



Hindustan-Bhutan Relations (1949-1971)

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Abstract

Bhutan is situated in the Eastern Himalayas, between 26°45 and 28°N lat and between 89°45 and 92°25E long, bordered on the North and East by Tibet and India, on the West and South by India¹. With land area of roughly 18000 sq mile, Bhutan is a small Himalayan kingdom with a total population of 6,95,819. Bhutan's population can be conveniently categorized into three groups: the Sharchops, Lhotshampas and the Ngalungs (often called Drukpas). While the Sharchops and the Ngalungs live in the Eastern and Western Bhutan respectively, Lhotshampas reside in the Southern region. The Ngalungs are the ruling group who control the monarchy and the National Assembly, with a prominent place in the economy. The Ngalungs migrated from Tibet and are also called Drukpas. They follow the Drukpa Kagyu school of Mahayana Buddhism².

Before 1949, Hindustan-Bhutan relations were governed by the 1865 Treaty as amended by January 1910 Treaty. Under this Treaty, the British Government undertook to exercise no interference in the internal affairs of Bhutan, and the Bhutan Government agreed to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations³.

Legally, it was recognized as a semi-sovereign foreign state unlike that of Sikkim's formal "protectorate" status. Finally, it did not fit into the mould of other Indian Princely States which were merged with the Indian Union. Like all the border states, however, it occupied a vital position in India's security environment. The rapid Communist take over in China in 1949 and the likelihood of its expansion, therefore, hastened the conclusion of a new Treaty between India and Bhutan in order to define, clearly, future relations.

Key words: Himalayan, conveniently, Prominent, governed, interference, external, semi-sovereign, environment.

The 1949 TREATY OBLIGATIONS: BHUTAN'S SECURITY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS⁴

It was termed the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship and signed on 8 August 1949. Included were seven major clauses designed "to regulate in a friendly manner, and upon a solid and durable basis, the state of affairs caused by the termination of British Government authority in India, and to promote and foster the relations of friendship and neighbourliness." Most important in the Treaty was embodied in Article II, the provision stating that India would undertake "to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan .On its part the government of Bhutan agree to be guided by the advice of the government of India in regard to its external relations."⁵ The other Articles pertained to payments to be made as a result of former treaties, territory to be returned to Bhutan, trade and commerce and import and export of



arms.⁶India gave annually Rs.5 lakhs as per the 1949 Treaty. Arms could be imported into Bhutan “from or through India”and “as long as the Government of India is satisfied that the intentions of the Government of Bhutan are friendly and that there is no danger to India from such importation.” Bhutan agreed not to export arms either through the Government or by private individuals. it was also agreed that equal justice would be dispensed to nationals of either state residing in the other’s territory and extradition facilities accorded when necessary.

It was only in 1958 that a breakthrough in meaningful relations was made when Nehru accompanied by Mrs. Gandhi, visited Bhutan in September. Being the first leader of a foreign country to visit Bhutan, the occasion was as historic as it was educative⁷. During these talks, Nehru reassured Bhutan of India’s intentions and interest in its welfare⁸. A map published in July 1958 in China Pictorial magazine denoting large tracts of not only Indian but Bhutanese territory as belonging to China, involved the territorial integrity of Bhutan as well. The events in Tibet in 1959 increased the tension . On 28 August 1959, Nehru declared in the Lok Sabha that , ‘ The Government of India is responsible for the protection of the borders of Sikkim and Bhutan and of the territorial integrity of these two States and any aggression against Bhutan and Sikkim will be considered as aggression against India⁹.

The Tibetan revolt and its aftermath in March 1959 had brought home to Bhutan the realization of its insecure situation. That it had shown a not-too—sympathetic attitude towards the Tibetan refugees” may have been a small attempt to appease China. The overall effect of this threat, however, was that Bhutan had made a number of appeals to this threat, however was that Bhutan grew closer to India¹⁰.However, in the mid-60’s. the progress of these developmental plans suffered as a set-back as a period of internal instability ensued, first following the assassination of Prime Minister Dorji on 5 April 1964- Reports alleged Chinese backing, involving top army officers. Later in the year, a group of civilian and army officers fled to Nepal Where they indulged in anti-Indian propaganda,

In January in 1965, therefore, Prime Minister Shastri met the King in Calcutta for a two-day meeting where both leaders reviewed recent events and discussed Bhutan’s economic development. Regarding the anti-Indian propaganda, Shastri had told newsmen on 12 January that the King himself had been embarrassed about these statements and added,

Bhutan is an independent country and we have always accepted it. The King himself agrees that there has been no pressure in any matter on the part of the Government of India.¹¹

31 July 1965, an assassination attempt was made on the King’s life. Soon after, the Bhutanese exiles in Nepal alleged India’s hand in the plot to kill the King which was refuted by both the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the King. A new alertness was called for by Bhutan and India as a result of these events, drawing them to a closer understanding. The Spurt of visits exchanged in 1966. apart from the events, were thus regarded as significant. Special significance was attached to King Wangchuk’s State visit to Delhi from 27 April to 1 May 1966 as revealed in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s‘ speech at a State dinner on 27 April, In the world of today, it is necessary that we should all develop a sort of understanding which helps different cultures to enrich each other. instead of destroying each other¹².”



