



## PERSPECTIVE

Saturday, May 3, 2025 | KUENSEL PAGE 9

# Historical and cultural linkages: Elements of Indo-Bhutan relations

History and culture are related, and shared history and culture help shape relationships among nations. In the context of the Himalayan region, the bilateral relationships between India and Bhutan are unique and different from other relationships in the area. However, if shared history and culture could bring nations closer, India's relations with Pakistan and Nepal would have been different. Historically and culturally, there are more similarities between India, Pakistan and Nepal than between India and Bhutan. Yet, despite the limited historical and cultural similarities, the bilateral relationship between India and Bhutan is better. Unlike history, which one can learn by reading, understanding a culture requires a deeper connection that goes beyond intellectual comprehension. As the saying goes, "Culture is not something you learn, it's something you feel." Therefore, to have a better grasp of Indo-Bhutan relationships, it is important to dive into the past to identify the few unique cultural traits of Bhutan that link to India and influence the bond between India and Bhutan.

The Indo-Bhutan relationship is also the legacy of Bhutan's relations with Britain, which began when Bhutan clashed with the British colonial power. Around a century of increasingly tense relationships over the Assam and Bengal Duars culminated in the treaty of Sinchula of 1865, which was renewed as the Treaty of Punakha in 1910. This was again renewed as the Treaty of Friendship in 1949 after India gained independence. The visit of HM Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third King of Bhutan, to India in 1954 and his long-standing invitation to the first Indian Prime Minister, Nehru, finally materialised in Nehru's visit to Paro in September 1958 as a landmark event in the Indo-Bhutan relationship.

Bhutan's culture is centred around Buddhism. Guru Rinpoche, also known as the Second Buddha, was an Indian who brought Vajrayana Buddhism to Bhutan first. According to Dasha Karma Ura, among the Bhutanese whose worldview is shaped by Buddhism, India is regarded as

the origin of Buddhist knowledge and literature, which was translated and transferred to Tibet and Bhutan.

Pride in its sovereignty is an important cultural trait in Bhutan. The annexation of the Assam Duars by the British Empire on 11 November 1841, and how Jigme Namgyel, the Tongsa Penlop, refused to sign the treaty proposed by the British in 1864 between the British and Bhutan unless it included the clause on return of the Assam Duars, the area directly controlled by the Tongsa Penlop, reflects Bhutanese pride in the country's sovereignty. The authentic account of the humiliation of Ashley Eden, the leader of the British mission, in the hands of Jigme Namgyel and Wangdi Dzongpon, during the mission's stay at Punakha between 15 to 29 March 1864 can be found in *Bhotan and the Story of the Doar War* (1866, pp. 124-126) by David Field Rennie, the Staff Surgeon with the corps. Jigme Namgyel, not fearing the consequences of retribution from the mighty British power, threatened Eden with imprisonment and asserted that he preferred a war to accepting a treaty that did not include the clause. Among the people of Bhutan, who are very proud of their sovereignty, this story is like folklore, which they proudly tell everyone who visits Bhutan. However, when someone's pride is hurt, depending on the situation, capability and temperament, it can evoke different forms of reactions, such as expressions of anger, pulling away or shutting down communications. The pride, however, has not made the Bhutanese arrogant. If at all, it is just the opposite.

Humility is perhaps the unique characteristic of Bhutanese culture. It begins at the highest level. For example, both His Majesty the King and His Holiness the Je Khenpo bow to each other simultaneously. The interesting part of the influence of religion in Bhutan is that it is a binding and NOT a divisive factor.

Not known for flaunting their material or intellectual wealth, it is not uncommon to find people from all walks of life withdrawing gracefully instead of associating with the arrogance of others. At the same time, they would take the extra step

to express their fondness for a humble person as a mark of respect. In Bhutan, one can experience the Biblical quote "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles, will be exalted".

Education is another area that fostered a very strong bond between India and Bhutan. In earlier days, when Bhutan's connectivity with other parts of the world was not so good, many students walked for hundreds of miles for days to reach the foothills and study in some of the renowned schools in India. The list include Their Majesties Queen Mothers. Some of my Bhutanese friends took pride in recalling valuable lessons about the dignity of labour and integrity in Graham Homes School in Kalimpong. I was surprised at the absence of enthusiasm on the part of the school authorities when I visited it in 2013. I wondered why Graham Homes School, which produced two prime ministers, two chief justices, a few generals and one cabinet secretary among many more, did not take pride in its contribution. The school probably took its achievements as a favour to the students of Bhutan and not as a service.

