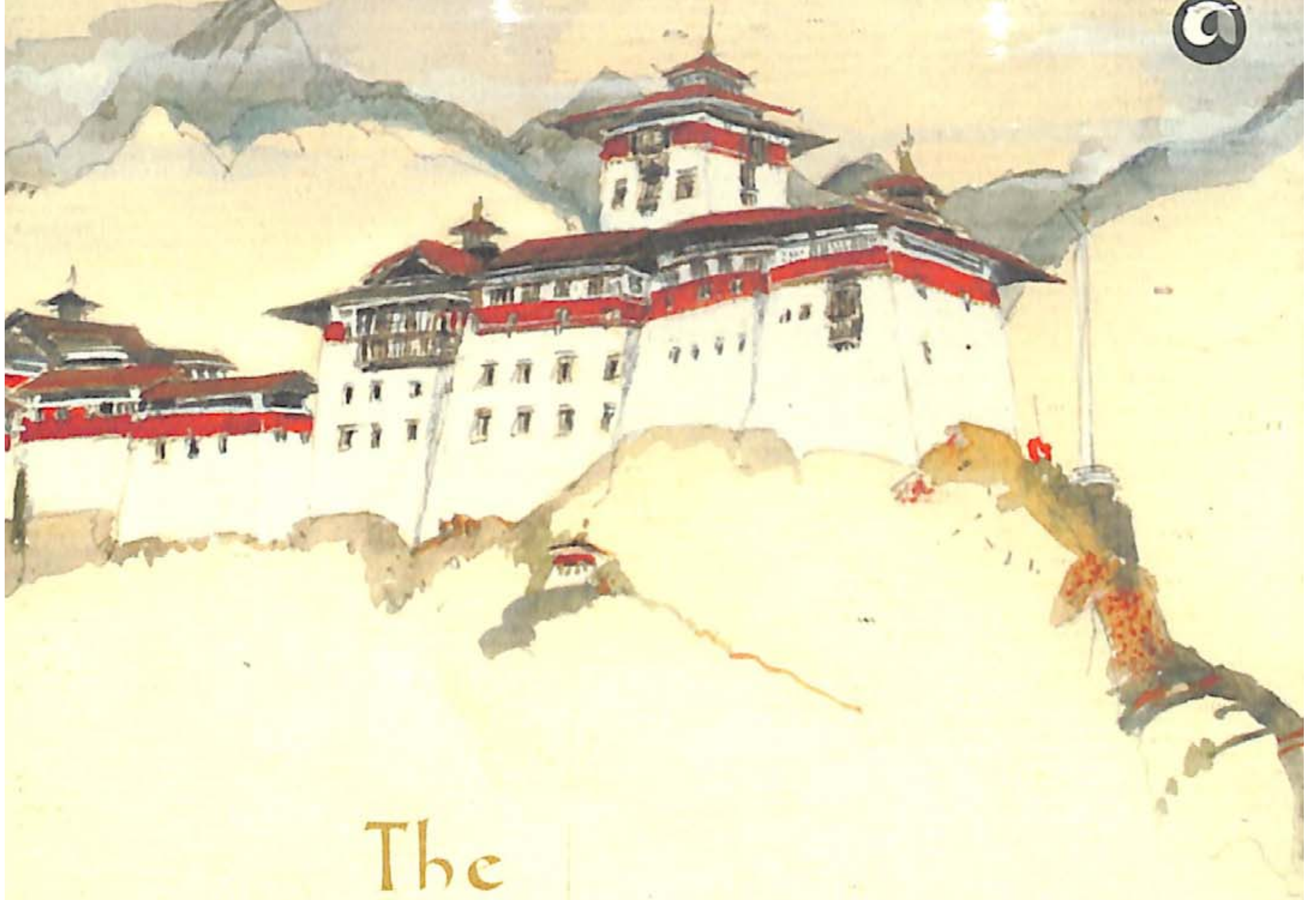

The kingdom at the centre of the world

journeys into Bhutan

MAIR AHMAD

The kingdom at the centre of the world

journeys into Bhutan

Prof. A. C. Sinha

OMAIR AHMAD

ALEPH

Contents

Prologue 1

A NATION FROM CHAOS

1. A Most Unusual Man 9
2. A Saint astride a Winged Tigress 17
3. A Saint of Song. A Saint of Bridges. A Saint of Madness. 30
4. At Whose Feet One Submits 42

