

# Indo-Bhutan Relations: An analysis on India's reluctant to participate in the Democratic transition of Bhutan

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**ABSTRACT:** In the recent wave of democratization process in South Asian region, India though is a regional power in the region and as the world largest democracy has played a marginal role in promoting democracy. India's lacks of enthusiasm to promote democracy like that of Western countries or institutions does not mean that India is entirely disinterested in supporting democratic transitions or sustaining the existing democracies. India's critical strategic interests and concerns need to be understood here. Likewise India's involvement in the democratic transition of Bhutan in 2007, the youngest democracy at present was merely assistance although Indo-Bhutan relations date back to 1949 treaty of mutual trust and friendship.

**Keywords:** Democracy promotion, Indo-Bhutan Relations, Democratization of Bhutan, Indian Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Interest.

India, even if is a largest democracy is apparent to extend the Western practiced 'liberal international order' towards its South Asian neighbouring countries. This lack of enthusiasm or cautious nature of India in promotion of democracy is a matter of concern to some western observers. 'Foreign policies are not solely ideologically driven and India's is no exception in this respect' (Muni, 2009). India has constantly prioritized strategic and security interests over democracy promotion towards her neighbouring countries. Contained by this, India has adopted democracy assistance emphasizing more on economic and development co-operation for the promotion of democracy in the neighbouring countries. Promotion of democracy in Bhutan was minimal as well. Bhutan, India's neighbouring border state with which India shares a long history of togetherness and unique friendship since 1949 treaty voted for the first time in 2007 and 2008 and became the youngest democracy. India's minimal intervention in Bhutan as a largest democracy, as well as a neighbouring country during her transition period from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy is therefore worth examining.

This article therefore will try to understand why India is wary of democracy promotion and how it is balancing its Strategic Interests towards its sensitive neighbourhoods, inspite of temptations from US to be recognized as a global actor and demands for democracy promotion in South East Asia.

## India and Bhutan since 1949 treaty:

According to Nehru '*India is a great and powerful country and Bhutan small one; India sincerely wished that Bhutan should remain an independent country*' (Ahmed, 2017) Depending on this principle, India signed a bilateral treaty; the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship with Bhutan on 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1949. Since then the two nations has been fulfilling and harnessing the national interests of each other. Bhutan is vital for India as it serves a buffer with China with whom India has a history of war and skirmishes. Similarly the friendship treaty opened for the landlocked Bhutan, scope to carry trade and commerce with and through India for the development of the country. As mentioned in Article 2 of the 1949 friendship treaty that "*the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India, regarding its external affairs*" (Poulose, 1971) which was renewed later under 2007 bilateral

treaty, assistance of India to Bhutan is seen in 1965 when Bhutan becomes a member of Colombo Plan countries in promotion done by India. India also supported Bhutan's admission in UN in 1971.

Co-operation of India could also be seen in the drafting and financing of Bhutan's Five Year Plan. The first Five Year Plan in Bhutan was executed during 1961-1966 and India single-handedly financed the entire cost of the plan. This is seen over again in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Five Year Plan of Bhutan. India once more without any support financed for the entire plan. In her present (2013-2018) eleventh Five Year Plan India has over again committed to bear for Rupees 4500 crores and additional Rupees 500 crores for Economic Stimulus Plan, in assistance to the country.

India is at present Bhutan's biggest trading partner, among remarkable rise in the hydro-power co-operation projects. *"In 2011 the largest share to Bhutan's GDP was from hydropower with 17.05 percent of the total revenue"* (Arif Hussain Malik, 2016)

Other than trade and commercial engagements taking place between the two countries, collaboration in various schemes like Nehru Wangchuk Scheme, New Bhutan ICCR Scholarship, India-Bhutan Foundation can be witnessed currently between India and Bhutan.

Like-wise Bhutan has always supported India, never played the China card unlike other neighbouring states of India, the 2003 Operation All Clear and Dokhlam crises being the best example of the kind. Bhutan has never used her land against the security of India holding. This friendship between India and Bhutan has been remarked as unique as well as all weather friends by many countries.

