikhs. He, therefore, came to the conclusion that the

only course left to him was "to pretend compliance" with Bhutanese demands. On 29 March 1864 Eden signed and sealed two copies of the treaty, but added the words 'Under Compulsion' on each copy in order to prevent the execution of the treaty. However he gave the Bhutanese no inkling to believe that he had acted under duress.

Main Reasons for the Failure of the Mission

Besides the traditional Bhutanese policy of keeping the British at arms' length, there were several causes for the failure of Eden's mission. The mission was dispatched to Bhutan at a time when its Government was dominated by a chief who was most anti British in his attitude. This attitude might be due, to two factors. First, he was the person who had been most injured by the annexation of the Assam Dooars. Secondly, the confidential adviser of the Tongsa Penlop was an Indian rebel who had gone to Bhutan after the Mutiny. The British demands were extremely obnoxious to the Bhutanese and Eden's dogged determination to push on to the Bhutanese capital in the teeth of Bhutanese opposition further enraged the Bhutanese authorities.

After quelling the revolt of 1857 the Government of India turned its attention to Bhutan. It requested the Bhutanese Government to surrender the captives detained in Bhutan against their will. On the failure of the Bhutanese Government to comply with the above demand, the British took possession of Ambari Falakata, the Bhutanese territory on the west of Teesta, in 1860. But the annexation of Ambari Falakata worsened Indo-Bhutanese relations. Hopkinson, who succeeded Colonel Jenkins in 1861 was inclined to fall in line with his predecessor, who had advocated the annexation of the Bengal Dooars in order to coerce the Bhutanese into submission. He, however, put forth the Idea of a mission to Bhutan as an alternative to the annexation of the Bengal Dooars for enforcing the British demands. The mission, led by Eden, pressed into Bhutan against the will of the Bhutanese chiefs. But the Bhutanese upset the calculations of Eden, who, being coerced and insulted by the Bhutanese, agreed to their terms and conditions and left the Bhutanese capital in humiliation. Eden signed the document in order just to ensure their safe return of his mission to India. But the Bhutanese, were finally brought to heel by British arms.
