

B. H. Hodgson as a factor for the fall of Bhimsen Thapa

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B. H. Hodgson, the British Resident in Nepal was one of the major factors for the fall of Bhimsen Thapa from power. A new dimension of Kathmandu's politics was added by the appointment of Hodgson as the Resident at Kathmandu in 1833. For Bhimsen Thapa this proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. Hodgson's new position was an indicator to the change in the British policy of non-intervention towards Nepal. Hodgson's clandestine involvement in the external politics of Nepal served as an external factor in Bhimsen Thapa's downfall in the near future.

During the *Mukhtiyarship* of Bhimsen Thapa, three British Residents were appointed. They were Edward Gardner (1816-29), Maddock (1831-33) and Hodgson (1833-43). Of these three Residents, it was Hodgson with whom Bhimsen had a tough time and in whom he found a match for himself. However, this does not mean that Gardner and Maddock were not a hard nut for Bhimsen Thapa. What needs to be emphasised is that the first two Residents closely adhered to what they had been instructed to do by the government.

Bhimsen thus had no need to face any difficulties from their sides. But it was entirely different in the case of Wily and intriguing Hodgson who could transfer the boundary laid down by his own government. As a matter of fact as if led by his own enthusiasm and subjective relations Hodgson began to show keen interest in the internal politics of Nepal. In doing so, he did not strictly follow the instruction of his government not to meddle Nepal's internal affairs.¹ So he was frequently at loggerheads with Bhimsen, who rightly chafed at the British Resident's behaviour. He could not take things granted in so far as Hodgson's behaviour was concerned.

Hodgson's resentment against Bhimsen Thapa were both personal and political. Personal because the restriction imposed on the British Residency at Kathmandu and political as the British was anxious to annex Nepal into the British India. Both his predecessors, Gardner, and Maddock had tolerated these restrictions but Hodgson was not at all prepared to be reconciled to such.

restrictions. In his opinion these restrictions were too many and should be removed.²

Hodgson had enormous energy for work. He was appointed assistant to George William Traill, the British Commissioner of Kumaon in the year 1819. It was Hodgson's first appointment in India. Young Hodgson was very much impressed by Traill as the latter was one of the best masters that the former could have had. Hodgson's nature of an inquiring and scientific bent was result of Traill's training to him at Kumaon. In 1820 Hodgson was appointed to the post of Assistant Resident at Kathmandu on Traill's recommendation. In 1822, Hodgson was appointed as a Deputy Secretary in the Persian Department in Calcutta. This opened for him a brilliant career but this came to an end due to his failing health. His health forced him to go to hilly region as W.W. Hunter in his book, *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson* his opined that Hodgson had to choose between an appointment to the hills or a grave in the plains. He was back to Nepal in 1824, and took the post of Post-mastership as his earlier post i. e. Assistant Residency was already up.³

In the year 1825, the post of Assistant Resident was again vacant at Kathmandu and Hodgson was reappointed to the post. In 1829 on Edward Gardner's retirement, he become the Acting Resident till 1831 i.e till T.H Maddock was appointed as the Resident. In 1833, Hodgson succeeded Maddock as a Resident and retained this post till 1843. Hodgson resented of doing nothing for an indefinite period in Nepal. As he was an energetic man, he was very much dismayed by finding himself virtually shut up within the Residency's four walls, except for a short routinal morning ride

inside Kathmandu. He often found himself ill at ease because of "so prolonged a study in the art of looking on⁴."

Hodgson was equally a versatile scholar. His knowledge of language, religion, zoology and botany of the Himalayan region was remarkably profound. He was beginning to be recognised in Europe as a unique orientalist.⁵ According to one of the restrictions imposed by the government of Nepal was that the Resident and his suit were debarred from going out for excursion in the neighbourhood of Kathmandu. Peasant were instructed to harass the Residency official, if ever the latter appeared in their field for their seasonal shooting. All these were too irritating to Hodgson, who by nature was of an inquiring and scientific bent and wanted to spend his spare time in visiting the various monasteries and collecting materials for his research work. Thus from his own personal point of view Hodgson resented Bhimsen Thapa's policy and regarded any restriction imposed to curb his outings as an insult to the representative of the all powerful British Nation, he represented. The extent to which he felt irritated at when areas outside Kathmandu were out of bound for him was manifest in his remark "I am decidedly of the opinion that it were better to put an end to the ludicrous mockery of Chinese foreign policy which the Minister had endeavoured to play off against the Residency since its establishment here⁶."

