

BHUTAN TODAY

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I

It is difficult to speak with any precision of "Bhutan today," as Bhutan is a country where yesterday, today and tomorrow are so strangely and elusively mingled together. Our idea of a country and its people is often based on what we know or hear of its capital and more important cities. The country's image is the image presented to the traveller who has time to visit the more accessible areas, which need not, and often do not, fairly represent the land as a whole. Until recent years, the outside world has known little of Bhutan, and most maps show as its capital not Thimphu, but the ancient historical centre of Punakha. And then, as of a sudden, we hear of Five Year Plans and the paraphernalia of a modern bureaucracy. What has happened, we may ask what is this change that seems to be coming over the country, how deeply is its impact felt by the people, and what do they think about it all?

It was just ten years ago that I was invited to pay my first visit to Bhutan. I remember well the excitement of preparations for what was, at that time, something of an adventure into a new and little known world. Our bustling caravan of ponies and mules trailing over the seemingly unending succession of mountain passes brought us, on our tenth day, to Thimphu, the 8000 feet high capital. Here we were graciously received by the King, hospitably entertained and after being duly revived, trekked eastwards for a further seven arduous days before reaching our destination in Central Bhutan. That was ten years ago. Last month, a doctor set off from Calcutta on a Monday to see a patient in Thimphu, and was back in his consulting room in Calcutta the following Wednesday after jeeping his way up the new road to the capital. Communications are, of course, being developed at a phenomenal pace in most countries. But there is, in the case of Bhutan, a significant difference, arising from the circumstances of her history. Elsewhere, people have

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wanted roads, but have not been able to afford the expenditure of building them. Bhutan, on the contrary, has, throughout her history, preferred to keep herself isolated from her neighbours. Yesterday's isolation is seen reflected in the character and attitudes of her people today. The Bhutanese rarely feels throughly at home outside his own country. In former days, he left Bhutan only when he must, and then too, for as short a period as possible. The reasons for his travelling outside his country were usually trade or pilgrimage, and, when his business was done, he was glad to return and settle down once more in his old familiar haunts. He was similarly shy of visitors from foreign lands, and if visitors came to Bhutan, it was not to see the sights but on some special mission, very often connected with land disputes along her frontiers. With this background, it becomes easier to understand what might otherwise appear to seem a certain aloofness in the Bhutanese character. The Bhutanese is, at heart, a friendly and hospitable person, but he is, naturally a child of his past, and tends to remain within his shell.

The Radio, newspaper, books, travel, all have combined to standardise to such a degree a particular way of life that many of us forget that there can be another way, many other ways, that are equally valid. We tend to evaluate the educational level of a country by the number of graduates and matriculates that are churned up every year. The casual visitor to Bhutan will find very few people in the interior with knowledge of English or any language other than Bhutanese. In the reports of early political missions to Bhutan, there are disparaging references to illiteracy in the country. Illiteracy in English, yes, illiteracy in Hindi, Nepalese and Bengali, but not so in Bhutanese. The early Kings of Bhutan were both religious and secular heads, who attached considerable importance to education. Among the most renowned of them was Nawang Namgyal, who, nearly four hundred years ago, succeeded in controlling the numerous warring factions within the country and imposing a strong centralised rule. His main interest was in the organising and disciplining of the religious order. Himself a reincarnate lama of the Kagyupa sect, he enforced a rigid observance not only by the monks, but by the general public, of the precepts of the faith. Much of the revenue of the country was ordered to be expended on the maintenance of the monasteries, which became centres of general education as well as of religious instruction. Monks in Bhutan are admitted to the monastery at a very early age, and, if they are found to be talented, are given special instruction in painting, carving and ceremonial dancing. Although, therefore, the conventional type of school with which we are familiar has been introduced in comparatively

recent times, the monasteries have for centuries provided, through their monks, a machinery for making the fundamentals of education available to the people—instruction in reading and writing, general knowledge, moral and religious teaching, ceremonial dancing, painting and wood-carving.

