

ORAL HISTORY

Bhutan: A Fantastic People with a Wonderful King (1977–80)

J. R. Hiremath

J. R. Hiremath, former Indian Ambassador to Bhutan, recalls his experience of India-Bhutan relations during the 1970s.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you very much, Ambassador, for agreeing to talk to us on Bhutan. You must have had many experiences during your stay there. We think this was a very critical and sensitive period for that country.

J.R. Hiremath (JRH): Thank you for inviting me to talk on Bhutan. My tenure in that country was undoubtedly very interesting. I have no hesitation in saying that it was one of the most fascinating experiences that I have ever had in my entire Foreign Service career from 1954 to 1989. I was, in fact, in Bulgaria when I got a message from the Foreign Secretary, saying that he was thinking of transferring me to our Embassy in Japan. I said “Oh, that would be fascinating, because that is where I had started my diplomatic career.” Then, within a couple of weeks, he said, “Sorry, but a colleague of ours, who is about to retire, has requested me to send him to Tokyo because this is going to be his last posting.” So the posting to Tokyo was cancelled. The Foreign Secretary said: “We can’t send you there but we have selected a very special place for you, namely Bhutan, where we need to have ‘a man of credibility and experience’.” I realised that this was very good bureaucratic sales talk (because I did not have either of those rare qualities at that stage of my life). But I merely responded by saying that I would be very willing to go to Bhutan.

Until then, I had no knowledge at all about Bhutan, so I was very keen to find out something about it. My wife rang up the wife of a previous envoy to Thimphu, to ask her what we should expect to find in Bhutan, and what preparations we should make for our stay in that country. Her response was not very helpful as she did not have much to tell my wife about living conditions in Bhutan. All she could say was that there was really nothing to say about Bhutan.

We went back to Delhi from Bulgaria. Before setting out for Thimphu, I called on the Prime Minister (PM) for the customary briefing from him. The PM at that time, in 1977, was the 83-year-old Shri Morarji Desai, while I was a mere 46. The Prime Minister's "brief" for my next assignment was indeed very brief. All he said was:

Young man, remember I don't want you to bully the Bhutanese. They are very nice people. You should consider Bhutan as a younger partner of India and treat its people as your younger brothers and sisters. That is the only "brief" that I have to give you. So, you can go now to Thimphu and good luck to you in your mission!

IFAJ: Was the Indian envoy to Bhutan designated at that time as the "Representative of India" (RoI)?

JRH: Yes, I served half of my tenure as RoI. Later on, my designation was changed to Ambassador.

IFAJ: What was the consideration in changing this?

JRH Well, I suppose Bhutan wanted, more and more, to be like any other country. "We have India's representative in Bhutan, so why is he not called the Indian Ambassador?," asked the King once. As this made very little difference to us, India readily agreed. So, one fine day, with Delhi's prior approval, I called on His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuk and said, "I have now brought you a new visiting card which designates me as 'Ambassador of India'." He merely smiled, but was obviously happy to see the change.

My tenure in Bhutan was for three years. To my great delight, I found in His Majesty the King a very gracious person. I cannot speak enough about his courtesy and kindness. I used to have occasional back problems at that time – the consequence of a fall on a hard tennis court, some years earlier. And every time that I went with my family on long travels within Bhutan, to acquaint myself with the country and its diverse people, the King would send one of his imported Australian cars as a back-up vehicle. But we always managed our travels successfully in our good old Indian-made "Ambassador" or in a jhonga if we had to negotiate any rough terrain.

IFAJ: Was this not just to keep an eye on what you were doing there?

JRH: No. I don't think so. There was very little that the Bhutanese could not find out about us, with their grapevine network, which was both very strong and also very efficient.

Every year, on the National Day of Bhutan on 17 December, His Majesty made it a point to attend the grand celebration that was organised by his subjects, each year by rotation in one of the districts of the country. My family and I would always be present on such occasions. Sometimes, if the venue was not in a relatively big town, and a decent place to stay in was not easily available, we would be accommodated in a tent. The local people would dig a little pit near it, put lots of logs in it, and light a fire. In this way, we were able to sleep comfortably in the middle of Bhutan's cold winters... . But the most significant thing about these annual celebrations was to see the bonds of loyalty and regard that were forged on these occasions between the King and his subjects. His Majesty would personally feed his subjects, serving their meals to them as they sat in long rows across open fields.