### **Democracy and Bhutan:**

After two rounds of mock election in April and May 2007 the people of Bhutan on 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2007 for the first time participated in the first ever National election of Bhutan and successfully elected the 25 members of National Council. The country again voted for the 47 member of the National Assembly in 2008 marking a key step in its transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy.

*"The election process generally met international standards for general elections and that there had been a successful and orderly change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy"* (Mark Turner, 2011) remarked the Chief Observer of the European Union Election Observer Mission after the election was commenced in the year 2007 and 2008 in Bhutan for the first time .

### **Brief History of growth of democracy in Bhutan:**

In a joint research work by Mark Tunrner, Sonam Chuki and Jit Tshering, they uncovers that it is not the popular mobilization for democratic rights in Bhutan or a regime disunity, economic crisis, elite pact or international pressure that contributed the transition to democracy in Bhutan. They argue that it is the result of slow '*Incremental approach*' (Mark Turner, 2011) started by His third Majesty Druk Gyalpo (king) Jigme Dorji Wangchuk after his coronation in the year 1952 that has gradually built Bhutan into a strong and organized state by its structure that could sustain a change. This approach was later adopted and applied by his successors too.

Decentralization of power in the history of Bhutan could be traced back during the phase of the 3<sup>rd</sup> King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk very soon after his coronation in 1952, in 1953 he introduced a consultative body the *Tshogdu* or National Assembly of some 138 members comprising representatives of the people, monastics and government with a purpose to redistribute the political power among relevant groups. This initiative of the king to bring the people together and build an efficient governing system could be the first step towards in the path of democratization of Bhutan. Besides this, National Assembly formalized the process of enacting law and its outcome came in the form of Thrimzhung

Chenmo or the Supreme Laws later in 1959. His Majesty took another step towards decentralization of power by setting up *Lodoe Tshogde* or the Royal Advisory Council in the year 1965. The purpose behind creation of this eight member body was to receive reviews and advices pertaining for both the King and the Government. *“A more stabilizing innovation came in 1969 with the National Assembly agreeing to the King’s proposal that the monarch would be obligated to abdicate if two-third of the Assembly’s membership supports a vote of no confidence on his conduct of office”* (Rose, 1977). With Supreme Law followed the appointment of judges or Drangpon in every district to implement the laws. Thus, it is in his reign that the Separation of Judiciary from executive and legislative was also taken forward. To practice an Independent Judiciary His Majesty the 3<sup>rd</sup> King established High Court in Bhutan on 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, 1967.

The Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk further created Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdug a semi-representative committee for district development in 1981 and a gewng level Gewang Yargay Tshogching, elected committees to accumulate more local participation. In 1998 His Majesty dissolved his Council of Ministers to award the executive power to the new Council of Ministers who is elected by the National Assembly. This milestone modification led to the creation of Prime Minister Office in Bhutan in the year 2000.

The biggest and final march to transition came to Bhutan on 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, when the *“king issued a Royal Decree commanding the drafting of a constitution, one which would establish a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy”* (Mark Turner, 2011). Accordingly the 39 member constituted constitution drafting committee, released its first draft in March 2005 and the second one in August 2005. The draft was then sent to the parliament for approval and by July 2007 the constitution was ready proclaiming Bhutan a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in its 1<sup>st</sup> Article.

Under the 5<sup>th</sup> King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck the process of transition accelerated as mock elections were conducted with the purpose to familiarize the citizens with the voting machines.

### **Democracy Assistance of India in Bhutan:**

*“Democracy promotion abroad involves assistance provided by the external actors to support democratization including political party development, electoral monitoring, supporting independent media and journalists, capacity building for the state institutions, training of judges, civic group leaders and legislators, enactment of pro-democracy clauses in regional bodies and conditional development aid.”* (Arijit Mazumdar, 2015) Promotion of this assistance by the external actor may be either by supporting democracy through capacity development of political and social actors together with institutions directly or by giving indirect support that allows democracy to survive and sustain transition.

