CHAPTER-2

POLITICAL RELATIONS

I

Geopolitical environment

The northern part of Bhutan lies within the Great Himalayas. In some places the mountain ranges have a height of more than twenty four thousand feet. In summer, valleys at elevations of twelve thousand feet are used for grazing. The Black Mountain range forms the watershed between the Sankhso and the Manas rivers. It divides Bhutan into two geographic sub divisions both administratively and ethnographically.

In Tongsa to the east the people hail from hills of Assam. To the west in Paro the population is predominantly Tibetan in origin. A number of broad fertile valleys of central Bhutan constitute the cultural and economic core of the kingdom. These valleys are located at elevations from five thousand to nine thousand feet. Among these the Paro, Thimpu and Punakha valleys are well-known.

The southern section of Bhutan slopes into Dooars plain. Rainfall is excessive in this region. The hill sides have rich vegetation. The narrow strip of Dooars plain have eighteen strategic passes through the Himalayan foot hills which lead into mountainous central Bhutan. Most of the inhabitants in central and northern Bhutan cling to Tibetan culture. The large number of Nepali settlers in southern Bhutan are Hindus. “In eastern Bhutan culture has been considerably modified by the intrusion of elements from the Indo Mongoloid culture of Assam Himalayas”\(^1\). The fixed facts of geography has given shape to fluid facts of politics in Indo-Bhutan relations through the ages.

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Early history of Bhutan

To what extent has the early Bhutanese culture been shaped by both the streams-Indic culture and Tibeto-Mongolian world? Indic culture has left only marginal impact whereas the Tibeto-Mongolian culture has a greater impact. But Bhutanese people maintain their own distinctive cultural identity.

The early history of Bhutan is shrouded in mystery. Michael Aris in his Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom (Warminster and New Delhi, 1979) has thrown light on the early phase of Bhutanese history. In his subsequent work Sources for the History of Bhutan (WIEN, 1986) he has examined four important texts, because of their value as crucial source material on the formative era of Bhutanese history, as they cover the entire period leading to the full emergence of the Bhutanese theocracy.

The first text (1728) is entitled rGyal-rigs 'byung-khungs gsal - ba' i sgron-me. The author of the text is monk Ngag dbang (Wa gindra) of the Byar clan. This work mentions some ancient ruling clans and families of central and eastern Bhutan. Aris points out that these clans claimed descent from a Prince of Tibet. It is to be noted that there is absolutely no mention of India’s contact with Bhutan in this text.

The second text entitled d Pal 'brug - par lung - lha' i gdung - brgyud - kyis bstan - pa' i ring - lugs is written by Ngag dbang. This is an undated text. The geographical terms used in these texts are obscure. The value of the work is that it contains a number of eye-witness reports. This text also contains no reference to Bhutan’s contact with India.

The third text is the Bhutan Legal Code of 1729 composed by bsTan - 'dzin Chos-rgyal for and on behalf of the 10th 'Brug sDe - srid, Mi - pham dBang - po at the start of the latter’s eight year reign. Eminent scholars like Petech and White affirm that this particular code enjoyed a constant validity through later Bhutanese history.

The fourth text is the translation of Cacella’s Relação. This document is highly significant because it contains a detailed account of Cacella’s meeting with Zhabs drung Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal (1594?-1651), the founder of Bhutan. Cacella and his fellow Jesuit Cabral, spent several months in the Zhabs – drung’s company in 1627. However,
his book is still, basic reading for those who wish to see Cacella’s account in the wider context of Jesuit missions to Tibet and Central Asia.

Aris conjectures that ‘Cambirasi’ was a local name for Bhutan used by the people of Cooch Behar. This is what Cacella learnt from his attendants. The Christian missionaries later heard in Tibet that the proper name for the country was unspecific term Mon. Wessels speculates that Cambirasi may be related to Chumbi. The latter was the name used by the British for the Gro-mo valley between Bhutan and Sikkim. But Aris did not agree with this view. The ending ‘rasi’ may well be the same as ‘Razi’ (mountain) as found in the names of many of the peaks which lie on the border of Tibet and Burma. Aris conjectures that this word obviously belonged to one of the many tribal languages of North Burma which was perhaps transmitted westwards to northern Bengal through the medium of the Ahom people of Assam.