The RoI's "Residence" at that time was on top of a hill, from which one could see the Thimphu River. It was a lovely Bhutanese-style cottage. Fifty yards from it was another small cottage that served as my office. Occasionally, even walking from the office to the house used to be painful – because of my old back problem. Down in the valley from our house was the Thimphu River. Beyond it was a tennis court where His Majesty could often be spotted, as he was a keen sportsman. We were very happy in our little cottage and had no longing for the new "RoI's Residence", a huge cement structure – a CPWD monster – in the valley, close to the river.

But the RoI's cottage was a delightful little place with plenty of open space around it. We were very happy there. My wife happened to discover an underground pipe, which had apparently been installed many years earlier, to supply water from a reservoir located uphill from where the house was. So we found that we could have running water in our taps. What we had heard before going to Bhutan, about Thimphu being a difficult place to live in, appeared to be an exaggeration. Even the severe winter cold could be tackled effectively by the family gathering around the bukhari. We soon decided that Thimphu was a beautiful place; that the people of Bhutan were very nice and friendly; and that they also had a wonderful and caring King.

IFAJ: You were saying something about the new house.

JRH It was a large house, in the New India House Complex. Neither the new house, nor the new office, bore any architectural relationship with the environment around them. Fortunately, we were able to resist all pressure put on us to move to the new house. However, we set up the Embassy's Library and its Reading Room in the office, after which we inaugurated the Embassy's Chancery.

IFAJ: How was it that they constructed the Embassy building without your being consulted?

JRH: We were actually not even there when the new building was constructed. We went there much later. By then, it was too late to do anything about the building. We could only contribute by planting thousands of trees and a rose garden, to relate the ugly New India House to its beautiful surroundings. Her Majesty Ashi Kesang Wangmo Wangchuk, who was the Queen Mother at the time, and the Forest Department of Bhutan, were of great help to us in this task. Without their guidance and generous contribution of saplings, it would have been an impossible undertaking.

I used to call on His Majesty every now and then, to discuss with him matters relating to Indo-Bhutan relations. Sometimes, he would send me a message: "Jagdish, come over." He was very informal in his relations with me. And when I was not particularly well because of my back problem, he was gracious enough to say: "You need not come all the way up the steep steps of the Thimphu Dzong to the Throne Room. I will meet you in my cottage, next to the Thimphu River." So I used to go and see him there in his cottage. Bhutan was altogether a marvellous experience for me.

IFAJ: What were the main issues between India and Bhutan at that time when you were there?

JRH Actually, I don't think there was any major issue at all. There were a few differences mainly on matters of trade and travel. And our response to them was basically not in any way to embarrass Bhutan.

There were often suggestions from Delhi for some new project or the other as part of Bhutan's development programme. India did not, at any time, want to exploit Bhutan for her own profit. If we agreed to finance the construction of a hydroelectric project, this would primarily be for the benefit of the people of

Bhutan, even if the excess power would be sold to India to satisfy our own requirements. So they used to ask me, “Now that Chukha has done so well, and even its fourth turbine would soon be in operation, is it not time for you to think of something else; maybe a new hydroelectric project somewhere downstream in the same river, or in some other river?...” I went and discussed this subject with the King and his response was:

You know, Jagdish, my people still live in another age. Some of them ask what the Indians are doing. They think they are taking away all the energy from our water. And I tell them you don't appreciate what they are doing for us. Wait for a while and then you will see the power that is generated. You will see each and every house in our country lit up by electricity. And then only, you will understand hydroelectric power.

That was His Majesty's response to his people's doubts.

IFAJ: So was it Tala, the next in line?

JRH: No, it was down-stream Chukha that we were proposing at that time. Tala and the other hydroelectric projects were to come much later.

IFAJ: There was another subject which the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) regarded as delicate.

