

ORAL HISTORY

Evolution of Bhutan's International Personality (1968–85)

Amar Nath Ram

Amar Nath Ram, India's former Ambassador to Bhutan, who had participated in building up Bhutan's diplomatic establishment at the United Nations in New York, narrates his long and eventful association with the Kingdom.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you, Ambassador, for agreeing to talk to the Journal. Kindly enlighten us about your association with Bhutan, which is known to have been an important assignment during your early diplomatic career.

Amar Nath Ram (ANR): My association with Bhutan covers a total of about ten years. First, in 1968, I was posted to our Mission in Thimphu to assist Shri B.S. Das in establishing our resident diplomatic presence in that country. Later in 1971, I served as a member of Bhutan's first Mission to the UN in New York and in that capacity represented them. On my return, in late 1973, for a few months I served as Deputy Secretary in the Northern Division of the Ministry. Subsequently in 1979, I was head of the Northern Division in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Much later, as Secretary, in a peripheral way, I continued to remain associated with Bhutan.

In October 1968, I was assigned in the Ministry as a young officer. On completion of my assignment in the normal course, I was posted to our Embassy in Turkey. As I was preparing to leave for Turkey, one late evening I received a call from Secretary, MEA, Shri T.N. Kaul, asking me if I would be interested in a challenging assignment in Bhutan and in assisting Shri B.S. Das in the process of opening our Mission there. For personal reasons, I was keen at the time to do a challenging "tough" posting. Therefore, I immediately accepted Shri Kaul's suggestion (or order?) to go to Bhutan.

My journey to Thimphu took me to a small airfield near the India–Bhutan border at Hasimara, where I landed from Calcutta (now Kolkata) in a small

aircraft. I think it was a ten-seater aircraft of Jam Air, a private airline. At Hasimara I was met by somebody, I think Shri Bondey of the Indian Police Training Team, who took me to the border town of Phuntsholing. After spending a night at Phuntsholing, we set out on a very long journey – about fourteen hours – to Thimphu, mostly by jeep on a very rough road still under construction – and also on horseback on certain stretches where there were landslides. The team of the Border Roads Project DANTAK, under Brig. O.P. Dutta, extended exceptional courtesies and hospitality to me throughout the long road journey and subsequently. I arrived in Thimphu in the evening on 26 October 1968. I was exhausted.

Thimphu Valley was spellbinding – very remarkably different from anything I had seen. I had been to mountains before and had spent time in Mussoorie where the National Academy of Administration is located. Thimphu Valley, headquarters of the Royal Government of Bhutan, stood out like a picture postcard. One could hear the birds sing even at the late hour. I stood motionless at the gate of Thimphu and took a deep breath. I was at 8000 feet above the sea level and said to myself: “This, indeed, is Shangri-La”.

My first days were spent in settling down. There was no house for me. The Bhutanese Government had ordered a house to be constructed. It was to be a bamboo-cum-mud-plastered house. It took about three months to be completed and until then I was first staying as guest of the Special Officer and then in temporary accommodation. The Special Officer of India was already engaged in the process of setting up our diplomatic mission in Thimphu. My job was to assist him as his deputy. The Special Officer, Shri B.S. Das, has distinguished himself both in his diplomatic and other assignments and is much respected in Bhutan.

There are certain incidents of the time which I recall very vividly. At that time Bhutan did not have a cabinet. The Ministers were called Secretaries. The Home Secretary, for example, was equivalent to the Home Minister. There was no Prime Minister. The King was both Head of State as well as Head of Government. Soon after I reached Thimphu, Shri Das proceeded on home leave and I was to head the Mission during his absence. I was advised to go and call on the Secretaries. We were unfamiliar with their local customs. I was told by someone, I think from the local staff in the Indian Mission, that in Bhutan their custom, when one visits a local dignitary for the first time, is for a drink to be offered, which one is supposed to finish in one go. If the glass is refilled, it suggests that one is welcome. Again one is expected to drink it in one go. If the

drink is offered a third time that would suggest that one is part of the larger family of friends. That too should be finished down in one go. Dasho Tamji Jagar was the Home Secretary, who subsequently became Home Minister (Lyonpo). When I visited him in his very traditional home in the afternoon, he was kind and gracious. He offered whiskey. I was then a teetotaler. My glass was filled up. As advised, I finished the whiskey down in one go. Immediately somebody came and filled up my glass and I drank that too. By then I was slightly sozzled. When the third whiskey arrived, I finished that too and needed help to be escorted out! The very stately Home Minister never forgot to remind me about this incident whenever I met him later! My first meeting with the Secretary-General of the Development Wing, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering (he soon became Foreign Minister), was at a dance party at his elegant home.