Hodgson had spent many years of his life in Nepal. This helped him to gain abundant knowledge about the country and its people. J. L Morrison has rightly pointed out that he knew Nepal more than any other living English man.⁷

During his long stay at Kathmandu, he had keenly watched the internal affairs of Nepal from close quarters. He knew the essential objective of his government's policy towards Nepal. After becoming the Resident he came to realize that the British had achieved none of his objectives by following the policy of non-interferences in Nepal's internal affairs.⁸ By the year 1834 Hodgson understood beyond any shadow of doubt that Nepal under the strong administration of Bhimsen Thapa was not willing to change her pattern of behaviour as expected by the British. To him Bhimsen was like a thorn in the path of the British interest in Nepal. He came to the conclusion that without his fall none of this interest had chance of being realised.⁹

Hodgson wanted his government to end the policy of non-interference once for all in Nepal. He was even in favour of applying force to achieve this. He further suggested to his government that they should immediately come to an understanding with Bhimsen rather than the *Durbar* because of his being the "Alpha and Omega" of the country.¹⁰

In the beginning Hodgson had tried to come an understanding with Bhimsen in the pursuit of his objective. But Bhimsen saw through the intention of the British Resident and could ill afford to play a second fiddle to him.¹¹ Hodgson resorted to craftiness when he set out to establish a working alliance with those group of the Nepalese political elements, who could be subservient to him. At first he used covert method and subsequently came in the open to interfere in the internal affairs of the Nepalese court. In doing so, he scarcely anticipated that

in showing the wind he would have to reap the whirl wind willy nilly.

Hodgson looked with grave concern at the increasing large army of Nepal being prepared by Bhimsen Thapa. He saw a positive danger to the British interest from such an army maintained on a strategically important frontier. To avert any danger from befalling the British territory, Hodgson wanted to change the martial and warlike people of Nepal into peaceful and docile one. He had a plan to do so which he elaborated to the government in his despatch, dated 31st May, 1834, remarking "I would reach the government through the people commerce should be my instrument¹²."

There is no doubt that Hodgson's aim of encouraging the growth of trade and commerce between Nepal and British India was motivated by political considerations rather than anything else. He calculated that growth of Indo-Nepalese trade would bring to the fore a new social class of traders capable of eventually replacing the old feudal warrior class. According to him the interest of this new class being primarily trade, it would follow a different policy bound to play subservient rule to the British. Besides, Nepal would be increasingly dependent on the British goods, thereby paving the way for "a command over its want", as Hodgson perceived in his own way.¹³

Hodgson was not in favour of the continuity of the British government's policy to acquiesce.¹⁴ as, in his opinion, Bhimsen Thapa was not the man to whom the British could easily effect any change in Nepal's political and social institutions. Further, he

saw the non-interference policy harming some of the basic British interest in Nepal. He was of the opinion that his government had given the Nepalese an advantage against the British subjects and the British products. According to him, Nepal while making every use of the commercial treaty of 1792, paid only two and a half per cent of the stipulated duties for their goods and obstinately refused any reciprocal benefit to the British government.¹⁵ The custom duties on Indian goods destined to Nepal were levied at many places inside the country and the duties thus levied came to be much more than two and a half percent.¹⁶ Besides Bhimsen Thapa's policy ran counter to the interest envisaged by Hodgson. Bhimsen Thapa took every means to put obstacle in the way of free commercial intercourse between Nepal and British India so much so that even the security of India traders was not guaranteed. Indian traders could not have direct access to the British Resident. They had practically no legal status for redressal of grievances against Nepal.¹⁷ Under these circumstances no bilateral trade mutually profitable could develop between Nepal and British India. Hodgson was intelligent enough to understand Bhimsen's strategy.

