

Nepal - Bhutan Relations (A Study Of Its Past)

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The two SAARC member countries, Nepal and Bhutan, are well known to all as the most beautiful Himalayan kingdoms situated between India and the Tibet China with very potential geopolitical importance. Although from the earliest times, Nepal and Bhutan have extremely good relations between them in political, religious and cultural fields, at present there seems a kind of uneasy diplomatic relations between them due to the problem of the Nepali origin Bhutanese citizens exiled from Bhutan and taking refuge in Jhapa and Morang districts of Nepal. Therefore, the study of the changes that have occurred in these two countries becomes quite significant to anyone interested in the study of the relations between these two almost neighboring countries.

Nepal has a long history extending more than 2000 years, though modern Nepal was found just a little more than 250 years ago. On the other hand, Bhutan, also primarily divided among small states, was unified more than 450 years ago. Nepal was unified by King Prithivi Narayan Shah, similarly, Bhutan was unified by a Lama Nawang Namgyal of

the Dukpa sect, a renowned scholarly monk belonging to Ralung Gompa in the Kham province of Tibet. He left Ralung Gompa and came to then Lho-Mon province of modern Bhutan where he is known as Syawadung Rimpoche Nawang Namgyal.

Nawang Namgyal, by conquering some influential feudals and Lama sects, completed the work of unifying Bhutan and established a new type of rule based on religion. In this system two types of rulers were appointed to administer the kingdom: Dharmaraja, the spiritual ruler, and Devraja, the temporal ruler. It is since this time that Bhutan had political, religious as well as cultural relations with the Malla Kings of Kathmandu Valley and the Gorkhas. Religion, especially Buddhism, also played a significant role in bringing Nepal and Bhutan closer. The religious activities of the then popular tantrik Lamas of Bhutan, and the existence of Swayambhunath in Kathmandu as the Buddhist educational and cultural center were the two major sources of the close friendly ties between these two countries. Soon after the completion of the unification of Bhutan by the first Bhutanese King, Bhutan

established close relationship with Gorkha and Kathmandu valley of Nepal in 1624/25AD.

After Nepal-Tibet war in 1855 AD (VS 1912), an officer of Bhutanese Dharmaraja, namely Da-Pon wrote a petition to Prime Minister Jung Bahadur of Nepal. This petition mentions the relations between Bhutan and Gorkha since the regime of Ram Shah. After the Tibet-Nepal war a Bhutanese Lama wrote a letter to Kaji of Nepal. In this he mentioned that six Gompas (monasteries) of the East, which are presented to him as gift at the time of Ram Shah, were being ruined due to confiscation and improper care from the Nepalese side. So, he requested the Kaji to help preserve the religious property set by the ancestors. It can be surmised that the Gompas were given to Bhutanese by the Gorkhas on various dates, i.e., since Ram Shah to Krishna Shah and later by Prithivi Narayan Shah. In total, it is expected that the Nepalese kings provided the Bhutanese Lamas authority over 12 Ghyangs or Gompas.

According to the Bhutanese source, the first Dharmaraja Syawadung Nawang Namgyal himself visited the Kathmandu valley and took with him 40/50 Gorkha families to Bhutan. Among them were Brahmins, Chhetriyas, Vaishya and Sudras. Bisan Thapa Magar was the leader of the migrated Gorkhalis to Bhutan. Being influenced by the political system of Gorkha constituted by King Ram Shah, the Dharmaraja Nawang Namgyal introduced the same in Bhutan with some necessary changes. The system of "Mana-panthi" of Gorkha known as "Gorge Jhappa" among the Dukpa and Pyapsa people of Bhutan has been popularized in Bhutan. A system as such is still in existence in Arunanchal.

As Ram Shah's Political administration influenced the Bhutanese; the Gorkhalis were also greatly influenced by the Tantrik knowledge of the Lamas of Bhutan. Thus these two regimes came into close contact and established a good relationship.

According to the Bhutanese history, Bhutan had relations with Gorkha even in the reign of the earlier Shah Kings- Drabya Shah and Purna Shah. Bhutanese sources mention this, but the Nepalese history doesn't. Bhutan's foreign relations began only after its unification, by Lama Nawang Namgyal in 1616 AD even though Gorkha might have relations with the northern part of it (villages of Tibetan origin) through gompas and religious sects.