My experience of social calls in Bhutan was very different from social calls elsewhere in the world. Bhutan is a very distinct society with unique local customs and traditions. The King is the Head of State and there is also a spiritual head called the Je Khempo. Both are highly respected and venerated. Bhutan is a deeply religious and a very devout Buddhist country. It was impossible not to be impressed by the country. Their spiritual and cultural values, their pride in their country, religion and culture, their friendship, their total commitment to nature, the harmony in which they lived, their music, dance, dress and cuisine – and even their architecture and buildings, in which they used vegetable dyes (they did not use chemicals or nails) – were all captivatingly unique and awesome. All this showed a certain harmony between man and nature which is so rare in today's world. My house, as I said earlier, was built with bamboo and mud plaster. Of course, it was a reasonably good house – a modern home – but was not like the houses one saw in towns at the time.

It took me a while to settle down in Thimphu because in those days very little fresh produce was available. The population of Thimphu at the time, I reckon, was not more than 1500. It was a tiny town. There was, in the centre of the valley, the imposing Dzong, the headquarters of both the spiritual and temporal authority in Bhutan. The King, I believe, spent a lot of time in the Dzong. He, apparently, lived there in one wing, although there was a royal cottage close by. Outside the Dzong, there were a few temporary functional hutments which housed the offices of the Royal Government. The Ministers and senior officials sat in the Dzong. The Monk Body occupied one wing. A small

hydropower plant supplied electricity for the homes of the establishment, not for the common people. There was no running water. People used to draw water from the nearby springs and the river which dominated the valley, with the beautiful Dzong in the background. Virtually no fresh milk, meat or vegetables were available except in season in the weekly market. All essential items were either imported from Siliguri, which was the nearest big city, or one had to do without them. The locals produced and consumed mostly red rice with lots of chillies – the big red chillies used to be dried on the rooftop of every home, a beautiful sight! They ate a lot of “churbi” (yak milk cheese), meat – mostly pork – and chewed “doma” (local betel nut). In Thimphu and in the countryside, yak meat was a favourite dish; dried yak meat was the most preferred dish among the local people.

My child, who was about two years old, was with us at Thimphu. It was difficult for us to organise baby food, fresh milk and fresh vegetables; we had to make do with whatever the visitors brought for us. Once in a while the Indian military training team under Brig. T.V. Jeganathan used to arrange essential items, which would keep us going. In terms of physical comforts of life, Bhutan of the 1960s was challenging. It was remote, even more remote than the remotest villages in India. Nevertheless, there were certain things about life in Bhutan which more than compensated for what we missed. I learnt to enjoy the somewhat austere life in Thimphu because we were young. We were quite happy to live the way the Bhutanese lived. I loved the people of Thimphu, particularly because they were unconditional friends, simple, open, friendly and hospitable. They tried to help us in their own ways. They would bring eggs from their homes, for example, so that we might be comfortable in terms of our daily needs. The Royal family, from time to time, used to send us red rice, fruits, bakery products, etc., which we enjoyed.

I enjoyed my work. Shri Das was a kind and generous boss. Very early in my career I was exposed to the highest levels of leadership in Thimphu. From time to time, I was privileged to be received in audience by His Majesty the King and to regularly interact with Secretaries/Ministers and senior officials. Soon the Secretaries were elevated to the rank of Ministers, possibly for protocol reasons. It was a unique opportunity for me to interact and work with them; to evolve a personal relationship.

