

Representing Bhutan: A Critical Analysis of the Politics of Knowledge Production

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ABSTRACT

Historical knowledge production about Bhutan by outsiders has generally relied upon the dominant lens of understanding the place and people through accounts that combine narratives of travel and strategy. In this article, I interrogate the complexly layered itinerary of such accounts to demonstrate how their imperial ethos has either been ignored or underplayed. I critically analyse the *systematicity*, *selectivity*, and the *positionality* in knowledge-making on Bhutan. I find that imperial knowledge production endeavour tends to be projected as casual and unintentional, innocent of its biases, unaware of its calculations, and oblivious to how it prioritises its own interests at the expense of the native Others and their worldviews. Thus, the sourcing of knowledge on Bhutan is linked to the histories of power in the region and marked by asymmetries in terms of whose views were heard and reproduced over time. Understanding the politics of knowledge-making on Bhutan – constructed as a peripheral non-Western region of the world, and having been subjected to multiple and overlapping imperial forces – has the potential to inform, and be informed by, other similar understudied areas.

KEYWORDS

Bhutan; representation;
Britain; India; imperial;
historiography; postcolonial

Introduction

Stories are the bigger part of history, and much history begins from hearsay. Many persuasive geopolitical constructs derive their long-entrenched appeal from the storytelling about nations that they rely on. In this sense, attending to the stories about nations and peoples is not really to examine them as fictions that can be contrasted against more durable realities, but to highlight the politics of knowledge production and its inevitable intertwining with the interests that are served by them. When I consider a small country like Bhutan, located in the non-West, in a region that was the focus of much imperial power play ('the great game'), then, the kinds of narratives that construct its

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place on the map, become especially salient in terms of the representational dynamics that re/construct the geographies of power.

In this article, I begin from the observation that much knowledge production about Bhutan by the non-Bhutanese (especially the Europeans, the British, the Indians)¹ has relied upon the dominant lens of understanding the place and people through accounts that combine narratives of travel and strategy. These two kinds of stories often interconnect and meld with each other; the imperial officials travelled for strategic reasons and their records are tinged with this perspective, but there were also incentivized explorers who inconspicuously pretended to be travellers or pilgrims but gathered strategic information. Likewise, strategic documents have substantive descriptions of travel such as perceived cultural norms and impressions about the people who are the object of their gaze. Travel records also often fuel the fire of strategic interest in terms of commerce and security.

As these narratives are either originally in English or translated into it, they are widely repeated and uncritically reproduced. They continue to present a picture which is problematically Orientalist,² and obscures the multiple ways in which such narratives, by laying claim to an objective and systematic modernist knowledge production about Bhutan, enable pervasive and enduring hierarchies of thought and identity. I parse a wide range of this literature, analysing it for tone and perception, to highlight the factors that play a role in the construction of a place through scholarship. In relation to the Himalayan region, for the time period and the texts that I analyse for narratives on Bhutan, my work opens a new conversation, for no analogous critical examination exists.³

The most prominent outsider narratives on Bhutan and the Bhutanese would include several different kinds of documentations of real or imagined journeys that foreigners made into or across the country. There are the references to Bhutan by Ralph Fitch in the early collection by Hakluyt dated 1598–1600,⁴ records from early Jesuit priests – Stephen Cacella and John Cabral – who went to Bhutan in the seventeenth century.⁵ There are the journey records and reflections of the various officials who led or accompanied the British missions (Bogle in 1774, Hamilton in 1775 and 1777, Turner in 1783, Bose in 1815, Pemberton in 1837–38, Eden in 1864, White in 1905 and 1907). Then, there are the published and unpublished notes of Indian travellers in the Himalayas who went to Bhutan for survey work in aid of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.⁶ The first half of the twentieth century saw further writings by Political Officers, diplomats and their wives; first British and later Indian.⁷ Typically, some of these texts attempt to summarise Bhutan and can be seen as interpretive precursors to the guidebooks of today. In the archives, I also discovered a hitherto unpublished essay on Bhutan written by a cameraman who accompanied the official Indian delegation to the coronation of the third King of Bhutan in 1952. Presumably, there are other such sources relating to records of ceremonial

occasions such as this, which are not yet in the public domain. Finally, there are the narratives left by the officials of the Indian armed forces who have often reenacted earlier British colonial journeys in Bhutan.