In the eighth century A.D. when Saint Padmasambhava visited the country, Bhutan was known as Mon Yu, the land of Monpas. Since the sixteenth century A.D. the country was known as Druk Yul, the country of the Drukpas. Most of the Bhutanese were followers of the Drukpa sect of Lamaism. Druk means a thunder dragon. It was the religious symbol of the Drukpas. Bhutan is also known as the land of the Thunder Dragon.

III

Tibet and Bhutan

David Field Rennie thinks that Bhutan consists of two words: Bhut (a corruption of the word Bhota or Bod which means Tibet) and Tan (a corruption of the word Stan as found in the Indo-Persian word such as Hidustan, Baluchistan and Afghanistan).
B. Chakraborty thinks that Bhutan is derived from the word Bhutanam, much the same way as the name, Iran has come from Aryaman (desah), ‘Rajputana’ from Rajaputranam and Gandana from Gandakanam. Thus Bhutan is the country of the ‘Bhotas’.

Tibet tried to annex Bhutan quite a number of times. But Bhutan foiled its attempts and maintained its independence. Phuntsok Namgyal, the King of Tsang, invaded Bhutan in 1639. A Bhutanese legend has stated that the Tibetans were harassed and defeated in the battlefields by the guardian spirit of Lama Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the Dharma Raja of Bhutan in the shape of the bird Garuda. Besides the Tibetans, the Bhutanese had to cope with the cunning diplomacy of the Chinese Ambans (representatives) in Lhasa for centuries. The Chinese attempted to introduce their seal in Bhutan at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The attempt to introduce Chinese seal to Bhutan remained the disturbing question even when Bogle visited Bhutan in 1774.

In 1874 Rampini had an audience with the Deb Raja and the latter was in no way a tributary to China. An annual exchange of presents was only a matter of reciprocal courtesy. Bhutan sent presents of an approximate value of Rs. 7,000/- to the Chinese Amban at Lhasa and received presents in return of an approximate value of Rs. 10,000/- only. Chakraborty has mentioned variety of religious beliefs prevalent in Bhutan and Tibet. He has also argued that Bhutan was never under ‘political control’ of Tibet. Both Charles Bell (The Religion of Tibet, OUP, 1931) and H. E. Richardson (Tibet and its History, OUP, 1962) have included Bhutan within the cultural orbit of Tibet. Nari Rustomji noticed in Bhutan “a feeling of almost contempt toward Tibetans”. The Tibetans in Bhutan today are “threat to national security”. The varied responses stir up curiosity. A critical estimate of Tibet-Bhutan relations in deeper perspective and fuller measure could clarify the issues that confuse us. In The Religion of Tibet, Charles Bell has drawn our attention to the history of Bhutan entitled “The Regions

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10. Bell, p.213.
History of the South (Lho-i-cho-Jung) as worthy of a high place”. It appears that Chakraborty has ignored this source material. It is strange but true that Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan (edited by Surendra Nath Sen and published by University of Calcutta, 1942) which contain some important materials on the history of Bhutan, has escaped the notice of most of the scholars who have thrown light on the early history of Bhutan.

IV

Stages of political relations

The political boundary between Bhutan and India has emerged as a result of the British annexation of large portions of Bhutan’s Dooars adjoining Assam and Bengal. The area of Bhutan ceded to British India upto 1864 comprised of eighteen Dooars, that is to say, a strip of territory averaging 22miles in width and 215 miles in length. These annexations fixed the southern boundary of Bhutan.

The political relation between British India and Bhutan were conducted through Bengal till 1904. After that the relations were controlled by British Indian Political Officer of Sikkim resident at Gangtok. He was at the same time entrusted with the political relations with Tibet. The Treaty of Sinchula between British India and Bhutan was signed in 1865. The Treaty stipulated inter alia the provisions of free trade between the two countries and the arbitration by the British Government of India in all disputes between Bhutan on the one hand and Cooch Behar and Sikkim on the other. The relation between the two countries had a stable foundation in Anglo-Bhutan treaty of 1910. According to Ram Rahul,

