

Dynamics of the Bhutanese Polity and Emergent Foreign Relations

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The Brugpa polity of Bhutan -the Dragon kingdom- developed through centuries on Tibetan lamaist theocratic pattern in the eastern Himalaya. Among many things, its uniqueness lies in its location on the socio-cultural frontiers of Tibetan and Indian great civilizations. Its legends, traditions and history informs us that it borrowed cultural traits, practices and institutions from its northern and southern neighbours and turned them into uniquely indigenous. Her monastic organizations, economic institutions, social structure, political pattern and value system were evolved through a continuous process of assimilation and absorption. It goes without saying that it was the Brugpa monastic order, which laid the foundation of the secular aspects of economy, polity and society. In course of time, it was the polity, which overwhelmed other sub-systems including ecclesiastical. Though relatively isolated in the lap of the lofty Himalayan ranges, it took centuries for the Brugpa polity to acquire its distinct contours. With a view to understanding the depth, texture ramifications of its internal interaction, it is advisable to uncover the basic facets of the Brugpa polity during the last hundred years. It is mainly because of the fact that besides its internal compulsions and contradictions, the ever-evolving Brugpa polity used and managed her foreign relation for consolidating itself internally. Thus, the nature of internal autonomy determined the extent of relations Bhutan might have with external forces.

We do acknowledge the fact that the polity parameters do not change overnight and they are more of procedural nature than that of the end products. However, in the history of Bhutan, certain landmark dates have decidedly changed the course of her history. Thus, we feel justified in giving a phase-wise treatment to the

Bhutanese polity in terms of her foreign relations. In this way, the Bhutanese history for the last hundred years may profitably be divided into a couple of broad phases on the basis of its internal power structure and external interactions: (i) the phase of theocracy: pre-1907, (ii) the phase of principality; 1908-1947, (iii) the phase of transition to nationhood; 1947-1971, (iv) the phase of the Brugpa nationhood; 1971 onwards. It will be desirable that the nuances of the basic internal power structure of the polity and its rationale for seeking external intervention as a mechanism in the hands of the power wielders be understood through out the various phases.

The Phase of Theocracy: Pre-1907

It was a Church State in which the Dharamraja and the Debraja ruled over two domains of sacred and secular respectively with the help of their councils, in which the regime was run on the name of the former. However, there were strong regional power wielders in the form of penlops (regional governors) and jongpens (the administrators or the governors of the forts and the regions around them), who exercised the authority in the secular spheres. Its technology and economy was simple and that of subsistence nature, in which capital formation was extremely limited. Taxes were collected in kind, stored in the regional forts and were consumed by the huge body of resident monks in the state sponsored monasteries. The Dzongs (forts), which also happened to be monasteries, were the keys to the state structure. The Brugpa state had an ambivalent attitude towards the Dalai Lamas of Tibet, to which they were familiar in terms of state structure, laws, religion, language and over all world- view. However, because of the sectarian differences, the Dharamraja maintained a distance from the Geylugpa Lhasa rulers, the Dalai Lamas. The two state -Bhutan and Tibet -had occasionally even wars with each other. However, their boundaries were traditionally recognized and they honoured each others regime. The Bhutanese had a tradition of sending occasional embassies with gifts to the Tibetan and the Chinese courts with a view to receiving ceremonially significant return gifts. However, they did not accept the over lordship of their northern neighbours.

The Dharamraja appeared to treat Sikkim and Koch Behar -the two neighbours in the west and the south respectively-as the

natural areas of their expansion. Thus, there were intrusions, attacks and even wars between them and Bhutan. However, with the emergence of the British in 18th and 19th centuries, the regional power structure was altered. The culmination came in 1865 with signing of the Sinchula Treaty, by which Bhutanese boundary in the west, south and east was fixed for all the time to come. For next four decades since signing of the above treaty, the faction-ridden Bhutanese theocrats had to reluctantly deal with the Tibetan and the British Indian rulers for settling their trade disputes and seeking for fugitive criminals. By the turn of 19th century, the British Indian rulers followed a strategy, came to be known as the "Forward Area Policy in the Himalayas", an active expansionist policy towards the Himalayan states such as Afghanistan, Kashmir, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam hills (Arunachal Pradesh). One of its historical landmarks was the Tibet Expedition, 1903-04 under Col. Francis Younghusband, in which the Tongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuk, the then Bhutanese strongman, played a significant role on the side of the British. He was perceptive enough to realize the significance of the British penetration across the Himalayas and he used this opportunity to secure a focal location for himself in the Bhutanese power structure with the British support.