These subjective impressions by imperial/imperious outsiders about the native 'others' are notable for, firstly, being taken as authoritative knowledge, and secondly, for being devoid of critical self-reflection. Key historical actors whose accounts form the bases upon which the histories of Bhutan are written, rarely, if ever, express any doubts about their enterprise and endeavours, or reflect upon their own place in it. It is important to question their position of privilege through which they bring into being the, by now reified, idea of Bhutan as a small, isolated, by turns supremely charming or barbarically uncivilised, religion-ridden Orientalist Other state which is described exhaustively through the trope of its inbetweenness (between the bigger neighbours India and China)⁸ and worthy of attention primarily because of it being a strategic buffer zone; a place and peoples that first benefited from British imperial interaction and civilisational influence, and subsequently from an equally imperious and paternal special friendship with India.

My analysis here is not merely chronological; I focus on the body of knowledge on Bhutan in order to examine how it represents the country and its people. Through these narratives of travel/strategy, their perpetuation and recitation, the impressions about Bhutan are constructed, which then shape how the inhabitants of Bhutan fared with the subsequent regimes of the merchant-market-and-commerce focused East India Company or the British Government with its add-on of the civilising mission or the Government of India with its development and northern security imperative. As I reveal the limitations of the expeditionary stories and the geostrategic political history accounts, I focus on the popular, archival, and social science works which claim to be illuminating Bhutan for the outsiders. The critique broadly takes on several works that aim to produce knowledge about Bhutan (in English) until roughly the second part of the twentieth century (including those written afterwards about this time period). Such knowledge-making endeavours have often been projected as casual and unintentional, innocent of any biases, unaware of any calculations, and oblivious to how they prioritised their own interests at the expense of the native Others and their worldviews. While most of the period I look at relates to British India, my work shows the continuation of many representational tropes well into the twentieth century.

I argue that it is valuable to critically interrogate the politics of knowledge production by looking at the *systematicity* with which conventional accounts continued to be produced, the *selectivity* with which texts travelled forward in time, and the salience of *positionality* in how certain lesser privileged creators of such knowledge were omitted from memory, recognition, and reward.

Politics of Knowledge Production: Systematicity

It is de rigueur to find British and Indian histories of Bhutan that begin from a convenient and incomplete interpretation of Cacella and Cabral visit, skip forward to visit by Bogle, hop from British mission to mission (and even here far less attention is given to the native-led mission of Bose and Roy in 1815),⁹ and then move on to the accounts of the Political Officers until mid-twentieth century, taking the reports of these missions as factual statements denoting knowledge about Bhutan as it was. I aim to complicate the metanarratives of conventional history that, when recounting the British India and Bhutan, and later, the India and Bhutan relations, ignore the asymmetric aspect of those quasi-imperial relations in both cases.

In this section, I demonstrate how outsider knowledge production about Bhutan over time provides us with a systematic set of representations of the country and its people that, more often than not, project them as timeless, strange, backward, innocent, wicked and so on. These essentialisations are born out of the nature of the encounters which involve a mix of asymmetric power, paternalism, and commercial or security considerations.

The late sixteenth century ‘Pioneer Englishman’ Ralph Fitch who sailed from the Thames in 1583 provided a hearsay account of Bhutan that was collected in Hakluyt’s compendium of *Voyages* published in 1599. From Fitch – as first published in sixteenth century by Hakluyt (*italics added*), himself an important early proponent of settler imperialism especially in America – we learn of a country:

called Bootanter and the citie Bottia ... the people whereof are very tall and strong; and there are marchants which come out of China, & they say out of Muscouia or Tartarie ... The countrey is very great, 3. moneths iourney. There are very high mountains in this countrey, & one of them is so steep ... *Vpon these mountains are people which haue eares of a spanne long: if their eares be not long, they call them apes* ... when they be vpon the mountaines, they see ships in the Sea sayling to and fro; but they know not from whence they come, nor whether they go ... They report that in their countrey they haue very good horses, but they be little; some men haue foure, fieve or six hundred horses and kine: they liue with milke and fleshe. They cut the tailles of their kine, and sell them very deere ... The people be very swift on foote.¹⁰

Hakluyt’s *Voyages* was published in 1599, the East India Company was founded in 1600; Hakluyt was also an advisor to the East India Company for his knowledge of maps and markets.¹¹ Fitch became a consultant of the East India Company.