India supported Bhutan throughout the phase of transition. *‘She sent experts who collaborated on the conception of the new constitution, helped with the work of the electoral commission and sent election observers’* (Cartwright, 2009). On request from the government of Bhutan, Indian Legal experts were set up to assist in drafting the Constitution and election law of the country. To train the electorate of Bhutan for democracy India assisted Bhutan to conduct a series of mock elections in the country. Moreover around 70 Bhutanese officials were invited by the Election Commission of India to observe assembly elections in the states of Punjab and Uttarakhand of India. In addition about four thousand EVMs were sent to Bhutan in 2007 along with economic aid of approximately 60 percent of Bhutan’s budget.

On 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2011, the 2006 MoU signed between the then CEC and ECB was renewed for another five years. *“The major aims of MoU was : promotion of exchanges of knowledge and experience in electoral processes; exchange of information, materials, expertise and training of personnel; production and distribution of materials pertaining to electoral systems, voting technology, voters’ education and awareness, and participation of women and minorities in electoral process.”* ([IN], 2011).

As a result Dr. Quraishi agreed to the request of the ECB to train the newly inducted Bhutanese election officials at Indian International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM) for the 2013



state election of Bhutan. India provided another 4000 EVMs for the 2<sup>nd</sup> term election of Bhutan which was held on 13<sup>th</sup> of May and 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2013.

### Indias's foreign policy and Democracy Promotion:

When the time came for newly independent India to set her ideologies in the international scenario, the long and painful experience of freedom struggle from the colonial rule motivated the leaders to choose a moderate path of Non-alignment with an objective of growth and defense of the nation away from the two blocks politics of the Cold war. Jawaharlal Nehru architect of India's foreign policy the first Prime Minister of independent India who also took over the office of Foreign Minister then, prioritized "*mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non aggression, non interference in inner affairs, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful co-existence*" (Kaur, 2008) rather than follow the two dominant ideologies of the Cold war. "*No argument in any country of Asia is going to have weight if it goes counter to the nationalist support of the country, communism or no communism. That has to be understood*" (Nanda, 1976) says Nehru at the Institute of Pacific Relations in Lucknow in October 1950. It is therefore clear to us the emphasis he puts on Nationalism and Independence in Asia against colonialism and imperialism. His above statement does not necessarily mean he had less commitment for Democracy. According to Muni "*He was always an active and enthusiastic in promoting democracy where ever possible*" (Muni, 2009). Nehru in answer to what would you like to like to be your legacy? as asked by an American editor Norman Cousins once, He replied '*400 million people (then India's population) capable of governing themselves*' (Tharoor, 2017)

The treaties that Nehru settled with the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan in 1949 and Nepal in 1950 are its best example. India inspite of being at influential position at the political level, as legal successor of Great Britain, India under Nehru took minimum effort to promote or to introduce democracy over these monarchies. However, the Indo-China conflict of 1962 and again a conflict with Pakistan in 1965 made Nehru to rethink the complexities of India's regional environment and his believes and ideologies imparted by him in the foreign policy.

*'It is then under Indira Gandhi we see a gradual shift away from the early idealism that had characterized the country's foreign policy and the adoption of an increasingly self help approach to foreign policy while retaining elements of Nehruvian rhetoric'* (Sumit Ganguly, 2009). The intervention of India in East Pakistan in 1971, in Srilanka in 1971 and 1989-1999, intervention in Maldives in 1988 bear witness of India's policy change to more security and economic interest towards her neighbours. The Indira Doctrine named after the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi reflects that *any conflict in the neighbouring states should be settled only with the help of India and without the intervention of other superpowers*. It was the phase when India framed her ideology towards South Asia. Hence Democracy promotion could be less traced in this phase of India's foreign policy also.

This security priority given by Indira Gandhi in her foreign policy towards the neighbouring States of India was later replaced by *Good neighbour Policy* of I. K Gujaral, Prime Minister of the United Front Government of India . I. K Gujaral emphasized more on economic issues. His policies, so called Gujaral Doctrine today, gave foreign policy of India a new conceptual basis, the principle of non reciprocity .