The Phase of the Wangchuk Principality: 1908-1947

Having realized the futility of internal conflict, the state councillors and the state functionaries of Bhutan decided to do away with the dyarchy of the Dharamraja and the Debraja. Thus, they selected the Tongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuk as the hereditary Maharaja of Bhutan on December 17, 1907 at Punakha. John Claude White, the Political Officer in Sikkim, represented the British Indian Government on the eve of the coronation of the new king and thus began an intimate relationship between the Wangchuks and the British. Charles A. Bell, White's successor in Sikkim, negotiated the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty, 1910, by which "Bhutan became a part of the British Indian empire". Further more, Bhutan agreed to be guided by the British in her external relations and the British decided not to interfere with the internal administration of the kingdom. The cash subsidy granted to the kingdom by the British was increased from rupees fifty thousand to rupees a hundred

thousand a year. The king was invited to the famous Delhi Durbar in 1911 along with other princely states in India and subsequently he was knighted by the British. The Political Officers in Sikkim filed Annual Reports on Bhutan along with that of Sikkim from 1910 to 1946 invariably after visiting the Wangchuks. They controlled the Bhutanese affairs effectively from their seat at Gangtok in Sikkim by appointing the Maharaja's Bhutanese ally -the Dorjis (father Ugyen, and son, Sonam Tobgyel) as the Assistant Political Officers.

The Wangchuk court functioned on a ruthless feudal pattern. There was little cash available internally except the amount of subsidy received from the British. Earlier within a decade of his assuming the throne the Maharaja had decided to open modern schools for the Bhutanese children. And he did start two such institutions in 1914: one, at Tongsa and another at Haa. He wanted to train teachers, medical doctors, engineers, veterinarians, foresters and other professionals. But there were no resources in terms of man and money to begin with. The forests were surveyed to some extent and some feeble efforts were made to extract commercial timber and introduce tea cultivation on southern Duars. Bhutan was effectively brought under the wings of the British Indian empire. The Political Officers encouraged the kings to learn Hindi. An issue was raised by the then Political Officer, F. M. Bailey in 1920's as to the status of Bhutan within the British Indian empire. After years of consultation and correspondence between Gangtok and Simla a decision was made that status of Bhutan within the empire remained "ambiguous and it was inadvisable to remove the ambiguity".

The documents available in the archives do not suggest many external contacts, which the Wangchuks maintained during the period Except a shadowy religious representation in Lhasa. Bhutan maintained no formal diplomatic contacts with any other state. Even with reference to Tibet, the British Political Officers were careful to isolate the Bhutanese political issues from that of the other and left no room for any ambiguity as to status of Bhutan as a British Indian protectrate. Two instances from Tibeto-Bhutanese relations during the period will illustrate the point. Firstly, the Tawang region of Assam Hills (Arunachal Pradesh) had a practice of transhumance with the Bhutanese Geog (administrative block)

of Mira-Sakden in the district of Tashigong (Trashigong) district. The then Dharamraja, who was born in Tawang region, issued the grazing permits to the villagers from Tawang to graze their cattle within Bhutan adjoining the known boundary. Once the Maharaja came to know of it, he cancelled the permit on the ground that it was his prerogative to do so and the Dharamraja had no authority for that. The Tawang villagers did not agree with the Maharaja's decision and resorted to a limited violence, in which some cattle died out and even some persons were injured. The matter was taken up by the Tibetan State Council, which controlled the territory at the time, and about half a dozen letters were exchanged between the two administrations. The Political Officer was informed of the development; he advised the Government of India to make a note of it and ignore the details of the correspondence, as the conflict dealt with was of local in nature and magnitude.

The second instance occurred in 1930-31 involving the same Dharamraja and in this case also the Tibetan Government interceded on his behalf. It so happened that the same Dharamraja and his brother who were nurturing some political ambitions, invoked M. K. Gandhi, the Indian freedom fighter. They were arrested, put behind the bars, were tortured and were found dead in the captivity. The Tibetan Government under the 12th Dalai Lama demanded explanation from the Maharaja and upbraided him for murdering the incarnate lama. The worried Maharaja sought the support from the Political Officer, Col. Weir. The latter sent his Assistant Political Officer, Raja Sonam Dorji, with a draft reply to the Maharaja for sending it to the Lama. Even this act did not satisfy the Tibetan authorities and they continued to exhibit their displeasure in various ways. So much so that Col. Weir had to travel to Lhasa with a view to assuage the ruffled feelings of the Dalai Lama. In spite of their own confirmed reports that the Dharamraja and his brothers were quietly murdered, Col. Weir informed the Tibetan theocrat that the Dharamraja had died a natural death; that he was a Bhutanese and not a Tibetan from Tawang; that the Maharaja was a devout Buddhist (who could not be instrumental in such a killing) and (in case Tibet was still upset with the incident, it has no business to do so, as) Bhutan was an Indian protectorate, on whose behalf the British would intervene so much so for the British love for the truth. Needless to add that

the Tibetan god-king informed his visitor that so far he was concerned, the matter stood closed.