The death of the Regent Queen Lalita Tripura Sundari in 1832 and King Rajendra Vir Vikram Shah attaining his majority in 1833 had made it clear to Hodgson that *Mukhtiyar* Bhimsen Thapa could no longer be as powerful as he had been before. Factional politics began to appear in surface in full view due to the partisan behaviour of King Rajendra and his ambitious queens. Hodgson took advantage of this new situation and made matters worse for Bhimsen Thapa.

Thus due to various political and

personal reasons as described Hodgson wanted the fall of Bhimsen Thapa from power so that British interest in Nepal could be realised. He relentlessly pursued his policy in that direction from 1834 onwards.

The first measure Hodgson took in pursuance of his objectives was to demand direct audience with the King.¹⁸ Since the establishment of the British Residency at Kathmandu in 1816, Bhimsen Thapa had prevented the Resident from having a direct access to the King on the ground of the latter minority. Bhimsen Thapa had exercised his monopoly over the government's official communication to the Residency. Hodgson felt that in such a situation the Residency was entirely dependent on Bhimsen Thapa's personal predilection and there was no way either to secure the sympathy of the King or of the counsellors for the British cause or to keep them informed about the real state of internal or external affairs either in British India or in Nepal. He also felt that the style in which the *Mukhtiyar* functioned had misrepresented British policies and actions and misguided the King and the Counsellors alike while keeping them in dark about denial of even ordinary privileges and facilities in the name of the *de jure* ruler the King.

Hodgson wanted to break this sort of monopoly exercised by Bhimsen in order to have a direct access to the King. He felt that by doing so, he would be able to acquaint the King as well as the court with the real intention of the British and thereby free the Residency from Bhimsen's whims and caprices if any.¹⁹ Hodgson held that his demand for a direct audience with the King was not an interference in the internal affairs of Nepal but his right and privileges due to an Ambassador representing his nation.²⁰

Hodgson also justified interference if British subjects in Nepal were denied justice. He argued that such a denial was a just ground for interference. This clearly indicates Hodgson's attitude towards Bhimsen Thapa as so far on one from among the traders in the British territory had lodged any complaint of denial of justice. This was a fact he himself had accepted.²¹

In August 1834, Hodgson opened the whole question of trade, in Nepal with Bhimsen Thapa, raising the issue of the commercial treaty of 1792,²² which in practice occupied a very ambiguous position. It was clearly affirmed by the treaty of 1801, but the treaty of Sugauli neither confirmed nor invalidated it. The British government honoured the treaty and uniformly and regularly charged two and half per cent duties on Nepalese import. The Nepal government on the contrary violated all the articles of the treaty of 1792 and instead of two and half per cent levied ten per cent duties on goods imported from India. Besides this, the Nepalese government levied not only at the main post of the entry of duties goods but also at various minor posts during their transit. Hodgson insisted that the disparities in the duties must be removed and the terms of the treaty should be binding on Nepal.²³ His stand placed Bhimsen Thapa in a quandary. He could ill afford to come into a direct clash with the British Resident particularly at a time when his power was on the wane. On the other hand to comply with Hodgson's demand would have been no less disastrous, as it was likely to cause loss of not only national income but also of the Anglophobia of the counsellors which he had successfully nursed so far.

In more than one way, it was unfortunate for Hodgson that the

British government of India did not accept his line. Hodgson was rebuked for his stand. He was instructed to observe strict neutrality, adopt conciliatory attitude towards all parties in Nepal and not to take sides in the factional politics of the Court of Kathmandu.²⁴

Similar as regard the operation of the treaty of 1792 was concerned the British government adopted a milder attitude towards the Nepal government in contrast to Hodgson's insistence on its operation on reciprocal basis. This led Bhimsen to refuse to abide by the treaty in November 1834²⁵. To the surprise of Hodgson Bhimsen Thapa proposed shortly after a new commercial treaty on first December 1834. This was manifestation of his friendly gesture toward the Residency.

If Hodgson knew the ins and outs of Nepal and her people Bhimsen was no less knowledgeable about the real objectives, the sources and strength of the British. It was not on account of fear of adverse trade balance that he had refused to give the usual privileges to the Indian traders but he was apprehensive of political repercussion of the expansion of trade interest of the British into Nepal. Bhimsen Thapa was fully aware how the British had come to India as traders and became its master over time.