Early European travellers to the other regions of the world – sailor-merchant-explorers-missionaries in search of god, gold or glory – invariably managed to find human beings who were not fully human in the same sense as themselves;¹² lacking physically and/or morally. The records of such real or imagined travels and explorations were important in advancing national

prestige gathered by knowledge about other remote countries. Unlike the Romas or the Mongols who reached Europe from outside,¹³ the European travellers in Asia had as their principal aim from fifteenth century onwards to seek profitable trade, or knowledge which could be turned into profit.

Fitch's account was used as part of a narrative on Bhutan by others. Ryley, in his book in 1899, footnotes Fitch's account of Bhutan,¹⁴ deploring that he did not 'penetrate Lhasa', and adding the caution that the description of the Bhutanese as an 'athletic vigorous race still holds' but that 'according to [Sir W.W] Hunter, they are degraded by mis-government, their morals are extremely low, and their numbers reduced by the unnatural system of polyandry and the excessive prevalence of monastic institutions'. The context for Ryley's assessment of Bhutan is both the chequered history of various British missions to Bhutan from Bogle to Eden between late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, and also the late Victorian imperial ethos and the then prevalent notions of racial hierarchies.

In his preface, Ryley approvingly quotes the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, who described the origin of power in the British Empire succinctly thus:

The casual stone which was thrown into the sea of chance by a handful of merchant adventurers two hundred years ago had produced an ever-extending circle of ripples, until at the present moment they embraced the limits and affected the destinies of the entire Asiatic continent.¹⁵

Such naturalisation of imperial expansions as inherent and teleological does little justice to the sustained efforts of those who systematically studied the world to classify and prepare it for the exercise of power in the service of modernity. There is nothing casual, in fact, about modernity's re-making of the world in the last few centuries.¹⁶

What has distinguished the arrival of modernity in the non-European world is a *systematicity* – a systematic disentangling and classification of people, objects, land and customs, and this systematic re-ordering of the world has proceeded *as if* no ordering existed before. In this view, where a people's history is not *written* in European terms, they have no history.

Fitch's hearsay account can be found much later in Ward, a rare combined mapmaker of the Bhutanese land, making maps and bio-maps, in particular of Lunana, and of the Bhutanese people's bodies. A consultant surgeon, he visited Bhutan in 1964 and 1965, noting that 'the origin of the Bhutanese people is obscure'.¹⁷ He describes various parts of Bhutan from a topological, climatic, demographic, administrative, economic, religious, flora and fauna, settlement pattern, medical including genetic perspectives and provides sketched maps.¹⁸ While this is a late example of an expert imperially surveying eye, he closes his piece with this quote from the mountaineer Wilfrid Noyce, 'Western man depends for his explorations and even meditations upon artifices which are the fruits of his own powers'.¹⁹ This self-attribution is

typically imperial in how it constructs the idea of a Western male self as the standard for all Others.

Another mention of Hakluyt's Voyages, without naming Fitch, is found in the accounts of an Indian official, who relies upon travel narrative constructions of Bhutan as a faraway land without a history. Coelho was with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in India and served as a Political Officer to Sikkim and Bhutan in the 1960s. He writes (in a non-official capacity) sympathetically about Bhutan, mentioning that he visited Bhutan from his residence in Sikkim in 1966–67. Under the title of 'The Land and the People', he notes their '*static past*' (italics added):²⁰

... a land of virile people whose origins are lost in obscurity ... curiously without the impositions of religious or political reformers. Sparse population, rugged terrain, and poor communications discouraged the ferment of ideas. Down the centuries, there were a few travellers, hardly more than a dozen or so ... notably an Indian guru who brought Buddhism ... The people are quaint ...