She assured King Wangchuk that India looked upon Bhutan's plans and its attempt to bring a better life to its people with the greatest sympathy and would give Bhutan all help and co-operation. Regarding Bhutan's defence, both Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Defence Minister Chavan reiterated that India considered Bhutan's defence as part of its own defence¹³. It seems, the King had raised the question of Bhutan's membership of the United Nations, but he appreciated the fact that the time was not opportune as yet. At the end of the visit, the King issued a Press statement appreciating India's help and advice and its technical and financial assistance for "Bhutan's economic and social progress.

Between April and September 1966, there had been three incursions in the Doklan 'pasture area' by Chinese troops and nationals. On 30 September, the Indian Government had sent a note of protest to the Chinese Government, on behalf of Bhutan" in which, it said in View of the persistence of these intrusions, the Government of Bhutan could no longer dismiss the incidents as accidental transgression of the frontier."¹⁴

In April 1967, India sponsored Bhutan's application to the Universal Postal Union (UPU) and it was admitted in March 1969. On the question of Bhutan's membership of the United Nations, however, it was felt that Bhutan was not ready as yet to assume the responsibilities and obligations of such membership. President V. V. Giri's visit, from 23-27 April 1970, the first Head of State to visit Bhutan, was therefore looked upon as the inauguration of a new era in Bhutan. President Giri, in a banquet speech on 23 April, while assuring India's continued "sympathy and understanding into all the needs of Bhutan for its future development in various fields," placed solemn significance on Hindustan—Bhutan relations. He said, "Not only are the fortunes of India and Bhutan inseparably bound to each other, but it is evident that it is only in each other's happiness that the two countries can prosper. We wish Bhutan to be a strong, stable and viable state, since it will also be a source of great strength to India."¹⁵

During this time, the question of Bhutan's membership of the United Nations was once again raised. In May 1970, Dinesh Singh, the Indian Foreign Minister had visited Bhutan with the express purpose of holding discussions on this subject and finally On 21 September 1971¹⁶. Bhutan was admitted to the United Nations. Earlier, on 17 May, the Royal Bhutan Mission was established in New Delhi. India reciprocated by sending its Representative to Thimpu on 15 July 1971.

ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

The subject of Bhutan's development had been raised during Nehru's visit to Bhutan in 1958. After several consultations, therefore, it was announced in September 1959 that a "broad agreement" had been reached on a number of proposals submitted by Prime Minister Dorji for the country's development. Top priority was reserved for road construction for which India had earmarked Rs. 15 crores. The most immediate was the building of a road, linking Jalgaon in West Bengal with Paro and Thimpu.¹⁷ Roads linking Thimpu with Assam would follow. It was also announced that a yearly subsidy of Rs. 7 lakhs would be granted from 1960 onwards for Bhutan's development purposes, instead of ad hoc grants which had been given hitherto. This Subsidy was to be distinct from the subsidy of Rs. 5 lakhs paid by India to Bhutan under the 1949 Treaty.¹⁸ Earlier, it was announced, on 5 March, that an agreement had been reached



between the Government of India and Bhutan for the execution of the Jaldhaka Hydro-Electric Project on the border of West Bengal and Bhutan. Estimated to cost Rs.5 crores, it was planned that power from the Project would enable the establishment of various industries, such as fruit preservation and timber, in the adjacent territories of Bhutan.¹⁹

Bhutan's first Five-Year Plan, estimated at Rs. 17.22 crores for economic and social development, was put into execution. It included road projects and general development schemes for education, health and mining. The Government of India, apart from financing the schemes, had assisted Bhutan in every aspect of its development in communications and transport, health services, education, agriculture, mineral resources, power, many industries and administration. It had also supplied foodgrains and other items in short supply and foreign exchange for essential imports, For Bhutan's second Five-Year Plan, India had promised a grant of Rs. 20 crores.

During the King's five-day State visit to India from 8-13 February 1968, during Deputy Prime Minister Morarji Desai's goodwill Visit to Bhutan from 23—26 March 1968 and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Bhutan from 3-5 May 1968. During the exchanges, subjects relating to the economic and technical cooperation and development plans of Bhutan were highlighted. As a follow-up of these talks, it was announced in New Delhi, on 6 February 1969, that India would give Bhutan an ad hoc subsidy of Rs. 1 crore besides additional maintenance costs.²⁰

Conclusion

The enhancement of Bhutan's international status in 1971 could not detract from the importance of its internal development. In April 1971, it launched its Third Five-Year Plan with India agreeing to provide Rs.33 crores in grants and loans. Besides financing the development programs, India would continue to provide the technical expertise, and grant scholarships and training facilities for students and local manpower. India played a "key role" in the total development and modernization process of Bhutan, India's respect and efforts to enhance Bhutan's sense -of sovereignty was appreciated by Bhutan which had pledged its continued friendship to India.²¹

India is like a visit to our own home, so deep are the ties of religion, culture and friendship between our peoples.

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²⁰ Times of India 6 Feb. 1969

²¹ King Jigme Wangchuk's broadcast over All India Radio on 12 April 1971 at the conclusion of his visit to India