FACE TO FACE WITH EMPIRE

5. On the Trail of the Black Regent 57
6. An Imperial Addiction 67
7. War in the Duars 79
8. The Road to Ogyen Chholing 86

THE MAKING OF THE MONARCHY

9. The Barefoot King 97
10. The Silk Scarf 106
11. Postage Stamps and the United Nations 112
12. The Murder of a Prime Minister 121

A NEIGHBOURHOOD OF DANGERS

13. Sikkim—The Loss of Hope 131

14. Gorkhaland—The First Revolution 149

15. The Tibetan Refugees—From Expulsion to Expulsion 158

16. Gorkhaland—Revolution and Exile 164

17. The Residue 177

KINGDOM COME

18. The King That Was 189

19. The King That Will Be 202

20. At the Pass of Thrumshing La 212

Bibliography 224

Acknowledgements 228

Prof. A. C. Sinha

Prologue

Here Be Dragons

There are truths we learn as children: There are dragons; there are kings. The cunning hero outwits the giant; the barefoot penitent wins the crown. Over time we lay these stories aside, sometimes reluctantly, in pursuit of a harder truth full of sharp reason. And yet we long for the clarity of a world in which deeds are written with blood and fire, and the future pivots on the actions of singular human beings.

In Bhutan, all such stories are true. This is the shock that most visitors struggle with and never quite overcome. A saint arrives on the back of a flying tigress, lamas engage in black-magic wars and one man stands against the greatest empire the world has seen. Myths and legends lie so thick over the landscape that the immediate reaction is to reject them all as mere folk tales of a credulous people long isolated from the world. This, though, would confirm only our own limited comprehension of reality. Myths often tell us more about our world than do books of history.

The dragons of Bhutan—and of Tibet and China—are not the exaggerated monsters of Western legends. Spiritually they represent the higher nature that imbues all humanity and inspires us to rise above worldly concerns. The story

goes that Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje founded the Drukpa school of Himalayan Buddhism in Tibet in the twelfth century after witnessing nine dragons rising between the earth and the sky among the high mountains. In Bhutan this school of thought is the dominant religion, and it is why the country is named Druk Yul: Land of the Thunder Dragon.

In the Himalayas, Buddhism emerged as a mix of tantric practice and intellectual ideas, given power by the ploys of kings. But this complex reality has been obscured over time, as the Himalayan kingdoms lost their wealth and, with it, the power to change the political landscape around them. They receded from the world. Of all the Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms, only Bhutan survived as a sovereign nation, but its truths, too, were hidden by an isolation created in equal parts by geography, the political decisions of its leaders, and luck. These half-glimpsed truths became legends and myths.

The Land of the Thunder Dragon was formed in the massive crucible of the Himalayas as Tibet rose to power and glory. The myths tell of a saint, Guru Rinpoche, riding a flying tigress into the land. History reveals him to be the great scholar-traveller Padmasambhava who merged the teachings of classical Buddhism with local beliefs in the Himalayan region. He set in train the second great expansion of Buddhism, in the eighth century CE, a thousand years after the lifetime of the Buddha. The tigress represents Padmasambhava's Tibetan consort, the princess Yeshe Tsogyal. It was Tibetan expansionism that led the great scholar-monk to the region, gave him wings and imprinted his teachings onto the mountains. Nor is the myth irrelevant to us today, over a millennium after the magical flight it describes. Buddhism spread across the Himalayas on the

back of a once powerful Tibetan empire whose ruins are now being disputed by the Asian giants India and China, and whose impact is felt by hundreds of millions.

Most of the other stories we encounter in Bhutan, and much of the history behind them, are more recent. The barefoot king is none other than Ugyen Wangchuck, who stood unshod before Bhutan's religious heads and nobles in 1907. As a reward for his humility as much as his undoubted achievements, he became the first king of the remarkable Wangchuck dynasty that has ruled the country for over a century. Behind this true story is another: of a dream in which a monk from Tibet was invited by the deity Mahakala to Bhutan in the seventeenth century to carve out a nation where none had existed before.