The Anglo Bhutanese Treaty of 1910 was a turning point in the history of Bhutan. Bhutan was now under British tutelage almost like any other native state in India. It lost its external sovereignty and became a British protectorate even though there was no mention of the term protectorate in the Treaty. The Anglo-Bhutanese treaty of 1910 thus marked the culmination of a process in Anglo-Bhutanese relations which had started with the treaty of 25 April 1774 between the Government of Bhutan and
the East India Company. It secured for the British Government the right to conduct Bhutan's external relations and preclude any other power from exercising any influence on Bhutan. It placed Bhutan almost on the same footing as Sikkim. The Political Officer in Sikkim (POS) looked after British interests in Bhutan. So all that the Anglo Bhutanese treaty of 1910 did was to enable the British Indian Government to secure its north-east frontiers. It eventually proved to be a sound barricade to Chinese intrusion into Bhutan. Briefly, it frustrated China's design on Bhutan.\footnote{Ram Rahul, \textit{Royal Bhutan: A Political History}, (New Delhi, Vikash Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1977), p.11.}

Rahul argues that Druk Gyalpo, Ugyen Wangchuck tilted towards British Government in India for three distinct reasons. First, the British success against Tibet in 1904 deeply impressed him. He was convinced of British military superiority. Secondly, he was in search of protection against Chinese expansionist policy towards Bhutan. Thirdly, he was convinced that Bhutan can exist as a separate political entity only at the pleasure of the British Government. Indeed he had no other alternative to pursue.

In October 1921, Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, the Governor of Bengal bestowed the insignia G.C.I.E. (Grand Commander of the Indian Empire) on the Druk Gyalpo, Maharaja Ugyen Wangchuck. But the Druk Gyalpo was unable to meet him due to influenza. Next year, Colonel F.M. Bailey, the Political Officer in Sikkim, took the same insignia to Bumthang where the Gyalpo was then staying. Lord Willie Peele, Secretary of State for India, defined in 1923 the political status of Bhutan as an autonomous state under British suzerainty. The Government of India Act 1935 did not take into account the status of Bhutan. So Bhutan remained completely outside its purview.

Jigme Wangchuck (1905-1952), eldest son of Ugyen Wangchuck ascended the throne of Bhutan on 21 August 1926. On the occasion of his coronation on 14 March, 1927, he declared that he would continue his father's policy towards the British Government of India. But his accession to the throne was challenged by Shabdrung Lama Jigme Dorji. The latter also sought support of the 13th Dalai Lama, Thupten Gyatso (1876-1933). But the attempt proved abortive. The policy of the British Government of India towards the regime of King Jigme Wangchuck was rather cautious.
It did not permit the western travellers to visit Bhutan. Ram Rahul informs us:

"Bhutan’s relations with independent India began in a climate of suspicion. Owing to certain extraneous reasons the Bhutanese authorities felt that independent India would be imperialistic towards their country. They, therefore, thought of forging a union of Bhutan and Sikkim in association with Tibet as a counterweight to India. Jigme Palden Dorji of Bhutan and his cousin Maharaj Kumar Palden Thondup Namgyal of Sikkim even visited Kathmandu for discussions with the Nepalese Government in this connection. Of course, nothing came of this."

Towards the end of 1948 the Government of independent India assured a Bhutanese delegation that it would respect Bhutan’s autonomy if it continued the same relationship with independent India as it had with the British Government of India. The relation between the two countries was formally stabilized in August 1949 when the two countries signed a Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship in Darjeeling.

Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928-1972) ascended the throne of Bhutan on 27 October 1952. He was the third king in the line of Wangchuck dynasty. He shifted his capital and seat of the Government of Bhutan to Thimphu. In 1953 he established the *Tsongdu* (Legislative Assembly) of the kingdom of Bhutan. He also established the Military Training Academy at Ha in west Bhutan. He emancipated the serfs and granted citizenship to the people of Nepali origin in Bhutan in 1958. The King visited India in the spring of 1954 on the invitation of Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. This was his first visit as Gyalpo of Bhutan. Again in November 1956 he visited India. Prime Minister, Nehru paid a return visit to Bhutan in September 1958.