I was in Bhutan at a very interesting time. As you would recall, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s historic visit to Bhutan in 1958 effectively ended Bhutan’s self-imposed isolationism. Bhutan accepted India’s assistance to build roads –

the road on which I had travelled – and other social and physical infrastructure. I arrived in 1968, ten years down the line, and the road was not quite ready yet. That was understandable in view of the difficulties of building roads on high mountains and in difficult terrain. Bhutan's decision to slowly open up imposed a special responsibility on us. It was a period of transition in a very traditional society. We were required to deal with the situation with utmost sensitivity. In the process of opening up, neither Bhutan nor India wanted any ripples of unmanageable social kind to occur. Every time doses of developmental assistance were injected into Bhutan we had to be careful that it did not disrupt local sensitivities and way of life. Development was not an end in itself; development had to be in tune with Bhutanese traditions and in harmony with their very strong religious beliefs, customs and traditions. In that sense, it was a sensitive posting, very different from a normal diplomatic assignment. At every step one had to allay doubts. Naturally, several questions were posed: "You want to build a hydropower project or a road here. Will it adversely affect our forests, our pristine land and our environment?"

Later, when work on the Chukha Hydel Project commenced – it involved very little inundation and minimum environmental impact – the people felt reassured and satisfied. The leadership in Bhutan was in tune with all this and we worked in close coordination and did exactly what they wanted. Never did we impose our views. It was the constraints, wishes and views of Thimphu that prevailed in every sense and at all times. India's role was to provide expertise, technical know-how and, of course, funding. It was about this time that some young people in Thimphu wanted Bhutan to open up to the outside world and for its sovereignty to be formally recognised by the rest of the world. Bhutan slowly began to acquire an international personality. This process, however, was gradual. It is noteworthy that this process unfolded in full consultation with the Government of India. First, Bhutan became a member of the Universal Postal Union, an intergovernmental organisation.

IFAJ: That was in 1968.

ANR: In the mid-1960s came the Colombo Plan. Then the aspirations of Bhutan acquired a little larger dimension. There was desire on the part of some young people in Thimphu that their country should explore the possibility of membership of the United Nations. Around 1969 it gathered momentum. In consultation with the Government of India it was decided that Bhutan would

send a delegation to New York to explore and recce the prospect. His Majesty the King asked the Government of India if I could be sent to assist the delegation which was led by his brother, His Royal Highness Prince Namgyal Wangchuk. During the 1969 UN General Assembly session, we went to New York for about a month to meet other member delegations of the United Nations, especially the Permanent Five (at that time PRC was not a member and the China seat was occupied by Taiwan). We came back and reported that there was general receptivity to the idea and the time may have come for Bhutan to make a formal request for full membership of the United Nations.

This process started in 1970. In 1971, the King again requested for my services – I was still in the Indian Mission in Thimphu – for assisting the Royal Government in pursuing membership and opening Bhutan's first Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York. I was sent along with a Bhutanese officer, somewhat before the membership was realised. I went there in May 1971 and Bhutan became a member of the UN in September 1971. In this capacity I continued to remain associated with Bhutan; but this time not as part of the Indian Mission but as part of the Bhutanese Mission to the UN in New York. Again this was a very challenging assignment because while I, as an Indian, could represent India very naturally, I was initially not very comfortable representing Bhutan. I had to mentally transform myself into a Bhutanese to understand what they would do in a certain situation. It was also the first major step in Bhutan's evolution as an international entity and in its foreign policy. I do not think that I would be wrong or exaggerating if I suggest that in some of the first policy decisions that Bhutan took in international affairs my inputs were taken into account. I was privileged to be a part of this historic process.

IFAJ: Any significant happenings of that time?

ANR: From Bhutan's point of view, not much was happening except Bangladesh. When Bangladeshi independence happened I was very much part of the Bhutanese Mission. Bhutan was the only country that voted with India in the General Assembly when Dacca fell on 16 December 1971. The vote, if I recall rightly, was 104 against India and 2 in favour – by India and Bhutan. I was privileged to be on the ringside of history in the making. In the Committees of the UN, I was given an opportunity to speak for Bhutan, articulating a position which later became inputs for policy. What I said in New York was approved by

my boss in the Mission and well received in Thimphu. I was fortunate as I had the full support of His Majesty the King as well as the Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering (who has since passed away), a very gracious person of old-world charm. My boss in the Mission, Lyonpo Sangye Penjore, trusted me fully as also did my colleagues. I think I was successfully able to balance my duties as a member of the Bhutanese Mission to the UN, representing Bhutan, and my own commitment to India, a fact which ultimately, I think, led to Bhutan honouring me with one of its highest civilian awards when I completed my Mission in 1973. I was conferred the award at a special ceremony by the King in the National Assembly of Bhutan, which I think – I am not sure – was happening for the first time to an Indian national. The award, called Druk Thuksey, was given for my contribution in setting up the Bhutanese Permanent Mission in the UN. It was a privilege. As you are aware, India does not normally allow its diplomats to receive awards from foreign governments. But in this case, an exception was made and I was allowed to receive the award in view of our very close relations with Bhutan.