However towards the end of 1834, Bhimsen Thapa modified his policy vis-a-vis the British because of political expedience. By and by he realized the value of Hodgson as an ally particularly at a time when his authority was slowly declining. This would explain the friendly and conciliating gestures he began to show towards the Residency even earlier from the middle of 1834.

To win the favour of Hodgson, Bhimsen Thapa granted the Resident and his subordinates direct access to the King, a privilege for which Hodgson had been fighting ever since he had become Resident. He waived the right to search the Resident's personal bargain and stores. He gave permission to the Resident and his suit to go out a few miles outside Kathmandu for their excursion.²⁶ He even permitted Hodgson to build summer residence of the British Residency in one of the adjacent hills situated a few miles away of Kathmanbu.²⁷

In the meantime new development had been unfolding themselves at the court. They all indicated a positive threat to Bhimsen's power and position. He could not ignore the spurt of the *Kala Pandes* encouraged by the senior Queen of Rajendra Vikram Shah. The *Kala Pandes* petitioned the King for the revival of their family honours and properties confiscated in 1804 at Bhimsen's instigation. The petition was received favourably by the King who instigated by his senior queen, was in search of an opportunity that would counteract the over dominating influence of Bhimsen Thapa. The King's action made it obvious to all including Hodgson that Bhimsen's authority no longer appeared to be unchallengeable.

This was a new development that led Bhimsen Thapa to devise ways and means in quest for his security more desparately than ever before. This was why his need for British support to enable him to maintain his declining power became increasingly evident. He even proposed to Hodgson on 27th April, 1835 that he himself or Mathbar Simha Thapa, his most trusted nephew would like to take a voyage to England.²⁸

It is fairly clear that in the first place Bhimsen Thapa himself intended to visit England but he subsequently abandoned the idea of his personal visit favour of that of his nephew Mathbar Simha Thapa. Hodgson encouraged Mathbar's visit to England and strongly recommended to the Governor General at Calcutta to permit Mathbar to visit England.²⁹

The proposal of Mathbar Simha Thapa's visit to England was received cordially by the British government on the recommendation of Hodgson and the Governor General with the belief that it would help in augmenting the trust Nepal reposed in the British. Soon after the Nepalese Government was informed that Mathbar Simha would be received favourably by the British authority at Calcutta and England.

In the meantime, the Nepalese government made some addition as regards the intended visit of Mathbar Singh Thapa. Hodgson was informed by the Nepal Government on 23rd June 1835, about the King's desire to send Mathbar as the bearer of a complimentary letter and present from him to the King of England. While reporting to government about the newly added purpose of the proposed visit Hodgson felt that Bhimsen was a sole author and that he hoped to achieve some material gain from Mathbar Simha's visit to England by way of security, either the removal of the Residency or the recovery of Kumaon. He further added upon Bhimsen's failure to achieve his object from the Residency he was now planning to get a direct line of communication with the authorities of Calcutta and England. Even then at that stage Hodgson did not see any sinister design of Bhimsen and pleaded his government that Mathbar be permitted to

visit to England with complimentary letter and presents of his master, the King of England. Hodgson was also inclined to believe that permission granted to that effect would be tantamount to a display of friendly disposition of the British Government towards the Nepal Government.³⁵

In October 1835, the Government of Nepal added a new item in the programme of Mathbar Simha's proposed visit. In addition to the complimentary letter and presents to the King of England, he was to lead a splendid complimentary mission to the Government General of Calcutta.³¹

Mathbar Simha departed from Kathmandu on 27th November, 1835 for Calcutta. He was accompanied by a large retinue of two thousand men including 600 picked soldier, 200 officers, 900 carriers, 15 Khalasies, 50 horses and 40 elephants.³² He also carried expensive presents from the King of Nepal to the King of England on the whole Mathbar's mission was a costly one.