On 23 September 1958, Nehru in a public address in Paro expressed India’s intention and effort to preserve and promote the independent status of Bhutan. He expressed in no uncertain terms:

Some may think that since India is a great and powerful country and Bhutan a small one, the former wish to exercise pressure on Bhutan. It is therefore essential that I make it clear to you that our only wish is that you should remain an independent country, choosing your own way of life and taking the path of progress according to your will. At the same time we should live as friendly neighbours helping each other. Freedom of both Bhutan and India should be safeguarded so that none from outside can do harm to it.
Nehru was the first head of the Government of India and President V. V. Giri was the first President of India who visited Bhutan and highlighted complete independence and sovereignty of Bhutan. Druk Gyalpo visited New Delhi in January – February 1961 to discuss Bhutan’s economic requirements. On this occasion for the first time the Bhutanese flag was flown along with Indian flag. In 1963 Maharaja Jigme Dorji Wangchuck changed his title from His Highness, the Maharaja to His Majesty, the King by a Royal proclamation with full concurrence of the Government of India.

India was the first country to sponsor Bhutan as the observer at the fourteenth meeting of the consultative committee of the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development in South and South East Asia in Sydney (Australia) on 19 November 1962. On 5 September 1973 Bhutan became a member of the NAM (Non Aligned Movement) with India’s initiative. Visits, both formal and informal, of the high dignitaries of both countries to each other’s countries have played crucial role in promoting peace and friendship between the two countries. The developments in Sikkim in 1970s worried some sections of people in Bhutan. Bhutan had to be assured by India that India would honour the independent status of Bhutan. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king in Wangchuck dynasty came to New Delhi on an informal visit in September 1975. This was followed by two formal visits one in August 1976 and another in April 1977. Both in the formal and informal visits the King expressed his eagerness to know deeply about various aspects of Indian life. This has been testified by Parmanand who writes, “I got this impression during my privileged audience with King Jigme Singye Wangchuck at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi during his visit to the country in September 1991. In an exclusive interview with me, Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering said that his official visits are not different from his private visits, for during both kinds of visits he avails himself of meeting as many people from India as possible. This, if anything, shows the intimacy between the Government and people of the two countries.”

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi nourished personal friendship with King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. He visited Bhutan in 1985 and also is 1988. On 19 September 1985 Rajiv Gandhi, during his visit received the kingdom’s highest honour, *Druk Wangyal* award given posthumously to his mother, Indira Gandhi.

President Venkataraman visited Bhutan to inaugurate Chukha Hydel Project. The project is a landmark in the history of India – Bhutan relations. In one of his interviews
in February 1992, Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering said, that for Bhutan's benefit, Bhutan had integrated its economy completely with India. In 1993 the state visit by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to Bhutan had further concretised India-Bhutan relations. The Kurichu Power Project agreement was signed between Bhutan and India in 1994. Prime Minister, I. K. Gujral's official visit to Bhutan took place in 1996. Tala Hydro-electric Project agreement was signed in the same year between the two countries and Dungsum Cement Project Agreement was also signed with India in 1996. Besides these, every year witnessed the state visit of Bhutanese delegation to India. The relationship between the two countries has thus in the words of Parmanand, grown from “maturity to maturity”. It should not be forgotten in this connection that Bhutan and India have adopted altogether different positions on issues like NPT and Kampuchea. But this difference should not be overemphasised. First, it should be borne in mind that Bhutan recognized Bangladesh soon after the recognition was accorded to the country by India. Secondly, Bhutan, though a monarchical state stood by India in not extending support to Nepal’s zone of peace proposal. Thirdly, in 1985 Bhutan offered its land and other facilities for talks between various militant Tamil groups, including the LTTE, of Sri Lanka under the good offices of India. All these prove that the India-Bhutan relations have attained the peak of profound maturity.

However the totality of Indo-Bhutan relations has been adversely affected by the recent ULFA- Bodo ethnic problems in north-east India. The intrusion of these militants through the long open porous India-Bhutan border into Bhutan has created misunderstandings between the two countries. India thinks that Bhutan is giving these extremists shelter in Bhutan. Bhutan, on the other hand, is totally reluctant to allow the Indian military to chase them out from Bhutanese soil, lest Bhutan's sovereignty is encroached by India on this pretext.

V

Political status of Bhutan

The status of Bhutan under the Treaty of January 1910 had been subject to controversy. Kapileshwar Labh in his book *India and Bhutan* argues that “Bhutan looked to the government of India for protection against Chinese expansion and the
government of India considered itself bound to resist any Chinese aggression on Bhutan. However, Bhutan did not form part of the British Indian empire. It was completely independent in its internal administration”.