In one 'factual' book after another, it is stated that the 'historical and anthropological beginnings of Bhutan and the Bhutanese people are shrouded in mystery',²¹ 'The early history of this remarkable country is enveloped in great obscurity',²² 'The early history of Bhutan is shrouded in mystery',²³ and 'The early history of Bhutan is enveloped in obscurity'.²⁴ Moreover, it would hardly be fair or correct to say, in a book written in 1970, that there wasn't a 'ferment of ideas', given that there was the political crisis including assassination of the Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Dorji in 1964 while the (third) King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck was away for medical treatment in Switzerland.²⁵ Sources vary on the run-ups to the event, but according to some versions, this was due to a clash between modernisers and traditionalists. When writing about the Government, Coelho says that the political situation in Bhutan is 'uneventful since political parties do not exist in this country thereby eliminating any controversial politics'.²⁶ He must also have been aware of the existence and activities of the Bhutan State Congress²⁷ since declassified official Indian correspondence reveals this to be so.

Thus, the 'archive' of outsider knowledge on Bhutan from travel narratives systematically and predominantly constructed it as a timeless place with obscure origins. Referring to Bhutan as isolated, inaccessible, with a static past, and no ferment of ideas, is potentially a convenient claim for a bigger neighbouring nation that would like to modernise Bhutan for its own security. It obviates the need to understand Bhutanese history as it was and instead prioritises the needs of the external power.

As a place at the Himalayan frontiers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bhutan also features in an alternate historical narrative, the records of the British missions. The reference points for both British and Indian historical telling can tend to proceed in parallel, and rather selectively.²⁸ Accounts exist of

the relations between Britain and Bhutan in the period from late eighteenth to the very early twentieth century; Britain-Bhutan relations are described until 1865 in Deb 1976, until 1880 in Gupta 1974, until 1910 in Kohli 1982, until 1947 in Collister 1987.

In looking at the reports from the eighteenth-century British missions and associates and comparing them with those in the nineteenth-century, there is a general 'depreciation', if I may put it so, in how the character of the Bhutanese natives is perceived. Wangchuck discerningly notes²⁹ the way the Bhutanese were reported: During the eighteenth-century overtures to opening trade with Bhutan, the British found much to recommend in the Bhutanese. For instance, in 1774, Hastings found good built, simplicity, a strong sense of religion (that preserved them from vices), and the virtues of humour and trust. In 1783, Turner and a surgeon recorded their positive impressions of the Bhutanese. But when their relations soured in mid-nineteenth century due to conflicts over fertile territories in Bhutan (the Duars) that the British eventually annexed, the impression of Eden in 1864 was that the Bhutanese were idle, indifferent, and so on. Eden found even the mules to be 'fidgety and vicious' and the music 'monotonous and noisy'.

In the early twentieth century, Claude White led missions to Bhutan in 1905 and 1907. White is nowhere as vituperative about Bhutan and the Bhutanese as, for instance, Eden and Pemberton were. In his book dated 1909, he recognises the unfairness of Eden's and Pemberton's account of Bhutan,³⁰ nonetheless he rationalises it by saying that while they may have been unfair, it was understandable due to the unfavourable reception they received in Bhutan in 1838 and 1864. This is surely part of the story, but it cannot paper over the economic conflict of interest between Britain and Bhutan at the time (the annexation first of the Assam and then the Bengal Duars that were the most fertile areas under Bhutanese control).³¹ Moreover, the nineteenth century missions were not merely unfavourably met, they were haughty and insistent in their advance into a country where they were uninvited and repeatedly asked to leave. They felt it their right to cross boundaries and push into lands they did not govern. They were also overly sensitive about what levels of respect they ought to get from people whom they never saw as being equal to themselves (and especially not in this era which was the dawn of scientific racism).³²

Instead of acknowledging any of this, White ties these nineteenth century episodes into a larger narrative according to which the British, right from Hastings (in eighteenth-century) onwards, followed a benign and lenient policy towards Bhutan and laid the foundation for successful relations, were it not for the 'subsequent misconduct' of the Bhutanese themselves.³³ White sees himself as picking up a tradition where Bogle and Turner left off in the late eighteenth century, and his narrative is later taken up as reflecting facts about Bhutan.

