



## **A Himalayan View on the Making of the Indian Republic: Bhutan's Representations to India, 1946-49**

**Speaker:** Swati Chawla

**Chair:** Vinod C Khanna

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**Venue:** Seminar Room, ICS

The speaker's talk focused on the years leading up to and immediately after the transfer of power in India when the political map of South Asia was significantly redrawn. In addition to the territorial consolidation that involved the assertion of India's sovereignty over the 500 odd princely states that were merged into the Union, along with its long northern and eastern borders, India re-negotiated colonial-era treaties with neighbouring governments, including the Himalayan nations of Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Tibet. All four were apprehensive about what the change in political leadership would mean for their relations with India. All restated old territorial claims. Tibet brought up the validity of the McMahon Line from the Simla Convention of 1914. Sikkim and Bhutan demanded the retrocession, respectively, of Darjeeling, and of Buxa Duar and Diwangiri, which had been ceded to British India.

Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet remain closely tied by language and faith, as well as networks of trade, intermarriage and monastic patronage. But of the three, only Bhutan has managed to retain its political sovereignty.

The speaker then discussed transition from the colonial rule. In 1924, Viceroy Lord Reading examined two separate questions regarding the legal status of Bhutan: Was Bhutan under His Majesty's Government's suzerainty? If so, was it a state in India? On one hand the response to the first question, it was believed that Article III of the Treaty of 1910, which gave Britain the control over Bhutan's external relations, meant that the latter had parted with that full external sovereignty which the necessary attribute of an independent Sovereign State. On the other hand, the answer to second question depended on whether His Majesty's Government's sovereignty over Bhutan was exercised through the Governor General in India or any Governor or officer subordinate to the Governor General. Since the Political Officer in Sikkim, who was responsible for exercising His Majesty's Government's control over Bhutan's external relations, acted under the instructions of the Government of India, the Viceroy concluded that Bhutan was an Indian state.

During the Second World War, Foreign Secretary Sir Olaf Caroe, reviewed the relations of the states on the North East frontier with India on the one hand, and Tibet and China on the other. Caroe believed that China's tradition was to work through Tibet and to claim for Chinese suzerainty whatever Tibet could influence. Since Bhutan's links to Tibet and China long

predated its reliance on British India, and it was really a protectorate in close treaty relations with His Majesty's Government, Caroe considered its position analogous to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf and did not believe that federation was the best solution for Bhutan.

After the Second World War, and in the preparation for the legal changes about to be incorporated into the Government of India Act of 1935, the Federal Structures Committee in London re-examined the status of Bhutan. The Committee believed that the Federal Constitution should provide for frontier states like Bhutan to qualify for adherence in order to bring them into the orbit of federation. On the question of whether Bhutan would secure the status of an Indian State, although Bhutan's dynastic and internal matters appertained to the Viceroy, its frontier affairs were dealt with through the External Affairs Department and were administered through the Political Officer, thus it was believed to be in the second category.

Bhutan's request for a meeting with the Cabinet Mission was turned down, but it was assured that Bhutan's position would be given careful consideration before the transfer of power in India. In a writing to Lord Mountbatten two months before independence it was mentioned that the Bhutanese have no affinities with the people of India; they have developed economic relations with India as well as with Sikkim and Tibet. Thus, the people of Bhutan do not wish to join the Indian Union.

Nehru recognized that Bhutan and Sikkim were not like other Indian states but were independent under the protection of India. He reassured that Bhutan's future position in relation to India would be determined through mutual consultation, and there was no question of compulsion in the matter.

The British Government did not believe it a practicable solution to excise Bhutan's protection from the Government of India and bring its control from the colonial administration. They also did not see it viable for Bhutan to remain in the Commonwealth, if India chose to leave it. The best that could be offered to Bhutan was to help negotiate its fresh treaty with India. Bhutan instead pleaded for a tri- and not bi-lateral future relationship with India, mediated through its agreement with the His Majesty's Government, and on revised terms, including (1) increased subsidy, (2) retrocession of Buxa Duars and Dewangiri.

In a meeting with delegates from Sikkim and Bhutan, E.B. Wakefield, the Deputy Secretary of Reforms in the Political Department in 1946, advised Bhutan to take up the question of new Treaties and Agreements with India while they still enjoyed the backing of His Majesty's Government, and there existed the possibility of Bhutan's position being defined in the proposed Treaty between the UK and India. Wakefield did not provide a response to Bhutan's probing questions about the consequences for Bhutan, under international law of transfer of power in India, except to state that the new Government of India would succeed to the rights and obligations of His Majesty's Government with respect to Bhutan.

Bhutan ceded territorial, economic and legal sovereignty to British India through the Treaty of Sinchuala in 1866. Indo-Bhutan relations were further strengthened following the Younghusband Expedition into Tibet in 1904. Following Independence and the Partition, the Dominion of India assumed the role of the succession government to British India for relations with the Himalayan states. While it signed a Standstill Agreement with Nepal, Sikkim and Tibet for continued relations with these states until a fresh treaty was negotiated the same was not the case for Bhutan.

Two years later, on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1949, Bhutan and India signed a fresh Treaty of Friendship. India recognized Bhutan's independence and agreed to not interfere in her internal administration; Bhutan agreed to be "guided by India" in its external relations. The phrasing left room for Bhutan to later assert that this guidance was not binding.

After the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959, India discovered in 1960 that Chinese military presence in Tibet had brought its border guards to patrol the passes from the Tsona district of Tibet into Bhutan. Chinese cartographical claims to parts of Bhutan coincided with Mao and Zhou Enlai's statements defining Bhutan as "the southern gate" of the Manchu Empire. India sought to rectify this vulnerability through a series of economic aid arrangements, particularly for roads linking central Bhutan to India in 1960, through assistance from Dantak, a part of the Indian Border Roads Organization. To this day, Bhutan remains the largest recipient of Indian aid.

In 1961, the Indian Army was formally entrusted to train the Royal Bhutan Army, bringing Bhutan into the defence system of India by implication. However, India also supported Bhutan's entry into the United Nations in 1971, and the Colombo Plan in 1962.

Intelligence reports from Gangtok and Lhasa at the time also mention talks about the Governments of Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet forming a federation of these Tibetan speaking countries, to resist incorporation into the newly emerging states of India and China on either side of the Himalayan mountain range.

Addressing the recent event, the speaker stated that the nodes of the Doklam trijunction lie in the three Himalayan kingdoms that had imagined themselves in a federation independent of India and China: Bhutan (Ha Valley), Tibet (Chumbi Valley) and Sikkim. However, the military standoff in the summer of 2017 was mostly seen through the prism of "bilateral" Sino-Indian relations. Developing Indrani Chatterjee's understanding of multiple, layered and polycentric sovereignties in the region organized through "monastic governmentality", the speaker analyzed the interface between the Indian state and the different units of a monastic economy.

The speaker concluded by mentioning two overlapping versions of national identity which have emerged over time. First, complex cultural and cosmological understandings of the region among the borderland populations independent of national borders, which draw on the often-overlapping resources of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam in South Asia. Second, there is an unfolding of border-making in newly independent India through a cartographic project of producing authoritative maps, proscribing erroneous ones and publicizing the former in the aid of nation-building.

*Report prepared by Srijana Karnatak, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies*

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