No doubt Mathbar Simha's mission to Calcutta was politely received and dismissed by the Governor General at Calcutta as of no consequences. It was a mere show put up by the Nepal *Durbar* to impress the British authorities at a huge cost to the national treasury. As a matter of fact nothing substantial was achieved by it. On the whole, the mission was a signal failure. It appeared as the last effort of Bhimsen to win over the British support for him in order to counteract opposition at the court. Even this objective was reduced futile by Resident Hodgson's sabotage. Not surprisingly he was severely criticised by his opponents for squandering national wealth, on such a costly but pointless show. However Bhimsen, being still powerful

ire of his opponent was particularly directed at Mathbar. The opposition headed by Ran Jang Pande further found it convenient to accuse Mathbar of adultery with his sister-in-law. They failed to produce any substantial proof and got away with it.

The failure of the mission hastened Bhimsen decline. Mathbar returned back in March 1836 from Calcutta and Bhimsen fell from power in 1837. This was what Hodgson wished. The main factor responsible for the failure of the mission was Hodgson who was anxious for the overthrow of Bhimsen Thapa regarding it as essential to strengthen and secure British position in the frontier region. Hodgson anticipated the failure of that costly mission would cost Bhimsen Thapa dearly. So, from the very beginning he resorted to all sorts of under hand methods to sabotage it, keeping the Nepal *Durbar* completely in dark about his intrigues. How great a double dealer was he would be manifest from the way he openly encouraged Bhimsen originally planned mission to England but used underhand method to wreck it by not allowing to proceed beyond Calcutta. A person who deadly hated Bhimsen could not be expected to enable him to secure a semblance of British support at that particular period fearing that even that would strengthen his authority.

Thus Hodgson was an important external factor for the fall of Bhimsen Thapa. He was very much pleased when Bhimsen fell from power and imprisoned on the charge of poisoning of the infant prince Dependra, younger son of the senior queen— an intrigue hatched by the Kala Pandes. Hodgson even went upto the extent of advising King Rajendra in September 1837 not to release Bhimsen from his imprisonment, although the later told him that there was no evidence

against Bhimsen.³³ All these indicates Hodgson wanted the fall of Bhimsen to fulfill his objective i.e. British interest in Nepal and was a major factor for his fall.

Foot Notes

1. M.S. Jain, *Emergence of New Aristocracy in Nepal* (Agra, 1872), PP.40-41.
2. FSC, 5 March, 1883, No.24. NAI, New Delhi.
3. William W. Hunter, *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson*, (London, 1896). PP63-64.
4. Ibid; PP.76-77.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. PP.129-35.
7. J. L. Morison, *Lawrence of Luknow* (London, 1934), P.136.
8. FSC, 9 October, 1834, No. 17, NAI, New Delhi.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. FSC, 5 March, 1833, No. 33, NAI, New Delhi.
12. FPC, 12 June, 1834, No. 140, NAI, New Delhi.
13. Ibid.
14. FSC, 9 October, 1834, No. 17. NAI, New Delhi.
15. FPC, 12 June, 1834, No. 38. NAI, New Delhi.
16. FPC, 21 August, 1834, No. 38. NAI, New Delhi.
17. Rama Kant, *Indo-Nepalese Relation: 1816-1877* (New Delhi, 1968), P.82.
18. FSC, 5 March, 1833, No.24. NAI, New Delhi.
19. FPC, 19 March, 1833, No. 26, NAI, New Delhi.
20. FPC, 6 November, 1834, No. 25, NAI, New Delhi.
21. Jain, N,I,P. 11.
22. Rama Kant, N.17, PP. 119-120.
23. FPC, 9 October, 1834, No. 17, NAI,
24. FPC, 9 October, 1834, No.19. NAI, New Delhi.
25. FPC, 2 December, 1834, No. 87. NAI, New Delhi.
26. FPC, 22 May, 1834, No.46. NAI, New Delhi.
27. FPC, 24 April, 1837, nos. 1-83, NAI, New Delhi.
28. Ibid.
29. FPC, 25 May, 1835, No. 34. NAI, New Delhi.
30. FPC, 13 July, 1835. no.61 NAI, New Delhi.
31. FPC, 26 October, 1836. no.22. NAI, New Delhi.
32. FPC, 26 October, 1835, no. 23-24 NAI, New Delhi.
33. FSC, 9 October, 1837, No. 45. NAI, New Delhi.