Bogle (in 1770s) was in Bhutan to expand trade opportunities for the East India Company.³⁴ At the time, after establishing control of Bengal, the British had started surveying the areas up north and were eyeing the lucrative trade with Lhasa. They needed to make progress in relations with people they did not yet know and therefore could start classifying. To this end, there was a systematicity in these representations of Bhutan and the Bhutanese. The officials of the company set about writing travel reports and constructing the personality of 'the Bhutanese' in terms of the things that mattered most to them: Are they well-disposed to the British and their interests? (How can they be made to be so?) Are they physically useful? (Are they good fighters or servants?) Are they white enough? (Are they human enough?).

As is typical of the link between empire and epidermis, Bogle saw many of them having 'complexions as fair as the French'; Turner, coming nearly a decade after him, saw fighting and concluded that they had 'martial weakness' which was 'more to the want of discipline than to actual lack of courage.'³⁵ The travel narratives constructed the 'lacks' and these failings were then mobilised in times of negotiations, incursions or aggressions. In 1838, Griffiths, the medical doctor who went on Pemberton's mission writes a catalogue of Bhutanese morals, or rather the lack thereof. According to Griffiths, though the lower orders of the Bhutanese are cheery even in depressed circumstances, they follow vices and bad examples. The higher orders possessed not a single good quality. He says (*italics added*):³⁶

They are utter strangers to truth; they are greedy beggars, they are wholly familiar with rapacity and craftiness and the will of working evil. *This censure applies only to those with who I had personal intercourse: it would be perhaps unfair to include the Soubahs, whom I saw only once in such a flattering picture, but it certainly would not be unreasonable, and I must make one exception in favour of Bullumboo, the Soubah of Dewangiri, and he was the only man of any rank that I had reason to be friendly towards and to respect.*

There is the gross generalisation, which 'even if unfair', is ultimately always 'certainly not unreasonable'. And then there is the largesse of making an exception the one individual someone somewhere who actually was good after all and confirms the rule. This is the classic display of power to arbitrate by the exercise of locating exceptions; the 'turkey pardon' scenario.³⁷ Thus, for Griffiths, [my paraphrase] the morale of the Bhutanese is inferior to that of the hill tribes, and in spite of whatever they possess, he finds the Bhutanese to be 'inferior even to the naked Naga'.³⁸ They are not even courageous [Turner in eighteenth century had thought them lacking discipline but not courage]. Their ideas of religion are very confused. They have no chastity, thus no need of prostitutes. Both sexes are inexpressibly filthy. Their bodies never come into contact with water. They scarcely ever change clothes. And so on. White in 1909 recognises that Eden in 1864 formed much the same opinion. And while he distances

himself from these observations somewhat by saying that Griffiths and Eden ‘exaggerated what they saw’, he follows it up immediately with ‘and as I know with what discourtesy they were treated, it is perhaps *not altogether unreasonable* for them to have seen only the worst side of the people’ (italics added).³⁹

If the travel explorations yielded profit and intelligence, they also formed convenient pictures of the people in the faraway lands. I use the adjective ‘convenient’ because the people in places like Bhutan were odd-eared when an explorer heard of them (Fitch in the sixteenth century), strong and friendly when links are sought to be opened with them consensually (Bogle and Turner in the eighteenth century), and morally and physically degraded when there is economic conflict and they are seen as needing instruction and improvement (in the nineteenth century). These facts are important to remember – and not only because it shows us how people in the nineteenth century were products of their time, which they were, and they reproduced those times – because British influence contributed to a vastly racialised Himalayas.