As Bhutan evolved as a modern state, both economically as well as a member of the international community, many other developments occurred. Bhutan became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and joined almost all the other international and regional organisations. Bhutan's international personality slowly flowered. As part of my responsibilities, I attended the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other conferences on behalf of Bhutan, accompanying their officials.

By this time, the Bhutanese had developed their own cadre of officials and had gained sufficient experience in managing their own affairs, especially their Foreign Office segment. Therefore, the completion of my tenure in New York did not cause any dislocation. It was also a part of my responsibility to brief and help young Bhutanese officers who would eventually staff important positions in Thimphu. I did this also when I was posted in Bhutan in the Indian Mission. For example, when Bhutan started bringing out a monthly newspaper called Kuensel, the editor, Rinzin Dorji, would often sit with me and talk about what to cover in the newspaper and how to make it interesting and relevant. My informal

involvement was extensive. Even His Majesty the King would occasionally seek me out and talk to me about some matters, especially when Shri Das was away from Thimphu.

The Bhutanese did not think for a minute before extending their fullest support to India. The Bangladesh issue was only one example of this. There, of course, were differences on certain matters between India and Bhutan, but no fundamental ones. The understanding, evolved over a period of time, appears to have been that wherever India's core interests are involved, Bhutan will always support India. Likewise, wherever Bhutan's core interests are involved, India will always stand by Bhutan. This is the uniqueness of our relationship, a model relationship. No other two neighbours in the world, I believe, have developed this kind of relationship of total trust.

IFAJ: Would you identify the core interests of Bhutan in terms of their foreign policy orientation, global outlook and India's interests and concerns?

ANR: In my view, Bhutan's core interests are: (a) its sovereignty and security, that's number one (b) to develop and make the country prosperous without undermining their customs, traditions, ecology, religious beliefs or way of life – and they have succeeded in that (c) to maintain a very close and good relationship with India. These are their three core national and foreign policy goals. I think it is a very pragmatic approach. That's why India makes sure that cooperation with Bhutan is not on commercial terms and is mutually beneficial. Our objective is that we should make our cooperation an instrument of Bhutan's efforts to become self-sufficient, become stronger; Bhutan's sovereignty and security to be enhanced and protected. For example, in the case of Chukka and Tala projects or any other project the terms that we offer to Bhutan are always generous, commercial-plus. The reason is that we do not want anyone even to suggest that we have exploited this relationship. We are not there for exploiting Bhutan's natural resources, which are Bhutan's alone. We are there for assisting Thimphu to become self-sufficient in terms of economic needs.

Many people do not know that today Bhutan is the most prosperous South Asian country. Its per capita income is close to US\$ 1500 – three times that of India and much higher than that of the rest of South Asia. Bhutan is now close to levels of per capita income that Southeast Asia enjoyed in the early or mid-1980s. It is a prosperous country, and with more projects coming up like the

Tala Project, which is a 1500 megawatt hydropower project, Bhutan's developmental needs will be substantially met by developing its own resources. Bhutan has been careful in preserving its ecology. It does not want indiscriminate development to take place at the cost of its way of life, its ecology. The number of tourists who are allowed to visit Bhutan is very small – I believe their number is 2000 per year, that too in organised groups. They are not allowed to go wherever they like. Deforestation is not allowed. Ecology is preserved in its pristine form. Fast-flowing rivers are abundant in water, their lakes are full, their forests are dense, and their wildlife, their flora and fauna are rich and diverse and are well preserved. Bhutan is probably one of the few countries in the world where ecology is still preserved in its pristine form. Global warming, of course, has had an effect but it is not due to what Bhutan is doing but due to the doings of those who live in other parts of the globe. These are Bhutan's core interests and India respects and supports them.