In 1640 AD the Bhutanese Dharmaraja, Nawang Namgyal, visited Gorkha when Dambar Shah was in power. On his visit, he took some Gorkhali families to Bhutan and let them settle among the western hills and terai. Since then, courtesy visits by every new Dharmaraja and Devraja of Bhutan to Gorkha became a regular feature.

Again during the reign of Narabhupal Shah (c. 1716-1743 AD), some of the gompas and land belonging to the gompas were bestowed upon Dharmaraja. During his reign, beside the cultural and religious relations, both the countries had political ties as well. The Tamrapatra of 1741 AD, issued to a popular Lama (known as Lhopa Lama) providing Nagathali Gompa and a vast tract of land around it, supports the Nepal-Bhutan relations. The inscriptions mention that prior to this much land and property were provided to Dharma Lama (Tsyong Lama) as kusa birta by issuing Tamrapatra.

According to the Bhasa Vamsavali, Narabhupal Shah, being childless, invited Dharmaraja to Nepal and with the blessings and ritual and Tantrik commencement performed by him, he became the father of a child, Prithivi Narayan Shah-the founder of modern Nepal. This time also Narabhupal Shah issued a Lalmohar in the name of Bhutanese Dharmaraja. This event is popular as a legend among the Nepalese residents of Bhutan.

Since the reign of Drabya Shah, the Gorkha rulers had to face frequent wars with the Barpaki

Bhutia rulers at the boundary between these two states. Bhasa Vamsavali narrates that Ram Shah and Narabhupal Shah fought battles with Tibet and the Gorkha army being victorious over Kyi-Ron went up to Kukuraghata and thus because of the enmity with Tibet, Bhutan might have good relationships with Gorkha.

Thus the existence of Bouddha Gompas in the northern belt of Gorkha, the settlement of Buddhists of the Tibetan origin, the schooling of Nawang Namgyal at Swayambhu and the Tibet-Bhutan and Tibet-Gorkha enmity brought both Nepal and Bhutan into close contact with one another. Besides, the Gorkha rulers were also deeply influenced by the Tantrik knowledge and commencement of the Bhutanese Lamas.

Very similar to Gorkha, Bhutan also had close relationship with the Malla Kings of the valley of Kathmandu. Her cultural and religious relationship with the valley lasted for a long time. The existence of Buddhism and the Buddhist culture were the main factors for such relationship. Ram Shah, who had good relations with Bhutan, was also friendly with the Malla Kings of the valley, especially that of Patan. As a result of the friendship with Gorkha, the Bhutanese got the opportunity of making close contacts with the artisans of Patan. Moreover, the first Dharmaraja of Bhutan, Syawadung Rimpoche Nawang Namgyal, had been a student at Swayambhu, the center for Buddhist Teachings, and as such was well acquainted with the art, artists and culture of the valley. While visiting Gorkha in 1614 AD, he also visited the valley of Kathmandu and offered one hundred thousand votive lamps to the deity at the temple of Swayambhu. He also befriended King Laxmi Narsingh Malla of Kantipur and took some artisans with him to Bhutan. Later when he visited Nepal in 1640 AD, he renovated the Swayambhu Temple. There are several documents, which support

the visit of Dugpa Lamas to Kathmandu and the renovation of Swayambhu Temple. Moreover, the silver coins-tankas-of the Mallas were also in large circulation in Bhutan. From what is mentioned above, we can surmise that during the Malla period, the economic ties between the valley of Kathmandu and Bhutan were at their peak.

The famous Gopal Raja Vamsavali mentions that Bhutan's relations with Nepal were established in the beginning of the sixth century AD. However it is not yet proved.

