

INDIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BHUTAN

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Abstract: Neighborhood, which can be categorized further as immediate and extended neighborhood, is a complex term and is quite difficult to explain. India's neighborhood policy characterizes its close socio-cultural, political and economic relations with the neighbouring countries and threats to her national security by them. In a nutshell India's neighborhood consists of seven South Asian countries namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Although India tries to maintain cordial relations with all its neighbours but the relationship which it has uphold with its tiny Himalayan neighbour is something that can be placed in the category of a unique one. On account of their geographic location, Bhutan and India are natural partners and their future is inseparable. Although, quite often it has been incorrectly stated that India has played a game of one-upmanship with Bhutan, that is trying to act as a big brother of Bhutan, that later is a 'pygmy' and India being a 'giant' in South Asia has always tried to dictate its terms and decisions over Bhutan, but the authenticity of the matter lies in the fact that both the countries have throughout the decades of mutual association played roles that have been complimentary to each other. Both the countries have withstood the test of time and have sustained their age-old friendship. Even after Bhutan becoming a democracy, the basic contours of relationship has not changed and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's maiden visit to Bhutan also highlighted the importance of this Himalayan kingdom for India. So, this particular paper would analyze the very foundations of the relationship between the two, how the two countries have nurtured their relationships and what efforts have been made by the present Indian government till date to further solidify their age old friendship with Bhutan?

Keywords: India, Bhutan, Friendship, Neighborhood, Policy.

Introduction: In modern times no state can avoid involvement in the international sphere. This involvement must be systematic and based on some well-defined policies and principles. In the contemporary world scenario all the states maintains among themselves some kind of relations. The Government of each nation tries to behave in a meticulous manner while dealing with the government of other states. The adjustment of the actions of states in favour of one's own state has been said to be the purpose of foreign policy. A country's foreign policy, as every other policy, is not static, but subject to constant change according to the needs of the changing world situation and the country's own requirements. This applies equally to India's foreign policy. No doubt, India formally emerged as an independent country in August 1947, but the basic principles of its foreign policy has been evolved during the period of colonial rule itself. India gives highest priority to her neighbours. This centrality of neighbours in India's foreign policy stems from the clear understanding that a peaceful periphery is essential for India to achieve her multifarious developmental goals. Moreover, India firmly believes that a stable and prosperous South Asia will contribute to India's own prosperity.¹

India's Policy with Its Himalayan Neighbour-'Bhutan': South Asian or sub continental system, India is a major power while other states has always been much smaller in terms of size, population, economic strength and military capabilities (In Basrur 2010:12). The policy of India with its neighbour Bhutan has been very friendly, peaceful and cooperative one. It is believed that 'Bhutan's relations with India have historically been both deep and extensive' (Rahul 1997:45). "Relations between nations have often been described to harbor dormant political ambitions that are seldom made public. Incidents of nascent political ambitions invisible to the astute diplomatic eye is not a novel phenomenon. However in the midst of such difficult conditions caused by intricacies of 'realpolitik', lie certain bilateral relations that are relatively free from the skirmishes of egocentric domestic political aspirations. The bilateral relations between India and Bhutan present a scenario of contentment in which two neighboring countries coexist peacefully with political goals and democratic aspirations in harmonious equilibrium' (Bandopadhyaya 2009:1). Owing to their geographic location, Bhutan and India are natural partners and their future is inseparable. The close ties that bind India and Bhutan go back to the dawn of history. Situated to the south of the high Himalayan ridge, the two countries share the same ecosystem and have similar political, security and economic interest. In recent time, the process of modernization of Bhutan

with Indian cooperation has created indissoluble bonds between the peoples of the two countries. The relationship has nurtured to a point where today one can confidently predict an ever-expanding and deepening relationship between Bhutan and India in the decades ahead (Rabgye 1998: 285). . If one was to underline the objectives of India's Bhutan policy, three tiers can be identified. The first tier is security and economics (the phase which was dominant during the early years, when Bhutan was cautiously and gradually moving closer to India); the second, connectivity—both in terms of infrastructural and socio-cultural linkages; and the third, energy and environment. While the first tier has received significant attention in past engagements, the second and third tiers of discussion and partnership are consequences of improved India-Bhutan bilateral ties and will be in the spotlight in the coming years.

Genesis of the Relationship: Indo-Bhutanese relations had their genesis in 1772 when Bhutan attacked Cooch Behar and the later asked British help to counter this aggression (White 1909: 264-65). This contact grew further when a treaty was signed in 1865 and also when in 1907 Ugyen Wangchuk became the king of Bhutan. On 8th January, 1910, the two countries signed a treaty at Punakha to counter Chinese advances and this gave control of Bhutan's external relations to India, then ruled by the British.

Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1949: The withdrawal of the British from India in 1947 opened a new chapter in Bhutanese history. It was now for Bhutan to choose a subordinate status vis-à-vis Tibet, or have sovereign independence, the latter being a status she could automatically have claimed on the abrogation of Treaty of 1910 with Britain (Singh 1988:242, 243). When India became independent in 1947, the old treaty i.e. Treaty of Punakha which was concluded in 1910 between India and Bhutan was supposed to be revised or modified. The forcible occupation of Tibet by China lent urgency to review old Indo-Bhutanese ties. Traditionally, Bhutan followed a policy of isolation, or perhaps better termed a policy of withdrawal from international politics to preserve its independence and distinct identity. Its geography protected it and allowed it to apply this policy successfully during the colonial years. But strategic developments in the Himalayan region in the 1950s moved Bhutan away from this tradition (Ahsan and Chakma 1993:1045). This treaty finally provided a basic framework to this relationship.