Closer to the present day the stories become darker, fuelled by the wars of imperialism and nationalism: stories of the Duar Wars of 1864-65 in which the small Himalayan kingdom fought the British Empire to a standstill; of the Opium War that Britain fought with China; of the Great Game that was played out as Russia expanded, China dwindled and the world staggered towards the First World War. There are assassinations and refugees, exile and war.

Over the last few years as I have researched, and journeyed into, Bhutan, I have felt that the kingdom has always thrown back to us stories that should be at the centre of our understanding of the world. For instance, in 2003, as the Americans marched on Baghdad, Bhutan too embarked upon a war. Except in the case of Bhutan the war was to expel foreign militants within its own borders, and Bhutan's army numbered only six thousand soldiers. It was led by the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck,

accompanied by his son. Unlike in Iraq, battle was joined after six long years of negotiations, and the conflict itself was considered a personal failure by the king. Every death among the Bhutanese would have been painful, but every death among its opponents had the potential to create a family of enemies, something a country as small as Bhutan could not afford. So Bhutan went to war reluctantly, after all else had failed, and the border has been silent ever since.

There is much that we can learn from Bhutan in times of peace as well. At the start of the twenty-first century, as the global economy struggles with a financial mess that few truly understand, Bhutan's vision of a political-economic model that puts the happiness of its citizens at the centre of its governance—choosing Gross National Happiness over Gross Domestic Product—suddenly seems to shine that much brighter. But it is poorly understood, both within and outside Bhutan. Can the ideas of the Fourth King, a remarkable ruler, be transposed onto a democratic system? Can a democracy emerge out of the grant of a king? What does such a democracy look like?

In the meanwhile the rise of China and India has led to a situation that has not been seen in the modern world. The two great Asian giants finally have borders which rub against each other. In the middle lies Bhutan, just next to sites of the 1962 India-China war. Can a small country survive such neighbours? Can it make peace?

It is said that the destiny of the world is written in each atom of dust. And yet there are few places in the world where we can actually see the rush and hear the roar of history as it is made. Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, offers such a vantage point.

To journey into Bhutan is to journey into history, into myth, into politics and, perhaps, above all, into ourselves. It is here, in this kingdom at the centre of the world, that we are forced to ask ourselves whether all of these journeys are one and the same.

Prof. A. C. Sinha

A Nation from Chaos

1. A Most Unusual Man

I did not go out looking for Bhutan. My business has not been about dragons, saints or kings, but about misery and human failure. That is what you get when you have an interest in politics—a close-up view of humanity's fault lines. When something bright appears, my immediate reaction is to duck for cover, and then raise my head very, very slowly. If things still look cheerful, I start digging for crimes, conspiracies and cover-ups. Happiness makes me suspicious.

It was in the business of politics that I had my first real encounter with Bhutan. It left me bewildered. This was in 2005. I was finishing up a short assignment as a political adviser at the British High Commission in New Delhi, when I was assigned to do some research on water issues between India and its neighbours. South Asia is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. It also has rapidly depleting sources of freshwater in an area where two-thirds of the population is composed of poor farmers heavily dependent on irrigation. Studying these issues too closely can be depressing.

Then, suddenly, there was Bhutan. It was a small country, a little over three hundred kilometres from east to west, and under two hundred kilometres north to south. Its population,

at less than seven hundred thousand people, was ridiculously small, especially so when compared to its neighbours, India and China, who have over a billion people each within their borders. Even on a map, with a fairly good knowledge of South Asian borders, I found the country difficult to spot. Despite all this, what little I could glean from a number of disparate sources told me that I was looking at something highly unusual. There were hydroelectric projects in Bhutan but no environmental destruction. It had good relations with India and no bad relations with any other country. It had a king who had pushed for democratic change himself, eliminating his own powers. And it was the last remaining Himalayan Buddhist kingdom in the world.

It all sounded too good to be true. I dug deeper.