Since the 17th century, the Nepalese artisans began to enter Thimpu and Punakha valley of Bhutan and have worked there since then. During the reign of Devraja Tan-Jin-Kh-Gye (1638-1696 AD) some of the Gompas in Bhutan were renovated by the Nepalese artisans and decorated them with pieces of art based on Buddhism. The bronze icons in connection with the *mahayana*, sculptured by the Nepalese artisans can still be found there in these gompas. Many artists from the Valley of Kathmandu went to Bhutan and resided in the northern part of Thimpu at Bebuna, near De-Chen. Some of them also settled in Pachu and Bel-Nang of Thimpu Valley recently known as Bal-Po, the name for Nepal in the Tibetan language. From this fact, we can estimate that the places inhabited by the Nepalese in Bhutan might have been called 'Bal-Po'. The Bhutanese artisans, who had close links with the Nepalese artists who received their services, were also influenced by the Nepalese style of art and architecture. The two stupas of Bhutan - the one constructed at Sgo-mang-Kho'-ra of Bkra-'sis-Yang-tse province and the other in Chendebji of Ton-Sara-are its examples. These stupas have big eyes marked on the Hermika, above the dome, and the architectural style of these stupas coincides with that of Bouddhanath of Nepal.

Once an illustrious Lama from Bhutan during the reign of Syawadung Nawang Namgyal visited

Gorkha and Kathmandu and with the permission of the rulers there set some gompas of the Dukpa sect in both these kingdoms. Probably, it is the very time (mid 17th century) when the Dukpa Gumpa at Swayambhu was erected and the Dharmaraja was provided land at and near Swayambhu as a gift from the king of Kantipur.

During the reign of Sen Kings in Eastern Nepal (recent Morang District), there was an annual tribute (Sirta) from Vijayapur to Bhutan. Later, when Prithivi Narayan Shah, in the process of unification merged Morang-Vijayapur within unified Nepal, he presented Haku village and 5 Kheta with some sloppy land for Swayambhu trust. This additional property was presented to Dharmaraja Si-dar as gift. Thus Prithivi Narayan Shah settled the business regarding Morang.

The Chiran-cha Gumpa, Nagathali Gumpa and some other gompas including some land were presented to the Bhutanese Lama by King Krishna Shah and Narabhupal Shah of Gorkha too.

Centuries old Gorkha-Bhutan relations were widely extended during the reign of Great King Prithivi Narayan Shah. Bhutan helped Nepal during its unification. At the outset of unification there was a deal between Prithivi Narayan Shah and Bhutanese Dharmaraja according to which Bhutanese Dharmaraja Syav-dun-rin-po-che was given the authority of all the Gompas within the Nepalese territory soon after the completion of unification. Following the deal Prithivi Narayan Shah provided 6 gompas and their land as Dan Birta and retained the authority of Bhutanese Dharmaraja over all the gompas and land provided to them by his ancestors and the kings of the valley as well.

Altogether 12 Ghyangs (gompas) were given to the Bhutanese and were retained from time to time by Shah Kings till the later period. Although all these gompas cannot be recognized now, Charikota, Nagathali, Yolmo, Nagare, Teri, Lichyakh, Humi,

Pundi, Nama-syun (Nasa), Cho Jodath, New Gumpa, Chiran-cha, Yate, Thate are some of the Gompas among them. Before the unification of Nepal, Bhutan received annual tribute from Vijayapur. But during the unification Bhutan did not claim its domination over the territory, instead helped Prithivi Narayan Shah, for which Haku village and 5 plots of land near Swayambhu were provided to Bhutan as Dan Birta.

In 1774 AD Bhutanese Dharmaraja 'phrin-las-brug-rgyal" visited Nepal accompanied by one of his officers Gsim-dpon-wang-chuk to meet Prithivi Narayan Shah. On that occasion he presented some gifts to the king on behalf of the Bhutanese government. Dharmaraja wanted to keep good relations with Nepal possibly because of the threat from the British to Bhutan during war against Sikkim, Kuchbihar and Assam. Thus to maintain good relations and mutual help, both the countries exchanged their Mohars. The Lalmohar of 1772 AD provided the facility of Jhara (forced or statutory labor) to the Lamas of Nagathali Gumpa to carry their load between Nepal and Bhutan. The other Lalmohars were issued to provide them land as Dan Birta.