The inhabitant of Central Bhutan, who form the bulk of the country's population and whose villages are situated at an elevation ranging from 4,000 to 10,000 feet, are Buddhists of the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa sects. The Bhutanese in the plains and foothills of the Southern frontier, however, are mainly Hindus of Nepalese origin. Their contacts with the outside world have been closer and it is mainly from the nearby India bazaars that they obtain their requirements of food, clothing and other necessities. The prevailing pattern of communications has largely dictated the pattern of their social life, economy and language. Communications to the North have, in the past, been far more difficult than communications to the South. The people of the Southern frontier have, therefore, had less contact with Central Bhutan; they still speak Nepalese and few of them can either understand or make themselves understood in Dzongkha, the State language of Bhutan. Communications, language and religion have been the main barrier in the way of the people of Central and Southern Bhutan coming closer together in their way of life, inter-marrying and developing more intimate social and other ties.

I have spoken to you today of Bhutan as she reflects her past. When I speak to you again, it will be of the Bhutan that is looking forward to the future. It will be the same Bhutan, but we shall see something of the processes by which her past heritage is being re-shaped to meet the challenges of a world which is becoming smaller day by day, a world in which the impact of larger, compelling forces is being felt increasingly by the people of all countries, however remotely situated.

II

When I spoke to you last week of Bhutan, it was to give an idea of some of the historical processes that have played their part in shaping the attitudes and emotions of her people today. Bhutan's past isolation from her neighbours was shown to have generated a certain reserve and sense of aloofness in the Bhutanese character. The absence of easy internal communications, we saw, had come in the way of people from different regions of the country developing intimate social ties or a uniform cultural pattern. And the predominant influence of religions was seen in the concentration of the country's revenue in the maintenance of monasteries, which were centres of both religious and general education.

If we turn for a while from the past, we see that the single, most significant development in Bhutan in recent years has been in the field of communications. Bhutan will soon be drawing to the close of her first Five Year Plan for economic development. The plan provides for the extension of medical and educational services, the development of forests, the setting up of hydro-electric projects, the survey and exploitation of mineral resources, the building up of cottage and large-scale industries—the usual ingredients of a plan for any developing country. What is significant, however, in view of Bhutan's traditional isolation, is her decision to give communications the main priority in all her plans and not only internal communications but communications that will link her more closely with the world outside. The Five Year Plan is largely an extension, though on a much wider scale, of ideas that had been fermenting in the minds of the Bhutanese authorities over a long period, but were not capable of effective implementation upto now, mainly for reasons of finance. The Bhutanese had, quite early in the century, realised that the world was fast changing, and that Bhutan must also prepare herself for change. And so batches of young students were sent down periodically from Bhutan to study in schools in India and equip themselves for service in their own country as teachers, administrators, forest officers and doctors. Most of these are now holding positions of high responsibility as Heads of Departments in the Centre and District Offices in the interior. We see, therefore, that it is mainly in the field of communications that Bhutan is making a departure from previous policy. The Bhutanese have now come to feel more keenly the need for good internal communications to enable the Central Government to remain in effective control of outlying areas

of the country and exercise closer supervision over its long-extended frontiers. They have felt equally the need for access roads from the plains to keep themselves in more regular touch with the world outside and facilitate the transport of materials required for implementation of the Five Year Plan. This new emphasis on the development of roads is indication of a re-shaping of the peoples' attitude towards their neighbours as well as a recognition of the impracticability of continuing isolation in a world where communications everywhere are so fast developing that distance no longer has any meaning and no longer forms a barrier.

