

Befriending the neighbour

“In a short time, PM Jawaharlal Nehru and King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck were able to lay a solid foundation for the excellent relationship between India and Bhutan.” Nehru with the third Druk Gyalpo in Delhi in 1954. | Photo Credit: [The Hindu Archives](#)

Bhutan and India have a unique relationship matched by no two other countries. This is a relationship based on trust, built brick by brick from the Treaty of Friendship signed in Darjeeling in 1949. But not so much was known about how that treaty came about, and some of the difficulties that followed it, until last year, when the personal papers of Ashi Tashi Chodzom Dorji (daughter of Gongzim Sonam Topgye Dorji, who negotiated the treaty) were published by her sister Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck, Queen Mother of the the fourth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

After India gained independence, Bhutan was one of the first countries to reach out to the new India. Bhutan saw India as a natural ally and strong development partner which could help it emerge from its long self-imposed isolation. In April 1948, the second Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Wangchuck, deputed his most trusted and able deputy to negotiate a treaty with India. On April 15, Gongzim Sonam Topgye Dorji met senior officers of the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi. The details of the visit are in the draft minutes of the meeting regarding the Bhutan government’s memorandum on territorial claims. As a member of the delegation, Ashi Tashi diligently maintained those minutes.

According to the neatly handwritten account, published in the book *Ashi Tashi Dorji, Her Life and Legacy*, Bhutan’s delegation arrived just as a transition was taking place in South Block: K.P.S. Menon (senior) was about to take over as the first Foreign Secretary of India. At the time, Menon was India’s expert on China and the Himalayas, and knew Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan like the back of his hand. On April 16, Menon was sworn in as the Foreign Secretary and the Bhutan delegation met him on April 19.

The day after that, the Bhutanese delegation met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The meeting lasted for an hour, and an official dinner that followed set the course for difficult negotiations. According to the minutes, Nehru said that he did not want to interfere in Bhutan’s internal affairs. But then he quickly contradicted that by offering two unexpected options. The first was for Bhutan to join the Indian Union but still remain an autonomous State within India. His second offer was for Bhutan to have an alliance with India and, if Bhutan wished, to hand over defence, communications and external relations issues to India to deal with.

“The Bhutan delegation stood firm in safeguarding Bhutan’s security and protecting its sovereignty,” writes the Queen Mother in the book. In fact, the discussions were much more tense than anyone had anticipated. “We maintained that unless we received some sort of written favourable assurance on our [territorial] claims, we were not authorised to discuss future relations between India and Bhutan,” Ashi Tashi’s minutes record says, and the Bhutanese delegation nearly left without an agreement. Eventually the word “communications” was left out, a concession from Nehru who had argued that Bhutan would not be able to build its communications infrastructure on its own.

Other heated moments followed. Bhutan had been granted only 1.5 lakh in consideration of vast areas ceded to the British, which it had hoped India would take a more empathetic view of. India offered another 50,000 for the “privilege of guiding Bhutan’s foreign relations”.

“At this point, Nehru said, why should we even pay you this 50,000, as handling foreign relations

was a liability to India,” records Ashi Tashi. She adds: “In that case, we said, why did India not forgo the handling of our foreign relations and relieve herself of such a liability?” Nehru laughed, she says, but did not reply.

After a few months of tough negotiations on every point, on August 8, 1949, Bhutan and India signed the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship at the government house in Darjeeling, signed by Gongzim Sonam Tobgye Dorji and Political Officer in Sikkim, Harishwar Dayal. Subsequently, King Jigme Wangchuck and President C. Rajagopalachari ratified this treaty for Bhutan and India as two fully sovereign nations.

Five years later, Nehru invited the third Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, and Queen (now ‘Royal grandmother’) Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck on a state visit. In 1950, India had started a tradition of inviting a head of state or government of a foreign country as the chief guest for the Republic Day celebrations. In 1954, in a remarkable gesture, Nehru invited the King as the chief guest for Republic Day. At that time, the King had been on the golden throne for two years and was only 25 years old.

It wasn’t till 1958, nearly a decade after the treaty was signed, that Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi came to Bhutan. This visit sealed the friendship. The two visitors rode on mules and yaks, crossed several mountain passes and trekked several days through unforgiving terrain to reach Bhutan.

The visit is summed up in a letter that Indira Gandhi wrote to ‘Royal grandmother’ Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck from Haa Dzong on September 27, 1958: “My father said at the public meeting that he was leaving a part of his heart at Paro. That is true of me also. We both love the mountains, their magnificent scenery and the sense of peace they give. Bhutan has these in full measures and it has something more, a special quality. It is fortunate for the Bhutanese that they have at the head two young people like yourself and His Highness who are not only popular but have the good of the people at heart and wisdom to guide them during these difficult times.”

An account in another memoir said that Nehru was “the happiest and most relaxed mood that day. By his own admission, those ten days in Bhutan had soothed him more than a six-month holiday in the best tourist resorts in the world could have.” (Unpublished memoirs of Dasho Prithvi Raj Bakshi.)

Like in all good relationships, Bhutan and India had their differences in the beginning. In a relatively short time, Nehru and King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck had reduced the differences. They were able to find common ground with one other, laying a solid foundation for the excellent relationship between a big country and a small but independent kingdom that continues to this day, each fully respecting the other’s interests.

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