Indo-Bhutan Policy towards Each Other Since 1949: During the Nehruvian phase of Indian politics, Bhutan choose to adopt a cautious wait and watch policy, and ultimately send a signal to India regarding its decision to move south rather than northwest towards China. While the security undertones in keeping China away and a calculated move towards opening up to India continued for almost three decades, the overt dependence on India was soon debated domestically, and in late 1970s and 1980s Bhutan fervently sought a more diversified foreign policy. With democracy taking roots in Bhutan, this particular trend continues prominently even today, thus demanding greater attention. This is a significant development, given that India is Bhutan's largest development and trading partner.

Treaty of 2007: The treaty actually which laid the foundations of the relationship between India and Bhutan, which was signed in 1949, got renewed in the year 2007. This treaty not only reflected the contemporary nature of India and Bhutan relationship but also laid the foundations for India- Bhutan relationship for future development in the 21st century. There is a section of scholars in both the nations who argue that the decision of renewal of the treaty was a forced one and it was not based on mutual consent. But the story is not the same as they believe. The treaty has been modified with altogether a different motive. A clause was there in the treaty of 1949 i.e. clause 2 which the scholars and analysts perceived as controversial was the main factor behind the renewal of the treaty. more diversified foreign policy. As has been increasingly witnessed in the past few years, the economic footprint of India has been an issue of much deliberation, debate, critique and also appreciation in Bhutan, with many stakeholders discussing the consequences that such development interventions and patterns of engagement engender for Bhutan. Assumptions apropos alleged interference by India during the 2013 elections in Bhutan, and the debates associated with the phenomenon of rupee crunch it has been witnessing for the last five years, which is suggestive of an overhauling of Bhutan's domestic sector, are two cases in point. The late 1980s also saw Bhutan, with Indian support, initiate its first hydroelectric project with the Kurichu dam. While the economic relationship, although beginning as development aid, had started way back in the 1960s, it started taking a new turn by the 1990s, when two more hydropower projects were commissioned—the Chukha and the Tala (Bisht 2016:108).

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The Governments of India and the Royal Government of Bhutan have signed the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty. This Treaty updates the Treaty which was signed in Darjeeling on 8 August 1949. The signing of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty marks a historic moment in relations with Bhutan. The Treaty reflects mutual desire to enhance relationship. . The 2007 Treaty between India and Bhutan not only put emphasis on hard areas but also put emphasis on soft areas. The revision of Treaty of Friendship with India in 2007 clearly reflects the level of maturity this relationship has attained and also demonstrates the level of confidence that the two countries have in their relations.

Policy under the Current Regime: The relationship between India and Bhutan presents a beautiful picture decorated with love, pleasure and affection. This relationship is unique as it has helped Bhutan to grow, to come out of its self-imposed isolation and to march forward on the path of progress and development. Indo-Bhutan relationship has withstood the test of time and both the countries have helped each other in times of need. Even after Bhutan becoming a democracy, the basic contours of relationship has not changed. And the decision of the newly elected Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi to choose Bhutan as his maiden foreign destination has again demonstrated the significance of this small Himalayan State. The visit indicated the importance of Himalayan nation in the strategic calculus of India. Often, neighborhood escapes high profile visit as India's attention remains diverted to broader foreign policy issues involving other major powers. This shift has two important dimensions which need to be kept in mind while analyzing broader parameter of India's engagement with its neighbours. First, it signals that the neighbourhood is going to be extremely important as a part of initiative to chart economic development and bolster internal security. Second, choosing the tiny Himalayan neighbour Bhutan as his first destination underlines that India acknowledges its solid friendship with Bhutan which has significantly cooperated in the counter insurgency initiative by denying space to the Indian insurgent groups in the past. Bhutan's relationship with India in this context is truly all weather. It is not further characterized by the usual anti-Indianism which the elites in neighbouring countries use to make political business nor has Bhutan ever adopted a balance-India policy by engaging with China (Pattanaik 2014: 1).

For Bhutan, Narendra Modi's visit was very significant as to ensure continuity and to be sure of India's adherence to earlier agreements in the face of a change of government in New Delhi. The visit also provided a glaring opportunity to understand the foreign policy priorities of the new Prime Minister. Student- exchange program and cultural exchanges between India and Bhutan will also play a dominant role in producing new leaders for Bhutan. Also, Mr. Modi's initiative to promote tourism between Bhutan and North-eastern states of India through various ways like organizing annual sports hill festival can play a significant role in promoting the socio-economic progress through newer enterprises and employment opportunities. Additionally, the steps that have been initiated to boost up the tourism between the Northeastern states of India and Bhutan across the beautiful Himalayan belt can play a significant role in socio-economic progress through creating scope for settling newer enterprises and more employment opportunities, infrastructure development and foreign exchange earnings (Sen 2014).

Conclusion: It can be said that India's policy towards Bhutan is of support and kindness and it has always showed a friendly gesture towards it. It has helped Bhutan in coming out of its self-imposed isolation and to establish a unique and sovereign identity of itself. Right from independence till date, both the countries have been cooperative with each other and have not let the anti-social elements to destroy the beautiful tale of their friendship. Although there are certain issues which can be a source of tension in between both the nations but this can surely be managed by both the countries on the basis of mutual negotiations and discussions. The relationship between both the countries has withstood the test of time and hopefully this will remain so in the years to come.

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