There were hints of problems. I found mention of a displaced Bhutanese community of Nepali origin; a religio-temporal leader called the Shabdrung, whose title literally meant 'at whose feet one submits', displaced from his realm; and militants from India's north-eastern region hiding in the forests. And yet the refugee issue seemed external to Bhutan, with no ongoing conflict within the country. The last Shabdrung, one of multiple reincarnations, was dead, and had never seemed a threat to a stable and well-loved political order. The Indian militants had been pushed out of Bhutan by the Army's first modern manoeuvres, led by the Fourth King himself.

I was intrigued, doubly intrigued, trebly intrigued, but I could find almost no concrete information about the country. In the news, there were only stray references to an isolated Buddhist kingdom that discouraged tourism, and some celebrity gossip about Hollywood stars flying there to 'get

away from it all'. Frustrated, I moved back to studying water issues until my assignment at the British High Commission came to an end and Bhutan disappeared from my horizon.

A few months later, Lady Plaxy Arthur, the wife of the British High Commissioner in India, called up to ask if I was doing anything for dinner. The Arthurs were warm hosts and the most atypical diplomatic couple I have had the pleasure of knowing. 'We have an interesting guest staying over. He's from Bhutan,' Lady Arthur said.

This was how I met Michael Rutland, the honorary Bhutanese Consul to the United Kingdom, who had just been conferred the Order of the British Empire in the Christmas Honours List of 2005 by the English Queen. Throughout the dinner Michael was full of old-world charm and courtesy—and it took a little while to catch the twinkle in his eye as he made sly, but always polite, jokes. He was surprised by my interest in Bhutan and mentioned it to the Arthurs; so we met again for dinner the next evening. Michael was a natural storyteller and spoke of his experience as a physics teacher in England, and as a squadron commander in Oman. I was, I must confess, most interested in how he became tutor to the crown prince of Bhutan who would go on to become the fourth king of the country—and the youngest head of state in the world—in 1972, at just seventeen years of age.

'It was pure chance all the way,' Michael told us. 'When I came back to England after my stint with the Royal Air Force, I decided to become qualified as a Physics teacher. Much to my surprise I found I was rather good at it, and was teaching at St. Edwards in Oxford when I was invited to a

dinner with the Queen Mother of Bhutan, Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck, sometime in 1970. She later asked if I would come to teach the crown prince.'

The dinner had been specifically arranged at the request of the then Queen Mother of Bhutan—although Michael did not know this or even, in fact, who she was. The Queen Mother wanted her only son to be educated in Bhutan, but did not want him to miss the benefits of Western education. The Queen Mother had studied at Oxford herself, the first Bhutanese to do so. When she decided to recruit scholars for her children, she chose teachers from her alma mater. Another young British man, Michael Aris, had already been recruited in 1967 to teach her daughters. Aris had a deep interest in Tibetan and Bhutanese culture and history, and after spending six years in Bhutan, the last three as head of the translation department of the government, he became the foremost authority on the country in European academia. It was also where he got engaged to Aung San Suu Kyi, who would go on to become the leader of the democratic movement in Burma.

When the Queen Mother made him the offer, Michael had already established a reputation as a teacher and administrator. But he had no interest in Bhutan at the time. He did not even know where it was—'maybe somewhere in the Middle East'. It was 1970, after all, and even an exceptional schoolteacher at one of the best schools in the world could hardly be expected to know about this remote kingdom in the Himalayas.

'Think of it rationally. Bhutan and Butane gas sound somewhat alike. I reasoned that anything to do with oil & gas and with a name ending in "Tan" would have to be in

the Middle East. It sounded a bit like Iran and all the other "ans" in that region.'

Michael called up the Royal Geographic Society to find out something about the kingdom. 'But the moment I mentioned the name, the chap at the RGS started to insist, quite aggressively, on knowing why I wanted to know. When I told him, he made me promise to pay a visit as soon as possible. It was all very mysterious.

'I guess the precise moment I knew I was going to go was when they brought down the map in the RGS and opened it up. Almost all of Bhutan was marked "Unmapped". You must remember that I was only thirty-two at the time. It seemed quite interesting. I had never been anywhere that was "unmapped".' Michael laughed, his smooth face crinkling up in remembered delight.

He ended up establishing one of the most unusual schools in the world. It taught one class of boys, and one class alone. The man who would go on to become the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, was the prime student. The crown prince had fifteen classmates, chosen largely at random, so that there would be a full class. A house was set up as a dormitory, where the boys stayed, to complete the full immersion experience of being in an elite British boarding school.