The status of Bhutan differed from that of Sikkim. In 1890 the British had acquired in Sikkim a “direct and exclusive control over the internal administration of foreign relations.” But they had no right to interfere in the internal administration of Bhutan. The status of Bhutan also differed from that of the native states of India. Labh has pointed out,

While the former was a protectorate, the latter were vassal states of Great Britain. As the nineteenth century progressed, the Government of British India almost absorbed the separate entities of Indian states so far as their foreign relations were concerned. Bhutan had, for some purposes, a position of its own as an International Person. British treaties with Bhutan, though executed by the Governor General in Council of India, were treaties between foreign countries. From the point of view of International Law Indian states had no separate external relations at all. Bhutan, on the contrary, had external relations, though by the treaty of 1910, it bound itself to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to them. Moreover, Bhutan was more independent than Indian states. The interference of the Government of British India, in the internal affairs of the Indian states was comprehensive and pervading. The British paramountcy over the Indian states put them in a class different from that of Bhutan.

Labh is of opinion that the status of Bhutan was not equal to that of Nepal. There was a British Resident in Nepal but not in Bhutan. Nevertheless Nepal was more independent than Bhutan. The King of Nepal like the rulers of other independent countries never accepted any foreign titles from the British government, whereas Maharaja of Bhutan like the rulers of native Indian states received titles from the British

government. The King of Nepal never paid homage to nor acknowledged the suzerainty of the King-Emperor. The Bhutanese rulers attended the Delhi Durbar in 1905 and again in 1911 and paid homage to the British rulers along with the feudatory chiefs of the native Indian states.15

Labh further argues that Bhutan’s status was not higher than that of Indian native states in so far as the extradition arrangements of British India with Bhutan were concerned. Labh explicitly states, “In fact the status of Bhutan was undefined, and that country was regarded more or less as a native Indian state till 1924 when the Government of India explicitly declared that Bhutan was not a native Indian state.”16

In the Government of India Act 1935, Sikkim was included within the purview of the Act and was given a seat in the Council of States (Upper House) of the Federal Legislature of India. In the opinion of R. K. Jha, Bhutan “was allowed to move out of the category of the princely state of India and the process continued till about 1942 when the second World War and the Quit India Movement attracted the whole attention of British.”17

Jha notices a distinction between an Indian state and Bhutan. An Indian state was a part of the territory of India. Treaties concluded by the Government of India ipso facto applied to the whole of India including such Indian states as had acceded to the dominion up to 1947. But the same could not be said of Bhutan because the legislative writ of India did not ipso facto extend to Bhutan. “Bhutan’s legal status before India’s independence has been understood to be that of a semi-sovereign foreign state; foreign because it was not in law an Indian state nor could it be regarded as British territory; and semi-sovereign because its sovereignty in external affairs was limited by the Treaty of 1910.”18

In 1946 after the British Government declared its intention to withdraw its authority from the subcontinent, Bhutan sought clarification from the Indian National Congress leadership concerning Bhutan’s status in relation to Britain and to a sovereign India.

15. Ibid, p.201.
16. Ibid, pp. 203-4
Nehru assured the Bhutanese delegation that “free India’s attitude would be one of friendliness and respect for autonomy and integrity” of Bhutan. “Significantly”, R. K. Jha commented, “Nehru used the term ‘autonomy’ instead of ‘independence’ for describing Bhutan’s status.” A standstill agreement was concluded between India and Bhutan to be effective from 15 August 1947 to govern Indo-Bhutan relations pending other discussions. Bhutan was now eager to put its relation with India on a new footing.

Towards the end of 1948, Druk Gyalpo, Maharaja Jigme Wangchuck sent a delegation to the Government of India to discuss relations between Bhutan and India. The latter assured the Bhutanese delegation that it would respect Bhutan’s autonomy if Bhutan was willing to continue the same relationship with Independent India as it had maintained with the Government of British India. The Government of India did not prefer to insist that Bhutan should accede to India. According to Ram Rahul, “It felt, obviously, that while Bhutan’s accession to India might not make any important difference to India’s position, independence even within the framework of heavy dependence on India was important for Bhutan in as much as it could maintain its identity.”19 The facts stated in this chapter help us to throw light on the crucial issues in India-Bhutan relations since 1947.