Nepal's relations with Bhutan remained intact even after Prithivi Narayan Shah. To give continuity to the age-lod relations, Pratap Singh Shah in 1776 AD (VS 1833) sent a new Lalmohar to Bhutanese Dharmaraja, Phrin-las-brug-rgyal. He, after the death of Pratap Singh Shah, visited Nepal at the request of queen Rajendra Laxmi performed Tantrik commencement for blessing long life of the two-year-old King Rana Bahadur Shah. Pleased with his performance, Nepal Darbar provided land in gift at Sinduri and Chene. Similarly, Prince Bahadur Shah also had good relations with the Bhutanese Lama Tanjin Dugyal. Bahadur Shah invited him to Nepal and provided Thon-mon and Kalari Villages to Dharmaraja in gift.

Nepal, under the regency of Bahadur shah, once attempted to march upto Assam and for this, Nepal demanded Bhutan for providing the route through her land. This happened in the time of Lama 'Sa-Ga' of Bhutan.

It is already mentioned that Swayambhunath is an important means to bring Nepal-Bhutan closer. Similarly, it is also stated that the renovation of Swayambhu Chaitya was done by Dukpa Lamas. In July of 1817 AD (VS 1874) Lama Senge-Nor-bu arrived Kathmandu and changed the Mahayesthi of Swayambhu Mahachaitya (Sogsin) with some minor reparation. Again in 1915 AD (VS 1972) Chewang Jigme, the son of Gelong-Sekh-dorje-kham-topden-Sakya repaired Swayambhu Mahachaitya. This work of reparation was completed in 1918 AD (VS 1975).

Nepal-Bhutan friendship was cordial upto the beginning of Rana regime. But in 1855 AD (VS 1912) when Janga Bahadur Rana was in power, Nepal suspected that Bhutanese were in favor of Tibet during Nepal-Tibet war. Therefore, the Nepalese government confiscated all the lands, gompas and trusts whatever have been provided in the past to Bhutanese Lamas as gifts. Thus, for the time being the friendship became strained. The gompas having lack of proper care remained in ruined condition. But later Nepal realized the misunderstanding. So, to normalize the matter with a great respect petitions were made from Nepal to the Bhutanese Dharmaraja and Devraja. Nepal reestablished the right of Bhutanese Lamas to enjoy the lands and the trusts alienated.

While discussing Bhutan-Nepal relations, the currency of Nepalese coins in Bhutan and the Mohar of Bhutanese rulers (Dharmaraja and Devraja) prepared by the Nepalese artist cannot be ignored. Nepalese coins were in use in Sikkim from 1788 AD to 1892 AD. Similarly, the Bhutanese were also using

Nepalese coins in Bhutan. The Mohars, which were being used by Bhutanese rulers, were marked with Devnagari letters, so it is presumed that those Mohars were prepared by Nepalese artists.

Similarly, the historical system of communications between these two countries cannot be ignored. Under the procuracy of Bhimsen Thapa there existed a postal service between Kathmandu and Punakha, Bhutan. During the premierships of Janga Bahadur and Bir Samsher some reforms were made in the postal service. Since the time of Bir Samsher at the request of the King of Sikkim, the route of postal service between Nepal and Bhutan was linked through Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Besides, there were also exchanges of emissaries between Nepal and Bhutan for sometime. The chief priest of Swayambhu also holds the post of Bhutanese representative. Similarly from time to time Vakils were deputed to represent Nepal in Bhutan. In the time of Bhimsen Thapa's procuracy Ahiman Ale was at the post of Vakil representing Nepal. Likewise, under the premiership of Bir Samsher Kancha Colonel Kesar Simha Thapa was deputed for the same.

The Nepalese rulers were also allowed to catch elephants in the Jungle of the border area of Bhutan. It is mentioned on the letter of 1872 AD that the Bhutanese government at the request of Nepalese delegates, permitted for the same.

Thus there is a 320 to 325 years long history of friendly relationships between Nepal and Bhutan. Nepal has always played a friendly but significant role in the context of providing a good shape with regards to Bhutanese statecraft, its development and its administrative setup. Therefore, hopefully it can be presumed that the present problem between these two countries regarding the Bhutanese refugees will be solved through well diplomatic practices.

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