Not for nothing the Maharaja behaved as a model prince to the British. Bhutan, in spite of her meagre financial resources, contributed to the War Fund during the two World Wars like other princely states in India. The first two kings were decorated by the British with the royal insignia. They paid visits to the Viceroys and the British dignitaries visited them. The movement for Indian independence began to gain momentum in 1920's and naturally such developments made the Maharaja worried like other Indian princes. He advised the Political Officer against permitting the congress leader, M. K. Gandhi, to take part in the deliberations of the Round Table Conference in London and rather he suggested that Mr. Gandhi should be sent to jail. It appears that the Wangchuk rulers felt comfortable in the company of the British colonial bureaucrats and maintained a distance from the Indian freedom fighters. On their part, the British appear to have abandoned their earlier policy to develop Bhutan as an Indian princely state and made suggestions that Bhutan (unlike a Hindu or a Muslim Indian state) was a Buddhist state, away from India. In this way, by the end of the Second World War, Bhutan had emerged as a model British dependent princely state and like other Indian princely states she also had her worries of uncertain future in independent India.

The Transition: 1947-1971

Bhutan was apprehensive of the emergent democratic Indian Union from 1947. The British bureaucrats, even advised the Bhutan Durbar to approach the United Nations on alleged Indian move to integrate Bhutan within the Union, further egged it up. Sikkim, a sister Buddhist kingdom on frontiers, was to be devilled with populist anti-feudal movement in 1947-1949. The Red Army of the People's Republic of China had moved to liberate Tibet in 1950. The Bhutanese desired to be independent in such a threatening environment in the mid 20th century. But they were also aware that, how so ever independence of their country might be desirable, they had no resources -human, financial and institutional- to function as an independent political entity with international commitments. With a little prompting from the Indian leaders, Bhutan signed a

standstill treaty with India in 1949, which ensured her internal autonomy and an increased cash subsidy from India.

However, even Bhutan did not remain untouched from populist movement. Inspired by the anti-feudal popular movements in India, Nepal and Sikkim, a section of the Lhotshampas (the southern Bhutanese, who are invariably of Nepalese origin) formed the Bhutan State Congress. The Bhutan State Congress launched a movement in 1953 on their three point demands; abolition of land lords, formation of a popular government and closer ties with India. No doubt, it was a localized agitation by a small band of immigrant Bhutanese on its southern fringe in a politically illiterate Bhutan. The movement was destined to fail in the absence of an internally committed support. This was a sufficient ground on which the Bhutanese establishment closed its rank and doors for democratic India from the south and the communist China from the north. For a decade and so Bhutan appears to have decided to follow a policy of self - imposed isolation and withdrawal within itself.

The second Maharaja and his all (Raja Sonoma Tobgyel Dorji, the Bhutan Agent and Assistant Political Officer) had died in early 1950's and their places were taken over by their young, inexperienced and uncertain sons. The third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, married Raja S. T. Dorji's western educated daughter. He was farsighted enough to initiate institutional changes within the country on an incremental scale. The Indian Prime-Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, undertook an arduous journey on a state visit to Bhutan in 1958. He offered financial assistance to Bhutan for a planned development of the country. Within a couple of years, the border war between India and China erupted, in which even Bhutan was indirectly threatened. This was perhaps the last straw and Bhutan decided to do away with its self-imposed isolation by opening -up communication links with India in the south. An example of mutual co-existence between the two countries may be seen in India promptly agreeing to under-write the expenses on the Bhutanese development projects and continuing to take India in confidence on significant external relations.

Bhutan evolved a strategy in which she decided to slowly and simultaneously, introduce a far-reaching internal restructuring of its feudal social set-up. The concept of the Five Years Developmental Plan was introduced; a permanent state capital was built; in place

of ascribed rule of the aristocracy impersonal bureaucratic authority was initiated; rules were codified; the role of the Buddhist monasteries were separated from that of the state; the traditional barter economy was replaced with that of the cash economy; a network of road communication and wheeled transportation was taken-up and cash crops were encouraged to be grown. Above all: the little Shangri-la of the Wangchuk principality turned into a kingdom of Bhutan, was choosing carefully her external friends and was ready to play her rightful role in the comity of nations. However, the foreign affairs of Bhutan considered as relatively a matter of small involvement in 1960's. Thus, it was left safely in the hands of more educated and externally exposed Jigme Dorji, king's brother-in-law, and later it was the third king himself, who directly dealt with the external relations of his kingdom.