As regards India's core interests in Bhutan, I believe India wants a stable, prosperous, sovereign, and independent Bhutan. This is in our self-interest. India's neighbourhood is sensitive. Bhutan shares boundaries with India and China. India wants Bhutan to remain strong, stable and prosperous so that there is no reason for anyone to believe that Bhutan is vulnerable. The second interest that India has in Bhutan is to help that country preserve its unique way of life – one of the last, pure, traditional ways of life. It is a heritage that the world must cherish. Buddhism in Bhutan, their way of life, their customs and traditions, their taboos, all are worthy of study and emulation. Bhutan is the only country that does not believe in the Gross National Product (GNP) concept; they believe in Gross National Happiness (GNH) – a new concept coined by the former King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who wisely said that happiness and prosperity are not interchangeable concepts; they are different. Prosperity may not lead to happiness but happiness can lead to prosperity. That is a unique concept which he has given to the world. Lastly, of course, the North East of India is facing difficult times and Bhutan can help us in this regard, as Bhutan did two years ago in flushing out north-east insurgents from its territory. India's national interest is furthered by a friendly Bhutan. There are enormous convergences and congruences between India and Bhutan both at the strategic as well as socio-economic levels. This is the only neighbouring country with which we have no bilateral problem whatsoever. There are, of course, a few issues that arise

because we are neighbours, but these are always amicably resolved through dialogue.

IFAJ: Which issues? Trade?

ANR: No, not necessarily trade. We have an excellent understanding on that. When two people live alongside on both sides of the border you do have small issues; these could be law-and-order issues, criminal issues, insurgency issues, etc. These problems always exist but I do not think that these are issues that separate India and Bhutan. These are dealt with at the local level. At the national level there are very few issues that divide India and Bhutan. Even regarding Bhutan's relationship with China there is a great degree of understanding between India and Bhutan. On international issues that do not affect India's core interests – of course, on core interest issues Bhutan is always with us – there is a fair amount of consultation, exchange of views and dialogue. I would like to believe that this is a relationship which is modelled in a unique manner. There is no parallel to it in the world. I would like to pay a tribute to the sagacity and statesmanship of His Late Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk who opened up Bhutan. Continuing this tradition, his son Jigme Singye Wangchuk, a farsighted and wise King, in a rare display of sensitivity voluntarily abandoned his own absolute powers and introduced participatory electoral democracy in Bhutan. This is unique. No absolute monarch in the world has ever given up power voluntarily. Here is a case where a King not only gave up his powers to elected representatives but has chosen to abdicate in favour of his son, saying that he has ruled for a long enough time and now it is time for his son to rule. It is, indeed, a remarkable country.

IFAJ: It's an enlightened leadership.

ANR: Very enlightened, no question about that. I think the credit for directing and managing Bhutan's evolution as an international entity, Bhutan's remarkable progress and its cordial relations with India and the outside world should go to the leadership in Bhutan, always enjoying the friendship and support of India.

IFAJ: What sort of democracy do they have?

ANR: It is a very open democracy, very representative. There are two major political parties. The recent elections were fought on party lines. As it happens, one party won a large number of seats; there is very little opposition to it in effective terms. That does not mean that it can sit on its electoral laurels. It has

to be responsible and accountable. Bhutan has evolved a system where accountability is a part of its administrative apparatus. There are checks and balances in place.

IFAJ: Like what?

ANR: Well, there is a Royal Advisory Council; there is an Audit Board; an independent Election Commission; there is Parliament; there is a watchdog body for government servants; and a Public Service Commission, etc.; and, of course, there is the King, the ultimate constitutional authority.

IFAJ: Some kind of ombudsman.

ANR: Yes, some kind of ombudsman. The King takes very close and direct interest in these matters. He does not interfere in the governance of the country on a day-to-day basis. He is there at all times for his subjects to come and tell him if something is going wrong. He has excellent communication and rapport with his people and he travels a lot within Bhutan.

IFAJ: What kind of civil society did they use to have, like business chambers, farmers associations, etc.?

ANR: In the 1960s, Bhutan's civil society was non-existent. The celestial body has always been hugely respected. Nobody in Bhutan ever questions the two revered and much-loved institutions: their religious structure, that is, the Buddhist structures; and their Monarchy. The King has voluntarily subjected himself to scrutiny by Parliament and the people. His actions are discussed and debated in the National Assembly, but he is a hugely respected figure. The day-to-day government is in the hands of the Prime Minister and his cabinet.