For example, according to White,⁴⁰ the Lepchas are of doubtful origin, almost Jewish in features, indolent, and improvident. They make excellent and trustworthy servants. The Bhuteahs are sturdy and Mongolian featured. The Paharias are industrious and thrifty, pushing and eager, but quarrelsome, and require a strong hand. The people of the Himalayas were classified into ‘stocks’ and the prejudices flowing from this racialisation are still prevalent in many problems facing the region today.⁴¹

Writing in 1987, Collister explicitly relies upon and narrates the travel reports of the twentieth century British Political Officers, especially White. Like White, he too recognises the unfairness of Pemberton and Eden’s accounts of Bhutan, but justifies them by adding, ‘they were *not, unnaturally*, prejudiced against their reluctant hosts’ (italics added).⁴² Collister went on a British mission to explore aid possibilities in Bhutan in 1975 and then went again in 1982 in an official capacity, his account is relatively recent; it aims not to be history of Bhutan but claims to be a book about Bhutan ‘as seen through British eyes although I have *tried to set the record straight* wherever possible’ (italics added).⁴³ Collister’s book speaks of the relations not between Bhutan and Britain but, as per its title, between Bhutan and *the British*. It aims to be an objective study, claims to not be a political book, and proceeds through descriptions based upon historical documents.

When referring to the past and the present, Collister is often at pains to demonstrate the ‘natural’ affinity of the Bhutanese towards the British – ‘universally revered hereditary monarchy, respect for the law, tolerance of others and a robust sense of humour’,⁴⁴ and their almost justified fear of India becoming independent. In fact, in spite of an elaborate and obvious account that he himself provides which illustrates that the British refused Bhutan’s repeated demands for assistance and finance (including the third King Jigme Dorji

Wangchuck stating this explicitly in 1971), he follows it up by justifications from Britain's point of view that conclude '*Understandably enough*, there had been neither time nor money to spend on foreign aid between 1913 and 1947' (italics added).⁴⁵ There is no mention of a possibly conscious British imperial policy to keep the buffer zones underdeveloped.⁴⁶

He argues that Bhutan may not have benefited materially from the British but there have been 'less tangible benefits, which are not inconsiderable', listing several advantages, including that (italics added): 'not only were his [referring to the first King Ugyen Wangchuck] eyes opened to the possibilities available to a reforming ruler in the fields of education, medicine and public works, *by his British sponsored tours of India*, but so were those of his wealthier subjects ...'; further, '[T]hey saw an *ordered and comparatively sophisticated society* ... their children and later their grandchildren were *exposed to a British system of education* in north India'.⁴⁷ The Bhutanese are represented as being wholly edified by their interactions with the British (or the Indians), but what do the British (or the Indians) learn from Bhutan in the course of those encounters?

Most Indian archival records from the post-colonial period are, unfortunately, either not declassified, or not easy to access in practice. Based on what I was able to access, it is possible to say that the collective generalisations about the Other, and the travel of stereotypes up and down the hierarchy, resonates here too. As at the start of British-Bhutanese relations in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the views of Bhutan and Bhutanese recorded by Indians at the start in mid-twentieth century appear positive. If the first British contact with Bhutan was necessitated by commercial considerations, the first post-independence Indian overtures came from strategic considerations structured in view of the Chinese influence in Tibet.

In an Indian Ministry of External Affairs, North East Frontier branch file from 1950, an Under Secretary writes (italics added):⁴⁸

In view of the Tibetan situation, P.O [Political Officer] suggested in his Monthly Report that the Government of India *should take greater interest* in the affairs of Bhutan. In *his view* the best course *would be to meet the Maharaja of Bhutan* at an early date to obtain first hand information about conditions in Bhutan.

Further in the same file, Intelligence Bureau, Ministry of Defence concur with this suggestion and put forward their own interest in the matter and the angle they would like the information from. The PO Harishwar Dayal⁴⁹ visited Bhutan later that year in 1950 and his report to the Secretary to the Government of India dated 21st December 1950 is also in the same file. The PO's Report provided the very first impressions of the Bhutanese to the wider bureaucrats of independent India; these were favourable about the country, its rulers and the populace in general:

[Bhutanese] are hardy, hard-working and cheerful, and they are for the most part still free of the extreme money-consciousness of the Tibetans on the Trade Routes. They have a genuine artistic sense, and Bumthang [a province] is the centre of many small industries and handicrafts ... Monks, soldiers and the people of the villages cultivate the art of dancing, and some of the performances that I saw were the most impressive in their native setting ...