JRH: Yes. The Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) Commandant at that time was Brigadier “Jeet” Khanna. Then, suddenly, a message came from Delhi that the IMTRAT Commandant would be promoted to Major General. At that time, the head of the Royal Bhutan Army was Maksi Lam, whose rank was equivalent to that of Lt. Colonel. So I was instructed by MEA to check with His Majesty as to whether Brigadier Khanna should be given his promotion right away, or only after he went back to India, when his promotion could be with retrospective effect. His Majesty's response was:

Why all this fuss? As long as Maksi Lam retains his present post as Commandant of the Royal Bhutan Army, whether Jeet Khanna is a Lt. Colonel or a Field Marshal is immaterial to us. You can promote him to whatever rank you like. You people are here to help us. Maksi Lam will, therefore, continue to be Maksi Lam.

I was very impressed by His Majesty's response and we promoted Jeet Khanna to Major General during his tenure in Bhutan. The King of Bhutan had all the majesty and national pride of a sovereign ruler; as the undisputed King of

Bhutan, he was in total command, even though he was a very young man at that time.

IFAJ: Was the question of revision of the 1949 Treaty raised during your tenure?

JRH: No. His Majesty is a very astute and intelligent person, always very discreet in his speech. But his Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Dawa Tshering, never tired of raising questions about the stipulation in the text of the then existing Indo-Bhutan Treaty, that Bhutan would be “guided by the advice of India in the conduct of its foreign policy”. He used to say that this only caused unnecessary misunderstandings between Bhutan and India. Dawa once said to me: “We will certainly follow your advice, but we will not follow it if you give us the wrong advice.” So I used to respond with: “Why would we ever want to give you any wrong advice? We are such close friends. We are totally involved in all your development programmes. We are always trying to be helpful to you, giving you five-year commitments to implement your development programmes”.

IFAJ: But did they ask for a revision of the treaty at any time during your tenure?

JRH: No, there was no formal request of that kind.

IFAJ: Do you recall that during Prime Minister Morarji Desai’s Prime Ministership, there was a certain, unfortunate incident involving Bhutan at the 1979 Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Conference in Havana?

JRH: Yes, at that time, India’s Foreign Minister was Shri S.N. Mishra. I had gone to Hashimara to receive His Majesty on his return from the NAM meeting. The King appeared to be very upset. I asked him whether he had had a very rough ride on the flight. His response was as follows:

No, not really. But at the Havana Conference, your Foreign Minister lectured me as if I were an errant schoolboy who was being reprimanded by his teacher for bad behaviour. That was only because I had not been in step with the Indian vote on a particular subject. We did not appreciate that at all. When the Indian Foreign Secretary had been to Bhutan – to brief us regarding the NAM meeting – he had not told us anything about this particular subject on which India had its own specific viewpoint. So we had used our own judgement after hearing the other NAM countries’ viewpoints.

IFAJ: Can you recollect what exactly the subject of discord was?

JRH: No, I cannot any more. It was probably about the then events in Kampuchea. During 1979 there had been some disturbances in that country. The following year, India even recognised the Heng Samrin regime. Anyway, on his return to Thimphu, the King made a public statement reflecting his resentment about the Indian handling of the issue. Subsequently, His Majesty was reported to have said in Delhi: “You can give us your advice. We will take it if it is found acceptable to us.” After that incident, one may be justified in feeling that Bhutan had begun to have increasing reservations about always automatically following our advice regarding international issues.

IFAJ: Were there any internal pressures on the King for revision of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty as it then existed?

JRH: This question seems to have gained momentum after the Kampuchean issue was debated at the NAM meeting in Havana in 1979. It is after that event that the demand for revision and updating of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty started gaining momentum.

Meanwhile, Bhutan had formally recognised Bangladesh. Bangladesh had even set up a resident Mission in Thimphu. We did not raise any objection at all to that. Instead, we quietly accepted it. Things were already beginning to change. We never tried to come in the way. It was perhaps a “very gracious” kind of relationship between India and Bhutan.

IFAJ: Was there any significant visit by the King to India or any Indian dignitaries to Bhutan at the time that you can recall?

JRH: There were many important visits by Indian officials like the Army Chief, the Air Force Chief, trade and technical experts. But perhaps the most significant visit was by Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then Foreign Minister. It was the first ministerial visit after the lifting of the emergency. Mr. Vajpayee was very successful in restoring the feeling of trust and friendship which had been more than a little shaken during the difficult years of the Emergency.