By signing the CD charter in June 2000 under the Bharatia Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime, democratic dimension shift began in India. Providing support to emerging democracies was the goal of the Community of Democracies. The CD's in the year 2004 with a purpose to give a democratic agenda in UN organized themselves into UN Democratic Caucus. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India, a congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the US a year after the formation of UN Democratic Caucus jointly announced a Global Democracy Initiatives (GDI) in July 2005 with an agenda to support the UN in its electoral assistance programs for transition democracies by constitution drafting and providing electoral expertise, national capacity building and also UN Democracy Fund where India was the second largest contributor. Statement of Prime Minister

Manmohan Singh that *“Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organization in today’s world. All alternative systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees are an aberration”* (Singh, 2018) all together reflects the gradual shift of India’s foreign policy in respect to promoting Democracy outside. Mazumdar and Statz in a research article says that India’s *“desire to improve [India’s] relationship with the US” and enhance “its status as a emerging power”* (Arijit Mazumdar, 2015) could be the possible reason behind the shift in the foreign policy of India in relation to Democracy promotion.

But India has always reservations in her Democracy promotion role in regional context. The fact that *“India wants to have its say in the region”* (Destradi, 2011) and the constant fear of encirclement by China in South Asia has led India to set different standards in concerning itself in democracy movement in neighbouring countries. Statement like As a functionary democracy ourselves naturally we feel very comfortable and enthused if there are more democracies emerging...[W]e don’t believe in the imposition of democracy or democratic values of any country. But if there is any interest in any country about our democratic institutions...we are ready to share these (Hall, 2017) by Shyan Sharan, Foreign Secretary (2004-2006) reflects the continuity of India’s foreign policy with some changes.

Towards her neighbours except in Nepal we could see India delivering democracy promotion only after a transition to democracy has begun. Ian Hall’s article ‘Not promoting, not exporting: India’s Democracy Assistance a study on democracy promotion role of India towards her neighbouring countries argues that India has adopted a *‘Dual tract approach’* (Hall, 2017) by baldly supporting multi-lateral mechanism like UNDEF in one hand and by merely providing technical assistance to existing and tansitioning democracation when requested on the other hand. He describes this nature of India’s democracy promotion as Democracy assistance, which the country has adopted in her own version. Similar kind of idea, so called *‘Defensive approach- that India’s defensive approach to democracy promotion reflects the balance between domestic and regional constraints and Western expectations’* (Dr. Jorg Faust, 2010), to the promotion of Democracy by India was discussed by Dr. Jorg Faust and Dr. (habil) Christian Wagner in their research article India: A new partner in Democracy Promotion. Their study based on the domestic politics and India’s involvement in South Asia. They are of the view that the legacy of Nehru’s Government, the principle of non-intervention and independence that protected the national interests of India during post independence period still dominates the foreign policy discourse of present India.

### **Realist Geopolitical interest of India:**

Indo-Bhutan relationship has emerged as one of the most strongest among india’s relations with its neighbours. The position of Bhutan, being placed between the Asian giants-India and China ,holds great strategic importance for India in the Himalayan frontier. The geostrategic importance of Bhutan in relation to India’s security is further accentuated due to Siliguri corridor, which is considered as India’s chicken’s neck, and its proximity to the straregic chumbi valley where China and Bhutan’s border converge. Thus maintaining Bhutan’s territorial integrity and national autonomy in the face of China’s assertiveness fall within the ambit of India’s strategic security. Thus, one of chief reasons for India’s passive approach in promoting democracy in Bhutan has been to keep national elites of Bhutan amenable to India’s strategic imperatives and suggestions; as an active interventionist approach would have risked straining Indo-Bhutanese relations to the detriment of India’s geopolitical security In the Himalayan region.

### **Conclusion:**

Although in the last few years India is seen as a active actor in democracy promotion along with US and EU in global arena, India has failed to convince many western observers because of its reluctance nature in the regional context. Nevertheless, India has chosen to take democracy assistance as an instrument to influence democracy in the region. The strategic security and interest of India in the region cannot be overlooked under the temptation and pressure from UN. Thus India for the long term interest of the nation should continue to maintain a balance between democracy and national interest.

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