Michael went shopping for the best equipment that could be acquired. The only thing that raised a problem was a skeleton for the biology class. The head abbot of Bhutan inspected the premises, and on being confronted by the skeleton, asked why it was needed. The only teachings requiring the bones of the dead in Buddhist practice are the esoteric rites of tantrism. These are only conducted in

private, out of the public eye, and although tantrism evokes sex and violence in the global imagination, in reality only the true initiates of such practices know exactly what transpires during them.

The head abbot was not pleased, therefore, at finding the bones of a dead man in the school where the heir to the throne was being taught. Biology class continued after the head abbot's visit, but without the skeleton.

Teaching biology without dissecting frogs was also a challenge. The use of frogs, or other animals, would not be allowed, for such practices would have violated the Buddhist principles of avoiding causing pain to fellow sentient creatures. Michael complained about the prohibition, but to no avail—or so he thought. One day soon after, as teacher and pupils arrived at the school, they found something in front of the school with a sheet over it. Upon removing the sheet, they found a dead leopard.

'It was a most considerate leopard,' Michael said, 'and having heard of our predicament, it must have come and died right before the school. Even more politely, it drew a sheet over its dead body afterward.'

The pupils learned dissection with a leopard that day, although they received an unnerving surprise when they found that the calf the leopard had just killed was still largely inside its stomach.

Things had a habit of resolving themselves when it came to the school. The pupils had to learn football, but the school field was too hard. The next morning women were seen planting grass, and by the evening the field was ready for the children to use.

Other things were more difficult, like food. Bhutan had

no airfield at that time, and McDonalds was just not around the corner. Bhutan has a fairly restricted diet. It is a country where chillies are considered a vegetable. Michael had a miserable time of it, with stomach cramps and the runs. Even when he got a break, it seemed as if the country conspired against him. Once, a whole stock of fresh sweet corn arrived just for him. He had it placed in the shelter behind the house and went to sleep, happily anticipating a delicious meal the next day. But when he woke the next day, he found that the corn had been ravaged. All that was left were a few paw prints of a bear.

In 2007 I visited the house where Michael lived in those days. A monk was living in retreat there, and although he was hospitable, it was not good manners to disturb him for long. The school buildings were pretty much exactly as they had been forty years ago, except the doors to the classrooms were all locked. The roofs had been changed, with wood being replaced by metal, but that was about it.

The old school, perfectly preserved, was not the only instance of Michael's past reaching out to him. According to an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (Grihault, 2004), Michael's father was a Chinese politician, and part of General Chiang Kai-Shak's Kuomintang government. He had been sent to Oxford to study agriculture, and had met and married an Englishwoman. After Michael was born his father decided to return to China, but in the middle of the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, it was too dangerous for Michael and his mother to come along. Although the Kuomintang eventually lost that war, Michael's family was not forgotten. According to the *Daily Telegraph* article, Michael was among the very few people who were

invited to attend both the British and the Chinese celebrations of the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. 'He was also invited to inspect his family estate by the Chinese government. Arriving at the then empty 200-year-old family house in Canton, he was overwhelmed to find his remaining relatives lined up to greet him. They had decorated the room where his father was born and he was taken to see the tomb of his ancestors.'

Michael's unusual personal history seemed to match the complex history of Bhutan itself. Given its geographical location, Bhutan has been both blessed and cursed by history. Great political movements have often buffeted the small kingdom, threatening it with annihilation, with subjugation or homogenization.

Through the latter half of the twentieth century, too, great forces were at work both outside and within the kingdom. The Chinese had forcefully put down a rebellion in Tibet in 1959 and, possibly as a result, Bhutan had opened up extensive relations with India. In 1962, China and India had fought a brief war, with much of the action happening just near Bhutan's borders. In 1964, the third Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Palden Dorji—the brother of the Queen Mother—had been assassinated. He and the Third King had been trying to modernize Bhutan, with dramatic consequences for the country. The Fourth King would inherit many of the legacies from these actions, but to Michael Rutland at that time, the young man was just a student then, even if the most important student in Bhutan.