IFAJ: Would you kindly elaborate about India-Bhutan cooperative security? Is it like joint patrolling or something else?

ANR: I do not think there is joint patrolling, though there is adequate cooperation and coordination. They, perhaps, patrol their own side. There is exchange of information and continuous dialogue at the local level. These matters also figure in regular dialogues between Thimphu and New Delhi. Nobody has complained that Bhutan is not cooperating fully. The flushing out of the north-eastern insurgents who had set up safe havens and camps inside Bhutan is a fine example of India-Bhutan cooperation, deeply appreciated by the people of India. The insurgents have got the message.

IFAJ: They would experiment in cooperative security arrangement.

ANR: Bhutan, as mentioned earlier, has been very forthcoming. And I would like to say again that the extent of cooperation that we receive from Bhutan is remarkable.

IFAJ: What has been Bhutan's relationship with its other neighbours in South Asia?

ANR: Let us start with Bhutan's relations with the SAARC countries. They have relations with all the SAARC countries. They attend all SAARC meetings and host and coordinate some too. They are very supportive of regional cooperation. As far as I know, Bhutan looks at SAARC as a valuable instrument of South Asian peace, prosperity and cohesion. This is their approach to SAARC. Bhutan has a Resident Ambassador in Bangladesh. With China, they have a boundary dispute. Some in Bhutan may not call it a dispute but there is a boundary disagreement with China in terms of the perception of where the boundary lies. They have had several rounds of talks with the Chinese. It is my impression – I may be wrong as I have been out of the government for a long time – that while the differences may have been slightly narrowed or better understood, no resolution has yet taken place in terms of agreement on the demarcation of the boundary. China believes that it needs to develop close relations with all the South Asian countries, including Bhutan.

IFAJ: Is it viable to consider Bhutan as a sort of headquarter at least for some cooperative activities within SAARC – education, culture, water sharing, joint research on some of these aspects?

ANR: Indeed, every SAARC country has been given certain subjects to coordinate and Bhutan has its own responsibility there. I would like to think that Bhutan is doing a very good job of coordinating those activities under the SAARC aegis. Bhutan is very much integrated, very well positioned to play this kind of coordinating role because it has very good relations with all the countries. It is a small country and has excellent relations with India. And it sees itself positioned in a very positive way to play a constructive role in taking the SAARC process forward. Bhutan hosts several meetings and will host the next SAARC Summit.

IFAJ: How do you see Bhutan's international personality vis-à-vis the international community?

ANR: Bhutan now has a fairly large Foreign Office and a large number of able diplomats. Particularly its young diplomats are very capable and well-versed in

the art of diplomacy. Of course, Bhutan's problems are very manageable. Bhutan does not have many issues with neighbours, not even with its closest neighbour, India. Its foreign policy is meant to play a role which enhances its own comfort level in international affairs. The Bhutanese do that very well. They focus on subjects that are of interest to them. Of course, they support India on issues, as I said, which are of concern to us. But there are no issues that put pressure on Bhutan. It is already ahead of the UN-mandated norms, for example, on environment, human development, etc. Thus, Bhutan is quite comfortably placed. Bhutan receives good support from the UN system and gives to the UN system a perspective that is unique. It is a country with no personal agenda of its own. It seeks nothing but value addition to the UN system.

IFAJ: You spoke about your second posting as Ambassador to Bhutan.

ANR: I went there in 1983 for the second time. The highlight of my second posting was the visit of our Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi – his first visit abroad was to Bhutan after he became Prime Minister. By that time the relationship with Bhutan had reached a very high, very intense level of cooperation, coordination, mutual support and trust. We were able to discuss with Bhutan all matters freely. That is the test, the hallmark of a good relationship. Bhutan feels comfortable in discussing all issues with India. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit was time for celebration of the India-Bhutan friendship. He did not go there to iron out any differences with Bhutan; he went there to cement this relationship and take it forward. That was achieved. The Bhutanese go an extra mile each time an Indian dignitary visits Bhutan, just as we feel honoured every time a Bhutanese dignitary visits India. In our relationship with Bhutan there are no significant issues; it is a question of moving forward, making sure that one manages the relationship in such a manner that we do not forget the mantra that we respect the sensitivities and core interests of each other.