Indian travel narratives relating to Bhutan in the years following the first contact furnish representations of Bhutan blending cultural curiosity with an emphasis on the remoteness and isolation of the country; this last, in keeping with an imperial tradition, adds to the feat and charm of their own visit.

Two years after this visit, a cameraman N.S. Thapa, of the Films Division accompanying the Indian delegation to the coronation of the third King in 1952, penned his own observations on Bhutan in an essay called 'Journey Through Forbidden Bhutan'.⁵⁰ His observations on Bhutan were as follows (italics added):

Bhutan to many is no more than a name or a patch *on the map of India*. Unfortunately, this remarkable country has always been *completely barred to all foreigners*, including Indians, except a privileged few. Therefore, she rarely comes in the news ... The people are fair, healthy and hard-working ... Royal family has patronized weaving and sword making, in which art the Bhutanese have attained a very high degree of proficiency ... in spite of ... hardships the people are care-free, happy and contented ...

Thapa was refused permission to publish his essay. The Ministry of External Affairs deferred to the PO in Sikkim, commenting that statements would be 'likely to give rise to controversies'. The PO in Sikkim (B.K. Kapur in 1953) was emphatically not in favour of publication.

Now, more than half a century after these documents on Bhutan were first composed, it is instructive to note the generalisations that they contain on Bhutan and the Bhutanese, and impossible not to identify the similarities with the imperial British style of writing about the natives. Records of the very first visits inside Bhutan by officials of Indian origin from an independent India, like the first travel accounts of the British missions – Bogle, for example – find Bhutan to be a cheerful, creative place where the people are very hardworking and well disposed towards the Indians.

Like Voltaire's 1761 reference to the sagely 'King of Boutan' in his *Tales*,⁵¹ these positive representations also filter through to children's literature in India. In a Children's Book Trust (CBT) publication from 1967 (I refer to the revised and reprinted 2005 edition), Indian children are introduced to the people of the neighbouring countries. 'Our Neighbours' in this slim volume are: Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar.⁵² There is a white space, akin to the Indian Ocean, indicating an unmarked silence on the map where Tibet/China geographically is. Bhutan is described as 'The Kingdom of Bhutan is bordered on the north by the *province of Tibet*

in *China* and by the Indian States of Sikkim in the west, West Bengal and Assam in the south and Arunachal Pradesh in the east' (*italics added*).⁵³ Bhutan's history is described as being 'marked by isolation and inaccessibility'.⁵⁴ There is as much reference to British India ever having interacted with Bhutan, as there is of Indian interaction with Bhutan in Aris's (1989) overview of Bhutan, which is to say, precious little!⁵⁵ In this neighbourly introduction to Bhutan's culture and politics for Indian children, 'The Bhutanese' are described thus: 'The people of Bhutan are well-built and good looking and the women are usually pretty. They are well-dressed in hand-woven cloth of bright colours... The Bhutanese are by nature hard-working yet fun-loving'.⁵⁶

Is there a shift in these perceptions over time as in the case of the British in the nineteenth century? A comprehensive answer to this question partly depends on the records from the mid-sixties onwards which are not yet accessible at the Archives. But, from what one can gather from the Indian officials, scholars, and journalists publishing articles on Bhutan in the following decades (especially late 70s to early 90s), the answer would seem to be a cautious yes. This is a period when Bhutan, now a member of the UN which it joined in 1971, actively expanded its international contacts, joined other international bodies where it voted with its own mind, diversified its aid donors, and began official boundary talks with China. In this period there was certainly the recognisable assertion of Bhutan's international identity and a clear reduction of its status-anxiety; all of these changes found their way into the representations and perceptions of Bhutan by Indians. During this era from 1970s onwards, the following perspectives are easy to find in Indian policy literature and media discourse: Bhutan is slipping out of India's ambit, Bhutan is 'not grateful enough' for India's assistance, Bhutan must not vote against India in international forums (the 1978 NAM summit was an example), Bhutan is turning anti-Indian.