Phase of the Brugpa Nationhood: 1972 Onwards

Bhutan became a member of the United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1971 with an active Indian support. By then the contour of the Brugpa nationhood began to be identified. It distanced itself from the past British heritage the Maharaja began to be addressed as the Drug-Gyalpo, the king of Bhutan and accordingly other Bhutanese designations began to changed / coined in Tibetan/ Dzongkha language; its currency, banking, armed forces, airways, commercial establishments, radio station, television channel, standard time, transport company etc. were patterned on the national scale; Dzongkha, the dialect spoken in western Bhutan, was elevated to the status of the national language; the high court and an elaborate hierarchical administration were organized and the Bhutanese were trained to take up new professional roles in public life. Modern education, health and medical care, electric supply, transport and communication and an over-all concern for the development of the country with preservation of the Bhutanese heritage were achieved. A sense of pride in indigenous architecture, food and dress, code of conduct, and national language emerged as universal among the Bhutanese. Assured of a place under the sun, the Bhutanese nation-state began identifying with that of the Gross National Happiness (G N H) instead of world-wide concern for the Gross National Product (G N P).

In terms of external relations, a close and intimate understanding with Indian Union remains one of the cardinal concerns of Bhutan all these years. Bhutan took a conscious decision in early 1970's that as a small isolated and land-locked country it had no use for big power international politics during the era of cold war. Thus, Bhutan has no relations with five veto - holding permanent members of the Security Council of the U N O, who also happened to be the initial nuclear powers of the world. However Bhutan decided to prefer multi-national fora such as Columbo Plan, UNDP, SAARC, UNO, NAM, etc. instead of bilateral contacts. Australia, Denmark, Japan, Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland are among the countries that are seriously engaged in Bhutan's development without resident diplomatic relations. Bhutan has resident diplomatic relations only with four countries- India, Bangladesh, Kuwait and Thailand. She also has non-resident diplomatic relations with another fourteen countries. As an active member of the SAARC nations Bhutan makes special efforts to have close relations with the neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Bhutan and Nepal established non-resident diplomatic ties way back in 1983. This turned out to be handy in 1990's once the Lhotshampa refugee crisis developed. About 75,000 Lhotshampa refugees are camped in the Jhapa district of Nepal and are maintained by the UNHCR. Taking sides with their ethnic brethren, Nepal appealed to the Bhutanese to take the refugees back to Bhutan. Having failed in their efforts, they tried to request India to intervene, which the later did not oblige. Since 1993 the two countries have held nine rounds of talks between themselves. They have agreed to categorize the refugees into four and constitute a Refugee Verification Committee with five members from both the countries. The success of Bhutanese foreign policy lies in the fact that during this hour of national crisis, when over a hundred thousand Lhotshampas left their home and hearth in favour of the refugee camps, Bhutan stood on its ground and received a fair amount of support from her close friends.

With the Druk-Gyalpo abdicating his role as the head of the administration in June 1998, a Council of Ministers was elected by the Tshogdu. As Jigmi Y. Thinley secured the maximum number of votes in the Tshogdu, he was elected to be the Chairman of the

Council of ministers and the minister of Foreign Affairs. With this development, over a quarter century long tenure of Lyonpo Dawa Tshering as the first foreign minister of Bhutan came to an end. It was feared that in the absence of the Lhotshampa labour the pace of development in Bhutan would be arrested and the national economy would suffer adversely. The Bhutanese have been careful to see that such apprehensions do not come true. This they did by inviting India to erect a number of ambitious hydel power projects on the Bhutanese rivers.

This brief over-view of the Bhutanese transformation from theocracy to a principality and from that to a nation-state has been a fascinating process. Four Wangchuk kings, four generations of Dorjis, half a dozen British bureaucrats, a couple of Indian public men and some of the functionaries were the prime movers, who could steer through this arduous course for the Bhutanese nation. This process of transformation itself necessitated re-structuring of the existing state system in every phase of the Bhutanese history. For example the theocratic principles were not altogether abandoned, when the Wangchuk dynastic rule was established. Similarly, during the transitional phase, when institutional foundation of nation-state was laid out, the feudal privileges were not given a go bye. In a hierarchically conscious protocol bound Bhutan, the Wangchuk monarchy has emerged as the abiding institution for the Brugpa polity. The Bhutanese strategic elite, right from Ugyen Wangchuk to the present ones, have been pragmatic enough to choose their external allies, who could provide tangible support in the hours of needs. The events during the last hundred years in the history of Bhutan have amply demonstrated discriminating capacity of the Bhutanese elite in choosing the external support, which strengthened the Bhutanese resolve to proceed on their chartered course of action.

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