IFAJ: You have been an Ambassador to a country with which our relationship is so wonderful. Your daily agenda was full-fledged or more than full-fledged.

ANR: More than full because in Bhutan, apart from the work, which is very interesting and challenging, you have to constantly think about further steps needed to take this unique relationship forward. Apart from that Bhutan is a society where social interaction is very close and personal; particularly for me, as I had a very large circle of friends since my first posting in the mid-1960s.

IFAJ: You are almost a Bhutanese in a sense.

ANR: I know a lot of people there. I attended their celebrations, weddings, and sad events and became a part of their social life. I must confess – and I say this as an aside – that it is impossible not to be totally impacted and influenced by the way Buddhism is practised in Bhutan. One of the most beautiful, peaceful and fulfilling experiences in life is to visit a Gompa, a Buddhist temple. It is peaceful, serene and isolated. The monks are compassionate. They are learned. The Kanjur and Tanjur, the holy scriptures of Buddhism and OM MANI are recited twenty-four hours in monasteries. Prayer is always on the lips of a Bhutanese. I have also visited Buddhist temples elsewhere – many of my postings have been to Buddhist countries – but the peace and harmony with nature that one experiences in Bhutan is hard to find elsewhere. Even though I may not formally have become a Buddhist in Bhutan, it was impossible for me not to have been deeply and profoundly influenced by that religion and its overpowering and all-embracing presence.

IFAJ: So what you are saying is – religion as pursuit of spiritualism and serenity, and you are at peace with yourself.

ANR: I could go to the extent of saying that one sees contentment in everyone who lives in that country. On their weathered faces, in their day-to-day life, in their rituals, in their music and dance and even in their work you see godliness and that godliness transcends. You cannot live in that society without being affected by its unique ambience. It is very profound. That is why in my small home there is a very special corner of Buddhism. These are not objects d'art or decoration pieces, they radiate peace or Shanti.

IFAJ: Anything you would like the coming generation to know about Bhutan?

ANR: The Bhutanese have a unique way of honouring their guests. It is not the twenty-one-gun salute that the Head of a State or Head of Government receives when he or she visits a capital. Here they open their hearts to their friends and honoured guests. That is what they did when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Smt. Sonia Gandhi visited Bhutan in 1985. They were showered with love, and in a rare gesture of friendship and hospitality, they were accommodated in the Royal Palace which Her Majesty the Queen Mother had vacated for the visiting dignitaries. In how many countries does this happen? Elsewhere, they would put

you up in a hotel or some guesthouse. In this case, Her Majesty the Queen Mother made sure that every detail of the Prime Minister and Smt. Sonia Gandhi's comforts was taken care of under her personal guidance. That is the extent of care, concern and hospitality that Bhutan displays for its close friends from India. The same was done during the visit of President V.V. Giri in 1971. I was in Thimphu then on my first posting. His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk vacated his own palace for the President. This is the quality of our relationship.

IFAJ: It looks like a post-modern society.

ANR: Yes, it is.

IFAJ: Did you have any kind of one-to-one discussion with His Majesty? You have mentioned about the Bangladesh issue and your stint in the UN. What was your costume at the time – the traditional Bhutanese? Was there any kind of briefing from the Bhutanese Government?

ANR: In the late 1960s and early 1970s my interaction with His Majesty the King was frequent. He would send for me from time to time. One was required to negotiate the steep stairs to the audience hall in the Dzong. He used to receive visitors in one of the sections of the Dzong, which was very high, leaving one breathless. The late King was so gracious, thoughtful and sensitive; when he saw me breathless, he would turn to the window to give me time to regain my breath! He kept a portrait of his friend, Smt. Indira Gandhi, in the audience hall. Where else would a Head of State show such graciousness for a mere First Secretary in the Indian Mission? He would always start his conversation on a personal note – how is your family, how are you doing, how are you keeping, any problem that you are having, etc. If he indirectly learnt about any problem – for example, bread or red rice not being available in the market – even before I reached back home I would find something waiting for me from His Majesty. I was privileged to be in touch with him and his ministers as well.

