



THE DRAGON COUNTRY

NIRMALA DAS

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(A HISTORY OF BHUTAN)

[Text-Book Edition]

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Preface

Till very recently Bhutan was considered the remotest country in the world. Its remoteness lay not only in its isolation but also in the complete lack of knowledge of the country's origin and history. While the country has shaken off its isolation, in the absence of any reliable published material Bhutan is still considered remote and, to some, the last Shangrila of this earth. This book seeks to overcome this problem to a limited extent.

Due to the non-availability of authentic material on the early history of Bhutan, that is, prior to the 16th century, it is difficult to compile a reliable documentation of Bhutan's history. Even after the 16th century, the country's isolation for centuries has prevented a proper study. Neither the Bhutanese nor any foreigner has so far undertaken a serious study of the subject and the little published material available today consists of some of the old works of the British Political Officers based on their ceremonial visits to the country and the knowledge that was available on the close links of Bhutan with Tibet in the spheres of culture and commerce.

The history of Bhutan can be divided into three periods. The first period is from the origin of Bhutan till the time of the advent of Tibet's influence. No documents are available for this period and the facts are based only on the little known history of the various adjoining Hindu kingdoms established in Assam during that period. The second period starts from about the 10th century till the consolidation of Bhutan as a national entity in the 18th century. This period was marked by the disappearance of the original inhabitants, advent of Tibetan influence, consolidation of Buddhism under the Drukpa hegemony and emergence of Bhutan as a national entity. The third is the period of Indo-Bhutan relationship both under the British and the Indian Governments and covers the period from early 19th century to date. The material available for

the second phase is sketchy but the documentation in the third phase is considerable and reliable.

No history of Bhutan can be written without a good knowledge of the history of the two most important sectors in the country's life, the Dzongs (literally meaning a fortress) and the Monasteries, around which the life of the country centres. Each one of them has its own story, its own character. Their stories are linked to the history of the country. They depict the happy blending of the secular with the temporal and the emergence of a system akin to that of Tibet in a way, unique in the world. The architecture is of sublime beauty and depicts the inner feeling of a nation which is so deeply imbued with a sense of their cultural heritage based on their religion. That is why readers will find an exclusive section on the Dzongs and Monasteries in this book.

I am extremely grateful to His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo, who so kindly made available to me valuable material on the subject. Without his encouragement and blessings, it would not have been possible to make even this modest effort.

I have ventured into this field with great hesitation. The subject is vast and still unexplored. The facts collected by me are only a drop in the ocean. My study not being academic, this book is meant for the general reader only and it does not reflect the views of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

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Origin and Early History of Bhutan

The early history of Bhutan is shrouded in mystery. According to ancient Sanskrit works, Bhutan was known as Bhotanta, the word 'Bhot' standing for Tibet and 'anta' meaning the end. In other words, the country at the end of Tibet was described as Bhotanta, the present-day Bhutan. This theory is disputed by Prof. S. S. Bhattacharya, an Indian scholar.

According to him, Bhutan was originally a Hindu kingdom, inhabited mostly by the tribes of Indo-Mongoloid origin. The country was known as Bhusthan. It was not unified under one king but was ruled by chiefs of different tribes in their ethnic areas. The close similarities in the frescoes, rituals and musical instruments of Bhutan with those of the ancient Hindus are cited as proof of Bhutan's origin as a Hindu kingdom. He further bases his theory on some ancient Sanskrit works, according to which Bhutas are referred to as the children of the great Hindu sage Kasayapa by his wife Bhuti. The children were called Bhutas and their country Bhutavata or Bhusthan. The Bhutas were followers of the Hindu God, Shiva or Mahadeva. Lord Shiva was also known as Lord of the Bhutas and hence his name Bhutesa or Mahadeva. (The word 'Bhutas' is not to be confused with 'Bhutias' whose origin is Tibetan.) The God worshipped by the Bhutas and the Hindu God Shiva are known by the same appellation Bhutapati or Bhutesa.

There is no conclusive evidence on the original inhabitants of Bhutan, though what Prof. Bhattacharya says is most plausible. It is clear that there was no geographical entity as Bhutan then and the Bhutanese of today, called Drukpas, were not the original inhabitants of the country. The similarity in the frescoes, rituals and musical instruments with the Hindu ones,

shows considerable Hindu influence in this region earlier. The common mode of worship has also been mentioned by Capt. Pemberton in his report on Bhutan, as late as 1838 A.D. The affinity of the then inhabitants of Bhutan with the people from the plains of India is mentioned by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1959 which mentions that 'according to the best Bhutanese records, Tibetan troops invaded the country at the end of the 9th century A.D., drove out the Indian princes and their subjects, and then settled down in occupation of the land.'

The Imperial Gazetteer of India (Vol. III, Oxford, New Edition, 1908) says that Bhutan formerly belonged to a tribe called Bhotia Telphu, who are believed to be of the same race as the Kacharis and Koch of the adjoining plains (of India) and who were subjugated by a band of Tibetan soldiers. The people of Eastern Bhutan are even today different from the Drukpa Tibetan stock of people inhabiting Central and Western Bhutan. They are more akin to the tribes of the North-East Frontier Agency and Assam in India. The indigenous people of Bhutan were given the name of Lhoman and Monpa by the Tibetans—meaning Southern people.

According to the account of the famous Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang (600-664 A.D.), Bhutan did not have a separate status outside the political framework of India in the very early period. A line of Indian chiefs, under the tutelage of Kamarupa (Assam), ruled Bhutan up to the middle of the 7th century. Kamarupa's effective influence over this area disappeared after the death in 650 A.D. of King Bhaskaravarman (605-650 A.D.). Thereafter started a period of instability leading to strifes, inter-tribal wars and incursions from Tibet.

According to Sir Ashley Eden, who had visited Bhutan in 1864, the present day Bhutanese or the Drukpas, as they are known, overran the country only about four or five centuries before Eden's visit, displacing the then natives of Bhutan who had settled in the area from Cooch Behar (an adjoining district of Bengal, in India). The invaders came from Tibet and were led by a Lama called Dugpani Sheptun.

From the accounts given earlier, it is more or less certain that till the middle of the 7th century A.D., Bhutan had no geographical entity as a nation state and was ruled by several Hindu chiefs. The prominent rulers came from the Kamarupa area of Assam. Their decline coincided with the emergence of Tibet as a powerful neighbour of Bhutan. This led to several incursions from Tibet, first of the Lamas of Tibet and then of the troops. Although Buddhism had come earlier, the consolidation of this religion took place only with the increase of Tibetan influence in this area. The Tibetan invasions and the consolidation of their hold over Bhutan between the 9th and the 17th centuries led to the disappearance of the original settlers of the country and the emergence of a new ethnic group from Tibet—now called the Drukpas.