As early as 1914 Bhutan sent 46 boys to India for Western education. Bhutanese students were beneficiaries of Indian teachers who traversed for weeks in 1961 to teach in remote schools in Bhutan. Bhutan did not forget this. As a mark of respect, 43 retired teachers joined the Bhutanese Teachers' Day celebration in 2018 in Bhutan. Students from Bhutan who studied in India took pride in waving the Indian Tricolour. Gratitude is another innate culture that runs in the veins of the Bhutanese population.

The student-teacher community, which immensely benefited from each other's cultures, was an important link between India and Bhutan. With the availability of better communication and more opportunities for Bhutanese students to travel to places beyond India, more Bhutanese study abroad, and there has been a consequent reduction in the number of Bhutanese in Indian educational institutions. Sadly, even the memory of this com-

munity's benefits is now almost extinct. Currently, most of the Bhutanese who were beneficiaries of Indian education still dominate the parliament, the bureaucracy and the armed forces. This status will change soon unless there is a sincere effort to revive that connection, especially when the change in the global view of education seems to have impacted the students of developing countries. On its part, India will have to offer Bhutan something new and better than what others can do and what it is doing now in civilian educational institutions as well as military training establishments.

Supposing there is a change in the relationship despite the shared history and culture, then our national strategies are probably in conflict, and that can create space for bilateral relations' vulnerability to external forces. Besides the shared historical and cultural linkages and economic benefits, the gravitational pull that attracts Bhutan towards India is mutual trust and faith. Trust and faith are cornerstones for building good and lasting relationships among friends, and hence, these must be honoured by India.

The bilateral relationship is also like building a dream house. It takes years to build the house brick by brick. Once the dream house is ready, after about a year or so, depending on the quality of construction, the hairline cracks begin to appear on the outer walls of the house. Unless the cracks are filled on time, there will be seepage of water, and probably creepers will also take root. Then the house will crumble unless the skilled workers like the mason, the plumber, the electrician, and the painter, as well as those who built the house, are called to identify the defects and suggest the appropriate solution. This is possible provided their original contributions are not erased from memory!

As nations evolve, their national interests indeed expand and transform, leading to shifts in priority objectives. When a nation reorders the priority of its objectives, it can trigger the need for adjustment in strategies, resulting in far-reaching consequences for the nations involved and the very founda-

tions of the bilateral relationship. When that happens, apologies, forgiveness, and a nuanced, mutually convenient perspective assumed for the greater good can help ameliorate the damages wrought by time. For the people of India, apology is the supreme manifestation of the spirit of non-violence. Whereas, for the people of Bhutan, forgiveness is a divine gift or an act of divine grace.

While the primary responsibility for taking the relationship forward lies with the respective governments, it is the population that can give another quality to the relationship, instead of making it transactional by providing space to others, respecting their sensitivity, and treating them as equals rather than beneficiaries. As for India, championing the cause of the Global South in making the world more inclusive with humility will be better for it to be a bridge between the 'haves and have-nots' rather than a leader. Doing so will get India greater endorsement from the Global South partners.

Humility is important. When humility and the desire to be independent, which is a natural part of sovereignty, are misunderstood as ungratefulness, the meaning of gratitude itself will be lost. Gratitude to the parents, teachers, elders, predecessors and friends for what they have handed down to us is the hallmark of good relationships. Acknowledging past support and assistance builds trust and strengthens bonds between countries.

The words of HM the Fourth King of Bhutan, which still resonate in my mind, are that in bilateral relationships, when the goal is the same, the strategies to achieve that goal must be aligned. This needs trust. Indeed, friends mean trusting each other. Trust is a cornerstone of effective diplomacy and long-lasting partnerships. Shared history and culture can help bring nations closer. But progressing bilateral relationships is neither one-sided nor mathematical. It is a shared responsibility.

*Contributed by  
Major General  
(Dr) AK Bardalai  
(Retired), former  
Commandant of IMTRAT*