He visited the schools in Thimphu, interacted with the Bhutanese and Indian experts, he even suggested that the huge new Indian Embassy residence would be more appropriate for a university and a cultural centre in Bhutan. Of course, that did not happen – but it was a worthwhile suggestion anyway.

We had our traditional official dinner for the Foreign Minister, hosted under a borrowed Royal Bhutanese shamiana. Seeing the colourful gathering of Bhutanese officials in their beautiful national dress, complete with the swords and scarves, the poet in Mr. Vajpayee immediately composed a song on the story of Bhutan. He then got us all to sing it to the tune of *Aao bachon tumhen sunayen*. Before we knew it, the formal royal gathering was swaying to the beats of Indian and Bhutanese folk and film songs. The ceremonial dinner gathering turned into a musical *majlis* – bringing a new warmth and informality into the history of official Bhutanese-Indian dinner diplomacy; for the first time, a dinner went on beyond the formal 10 o'clock royal time limit. It also restored some of the trust and friendship which had been under immense strain during the previous two years of the Emergency.

IFAJ: Was there some tension between India and Bhutan at the time when Atalji went there?

JRH: There were ongoing tensions and resentments relating to the issue of entry and transit permits. The Bhutanese also had to obtain “P” forms from India for travelling abroad to third countries. Mr. Vajpayee took a very understanding view of the problem.

IFAJ: Had they started talking to the Chinese on the border issue during your tenure in Bhutan?

JRH: Yes, Chinese graziers had started crossing, from time to time, into what Bhutan considered as its own territory, though it had not yet been formally demarcated. The graziers would come and usually leave after a while, avoiding any conflict. At this time, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) decided to enter into direct negotiations with the Chinese to resolve this issue. We suggested sending Indian officials to attend these talks as Observers. But neither Bhutan nor China agreed to our suggestion. Of course, we were not happy about that. But the Bhutanese kept us informed about their negotiations, and as IMTRAT had its headquarters at Ha, not far from the still-to-be-demarcated northern border of Bhutan, we were able to keep a close watch on what was happening at the border. We were just watching the developments.

IFAJ: But why did IMTRAT not patrol that area, in order to prevent the Chinese graziers from crossing into what Bhutan considered as its own, though still formally undemarcated, northern border?

JRH: IMTRAT was in Bhutan only as a training team and therefore was not in a position to patrol the area. Nor did India want any direct confrontation with China. Accordingly, in these circumstances, IMTRAT personnel mounted excursions periodically to keep track of the situation.

IFAJ: But how and when did the Bhutanese start talking to the Chinese on the border issue?

JRH: The RGB sent a delegation to Beijing to resolve the question of the Chinese graziers. As this issue was about a formally undemarcated border, it was not possible for Bhutan easily to validate its claim of territorial jurisdiction. It was an open kind of area, on which Bhutan was trying to assert its jurisdiction. Fortunately, there were no major incidents of any kind. My tenure in Bhutan ended around the time that I have just described.

IFAJ: If you can recall, they had also engaged Om Pradhan to lead the delegation, may be much later.

JRH: Yes much later, but I believe that was the King's way of getting the Nepalese involved in the process.

IFAJ: How was the economic relationship between India and Bhutan at that time?

JRH: India was very deeply involved with all aspects of the economic development in Bhutan. We were financing their Five Year Plan. Of course, there were also some large projects like Chukha, the Penden cement plant, the Druk and Kissan collaboration on fruit processing and preservation – Druk has since become a major brand for juices and fruit drinks, jams and fruit preserves. We also had trade and development advisors to assist the RGB, and a team of geologists to help them in exploring their mineral wealth.

Perhaps the most important contribution in making Bhutan a cohesive trading and economic entity was made by Dantak, the Indian Border Roads Task

Force. They made a network of roads over some of the most difficult terrain, facilitating connectivity and communication both within the country and with neighbouring Indian states.

IFAJ: Was there any problem regarding Bhutan's heavy reliance on India, economically or militarily?

JRH: Of course, Bhutan would have liked some diversification. But at the same time it did not want to be involved with any great power. They watched the problems in Afghanistan, the unrest in Nepal, and the general environment of the world divided into Cold War power blocks. Geographically they found it more comfortable to be in the Indian sphere of influence – our shared history and religion and border trading traditions made us natural allies. But they were not averse to opening economic relations with countries like Japan or Denmark, or Austria.