It is the genius of the Bhutanese that they have been able to undertake an extensive Plan for development without disturbing overmuch their traditional pattern of administration. This has been achieved through the imaginative insight of the King himself, who, while initiating the Development Plan, decided at the same time to rebuild the Dzong at his capital in Thimphu. For the Bhutanese, the Dzong is the symbol of their country's history, culture and religion. The Dzong consists not only of the main administrative offices, but is the headquarters of the monks and houses the most venerated chapels of the country. Thimphu and Punakha were the historic summer and winter capitals of Bhutan, and it was at their ancient Dzongs that the highest monastic bodies redised and discharged their solemn functions. In rebuilding the Thimphu Dzong, the King has made it clear in a language that his people will best understand that, while the Development Plan has its importance, so too have the ancient institutions of the land. The building of the Dzong is organised along traditional lines, with Bhutanese villagers coming in from the remotest corners of the country to make their contribution in labour to the raising of what is, in effect, a symbol of Bhutan's reverence for her traditional institutions, her faith and her cultural heritage.

Less than three miles from the new Dzong Bhutanese workers are busy constructing Bhutan's first Public School. The emerging of these two institutions almost side by side at the capital is a pointer to the carefully thought out blending and balancing of old and new that is so much the Government's concern in shaping Bhutan's future. The new School will constitute the main source for the flow of doctors engineers and technical personnel required to man the new services initiated under Bhutan's Five Year Plan. The school will also afford opportunities to the students to learn about and take pride in their

country's history and culture. They will play foot-ball like boys all over the world; but archery, Bhutan's national sport, will be given a special place in the life of the school. And so also will religion, the bedrock of Bhutan's history. The new Dzong and the new School will be, in many ways, complementary institutions the former a symbol of Bhutan's variegated history, the latter of her hopes for the future, both interacting upon and influencing each other, as much as to say, "Remember, I too have my part to play".

With improvement in communications is following, gradually, the setting up of new industries. Apart from the forests along her southern frontiers, Bhutan's rich and extensive forests in the interior have upto now remained largely untapped. Forest surveys have indicated the possibility of establishing, amongst other ventures, a paper and pulp industry, match-factory and ply-wood plant. Geological surveys have also pointed to extensive deposits of limestone, dolomite and gypsum. Bhutan's major asset lies, however, in her waterpower resources. The great gorges formed by the succession of rivers flowing South through the labyrinth of Bhutan's mountain ranges are a natural invitation to build dams for the generation of power, and investigations for a large-scale hydro-electric project are already nearing completion. The setting-up of industries and hydro-electric projects, however, demands a reserve of technical know-how which it will take some time yet for Bhutanese themselves to acquire. The concentration of effort for the present is therefore mainly of the improvement of Bhutan's agricultural economy. The Bhutanese are skilful cultivators, and their systematically-irrigated and neatly-terraced rice-fields present a happy contrast to the shifting cultivation practised so widely in the Himalayan hills. Rainfall in Central Bhutan is moderate and soil conditions here favour the growing of apples, pears, peaches, plums, almond, walnut and other temperate plants. There are already extensive orange-groves in the southern plains areas and a canning unit has for some years now been processing orange and pine-apple juice for export outside the country. Bhutan will have her hands full for many years to come in developing her very promising potential in horticulture and industry.

There can be few countries that have been faced so suddenly with such a variety of new and unusual problems. I have spoken of the Government's concern to ensure a just balance between the old and the new. Bhutan's strategic position also poses problems and she is

fully alive to the need for maintaining her army in a state of efficiency and preparedness. Bhutan has a treaty of perpetual peace and friendship with the Government of India, which guarantees that there shall be no interference in Bhutan's internal administration, and provides that she will be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to her external relations. The greater part of aid received by Bhutan comes from India, and it is mainly from India that Bhutan has been requisitioning personnel for assistance in the implementation of her Five Year Plan. Bhutan is, however, also a member of the Colombo Plan, to whose meetings she has been sending her delegates since the last two years and from whom she has received assistance in various fields. Bhutan has achieved much in recent years, and no small part of her achievement has been in so successfully adapting her traditional administrative machinery, evolved to fulfil the needs of a more leisurely age, to the accelerated tempo of today's mad world. There are few countries that have mastered so precisely the delicate art of hastening slowly.