By the time of my posting as Ambassador in 1983, things had become a trifle formal. But for me, perhaps, as an old friend of Bhutan's, some very special doors had been kept open. As I recall, soon after I presented my credentials to His Majesty, he followed me to my residence for a chat and a cup of tea with me. That does not happen in many other countries. This had nothing to do with protocol. Protocol-wise his role would have been over once he had accepted my credentials and the ceremony was over. But, as a special gesture of friendship and goodwill, His Majesty, the Head of the State, visited me at my residence. This was really special.

As for attire, on formal occasions I would dress up in a Bhutanese Kho or Baaku. Each time I spoke it used to be for Bhutan; even by mistake my Indian identity would not come out. I gave newspaper interviews, gave talks at various places, various universities, societies; every time I spoke for Bhutan and as a Bhutanese. When I spoke about the Bhutanese way of life I was always a Bhutanese. There was a lot of curiosity about Bhutan, particularly in New York of the 1970s. At that time, Bhutan was totally unknown. It was a personal honour for me to represent Bhutan; it reflected the degree of trust and confidence that the late King and the Royal Government had in me that they should have requested for my services. I must have done something right in my first posting to earn their trust and confidence. The late King did not expect me to abandon my Indian loyalty and become Bhutanese. He understood that I was an Indian and would always remain Indian. India's interests would always be paramount for me. He did not see any conflict or contradiction between India's interests and Bhutan's interests.

IFAJ: This is the harmony.

ANR: Yes, this is the harmony. Regarding the Bangladesh episode, I had full freedom within the parameters of policy. We were a very small Mission in New York at the time. Apart from myself there was the Permanent Representative – my boss – and a younger officer. I used to cover more than one committee and hop from one to another. Whenever Bangladesh was on the agenda, I would go and intervene in the discussion as a Bhutanese, of course within the parameters of approved policy. In the General Assembly also I did the same thing. Nobody gave me any instructions to curtail my freedom or to be restrictive in terms of my views so long as what I said was in the best interest of Bhutan and after obtaining my boss's approval. The Permanent Representative had faith and confidence in me. The fact that I was working for a foreign government did not specially constrain me from expressing my views as I deemed them to be in the best interest of Bhutan, which also was not in conflict with India's views.

IFAJ: Anything you would remember about President V.V. Giri's visit to Bhutan in 1971?

ANR: It was a historic visit, the first by a President of India to Bhutan. Facilities in Thimphu at the time were very basic. As I mentioned earlier, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, everything had to be brought from the plains. The Bhutanese went out of their way to arrange a highly successful visit. The President himself

stayed at the Royal Cottage. The rest of the party stayed at the only guesthouse at Moti Thang. There were no hotels in Thimphu then. I do not think that the President went anywhere outside Thimphu. A very unfortunate incident happened on his return journey. It was raining very heavily. He was supposed to take a chopper from Thimphu to Bagdogra and the Presidential IAF Aircraft was waiting at Bagdogra to take him back to Delhi.

Because it was raining so heavily, he had to travel by road to Bagdogra. The King accompanied him in his Rolls Royce, which was used on such occasions. Somewhere halfway, a huge boulder fell on one of the motorcade cars, instantly killing an Indian journalist, Shri Sharma. That caused such consternation that the King and the President came back a long way on learning about the accident. The King, as always, was very generous and suggested that the deceased's family should be looked after. These are very special gestures. Sometimes people think that the Bhutanese are generous to a fault; but one has to understand that it is a part of their culture. In their culture, like in many other Asian societies, they seldom use the word "No". If you ask them if they would be able to do something and if they do not say "Yes" then you should assume that they have reservations. We have to understand this. Every society has its typical ways of acting and reacting to things. The Bhutanese society is a much evolved society. Their social structures are also very evolved. They have made politeness and courtesy a hallmark of their culture. If you are a casual visitor you will sometimes not understand this. That's the way they are. They are intensely nationalistic and patriotic. They will not accept any slight to their nation, leaders, culture or national character.

IFAJ: Their idea of a nation seems to be very strong.

ANR: Yes, very strong. One has to be very careful in dealing with a society like this, because here unspoken words are almost as important as spoken words. Actions are as important as pronouncements.

IFAJ: Thank you very much, Sir, for such an insightful discussion on an important part of your diplomatic career.