IFAJ: But ever since the King's father's time there was always a small group in Bhutan that wanted more distance between their country and India.

JRH: Yes, they wanted to become a truly sovereign and independent country. We were far from denying them that status, except that we wanted them to harmonise their relationship with India; a kind of sister country. We were in no mood to bully them; we were there to be their friend, adviser, helper. Many Indian financial and other experts were there to help them.

IFAJ: What about the Chinese perception of this?

JRH: I do not think this question had appeared in a big way during my tenure, except on learning about Chinese graziers coming across open fields and unmarked borders in the area beyond Ha. That was near the place where IMTRAT was located.

IFAJ: When did we withdraw IMTRAT from Bhutan?

JRH: I cannot tell you when that happened, as it was after my tenure in Bhutan.

IFAJ: Was there any visible reservation regarding the IMTRAT on the part of the Bhutanese during your time?

JRH: No not at all. IMTRAT was there to train the Bhutanese army and not as a large formidable army presence. IMTRAT also integrated into the community, especially in the more remote Bhutanese villages, providing transport and medical facilities to anyone in need. The little IMTRAT clinics served a very special need at the time.

IFAJ: But they were not expanding their army in any case

JRH: Not particularly. Their resources were limited and they did not see any need for it either. They faced this problem later on, when the Nepalese question arose. That was, anyway, after my tenure.

IFAJ: Had they ever envisaged any military encroachment from the Chinese side?

JRH: Not militarily, but their graziers were coming across. I don't really know if any Chinese army personnel were also doing so. May be, there were some soldiers dressed like graziers, to explore the situation.

IFAJ: The Chinese are now improving their connectivity. Several roads have brought them very close to the Bhutan border.

JRH: There is also now a Trans-Tibet railway line, surmounting the formidable mountains.

IFAJ: Do you expect any problem in Bhutan with all these developments?

JRH: I don't think it would be in China's interest to encroach physically into Bhutan, which has been a convenient buffer state between two big countries. Besides, the US and other Western countries are not likely to sit idly by and watch China do that to Bhutan. I doubt if that would happen. At most, China may try to increase its cultural influence in Bhutan. But I would not like to stray too far from the main subject of our present discourse.

IFAJ: Were there any rumblings of the Nepali problem during your time?

JRH: During my tenure in Bhutan, there was not really much of that, though the future could have had ominous possibilities. But the future may have been beckoning, ever so gently, as the Nepalese in Bhutan were already being encouraged to harmonise themselves with the dominant Drukpa culture. Perhaps

as a balancing act, one among them, Mr. Om Pradhan, had been made a Dasho and entrusted with high office.

IFAJ: During your time, did you feel that the Nepalese were being discriminated against? Or did they need more elbow room to retain their own distinctive culture?

JRH: Bhutan's "Nepalese problem" was still only incubating during my Thimphu days.

IFAJ: Was there any demand on us which we found, on our part, unreasonable?

JRH: Not really. They wanted to have representation of other countries and we agreed to that. First the UNDP Resident Representative was sent to Thimphu. He was an Indian national. Bhutan was considerate and conciliatory all the time, and the King was not a person to go out of his way to irritate India for any reason. We, of course, used to attend meetings in the Tsogdu as observers. We found that the King's presence moderated everything. He hardly ever intervened in the debates, unless it was absolutely necessary.

IFAJ: Were there any unpalatable comments about India in the debates there?

JRH: No, never, not really. The Bhutanese are good people. They only wanted space, and we appreciated that.

IFAJ: What was their perception of Indira Gandhi's India and Morarji Desai's India? Were there any differences in how they looked at us?

JRH: Not really. Prime Minister Morarji Desai's instructions to me were to be pleasant to the Bhutanese and not to bully them. So there was no question of that type. Of course, I think they were in awe of Mrs. Gandhi, especially during the Emergency. But Prime Minister Morarji Desai's tenure was quite reassuring for establishing the traditional warm and cordial relations between our two countries.

IFAJ: Thank you so much, Ambassador, for talking to us.