Politics of Knowledge Production: Selectivity

In this section, I consider the way in which knowledge production of non-Western peripheries like Bhutan relies upon foundational European accounts which ought not to be taken as disinterested histories because of how they combine experience with embellishments, and are carried forward through translations, with specific focus areas and omissions.

My exemplar here is *The Relacao*, a 1627 report of the travels of the two Jesuit priests, Fathers Cacella and Cabral, who are referred to as the first Europeans to visit Bhutan in their search for the Kingdom of Cathay (modern day China). This is the first epistolary documentation of an encounter of Europeans and Bhutanese at a time when the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries had sought out Himalayan Buddhists.⁵⁷

Jesuits Cacella and Cabral met the ‘Shabdrung’ Ngawang Namgyel – an important figure in Bhutanese history and politics who unified the country and is seen as the founder of modern Bhutan – and provided an account through *The Relacao* in 1627. So far, three scholars have translated *The Relacao* from Portuguese, and those that have – Wessels,⁵⁸ Aris,⁵⁹ Baillie⁶⁰ – have offered it as a window into Bhutanese history. Of these, Wessels was writing about early Jesuit travellers in central Asia with no specific interest in Bhutan,⁶¹ and Aris felt that ‘though he made a brave attempt to relate the evidence to Bhutanese institutions ... the significance of the work from the point of view of the Bhutanese material was lost on him’.⁶² Aris himself does provide detailed annotations but clearly he seems to take the document as factual corroboration and straightforward evidence of Bhutanese history – for example, in a note⁶³ referring to the Jesuits’ mention of the desire of the Shabdrung to cut his hair and retire after the birth of his son who will succeed him, Aris concludes that the idea of reincarnational succession would have had little appeal for him.

As background, Aris briefly provides a few comments of a Portuguese Lecturer at his institution, according to whom the report was probably hastily put together by the Jesuits because one paragraph (before the end) is a ‘sententious summing up’, but after which the report continues on. It is incomprehensible to me why Aris mysteriously omits a paragraph in the report that illustrates this point of it ‘being hastily written’; the very fact of this paragraph being ‘rather unclear and difficult to follow’ should be an excellent reason to include it in a rare translation to open it up to scholars, instead of omitting it completely.⁶⁴

Baillie does provide a translation of the entire document in 1999.⁶⁵ Again, she sees the Jesuits’ report as a significant ‘way to *reveal* Asian civilisations to the Western World’ (*italics added*).⁶⁶ In her view, *The Relacao* is important because it gives the ‘first description of Bhutan by Western visitors’.⁶⁷ The striking omission, to me, consists of the failure to recognise that the document is not merely a description of factual Bhutan, as it existed then or now,⁶⁸ but that it is an interpretation of Bhutan by the Jesuit priests. Of course, they described what they saw or felt, but there are the inconclusive issues of intent and the theory-ladenness⁶⁹ of their observations. They would have seen things relevant to them and in the ways relevant to them.

Why did they report that there were more than 500,000 people in Paro?⁷⁰ Were they really welcomed with the honour reserved for Kings alone and seated above everyone, including the highest lamas? Did they really see hardly any places of worship [temples in Baillie] [pagodas in Aris] even after journeying on land for days on end? Did the Shabdrung really not want them to leave the Kingdom because it was a ‘great honour’ to have them there and it would be embarrassing and a discredit to him if news of their leaving reached the other Kingdoms around? The Shabdrung, they say, had a

clear ‘dislike and coldness’⁷¹ towards the things that concerned them, yet they were previously allowed to build a chapel, promised a church and given lamas as disciples and the people of the areas came to them for blessing and cures; why did they then decide to leave after only eight months?

Indeed, they describe how they laughed in the King’s face calling his beliefs ‘falsehood and mockery’. They call the prayers of the lamas the work of the devil; they make fun of the gods. They try and convince the King that his people were Christians long ago. They point out that the lama and the King are themselves confused about their own religion. They tell us that people in the Kingdom preferred their religion to that of the King, prostrating before the images of the Virgin and Jesus and kissing the altar with devotion.

These questions are important to remember because they give us a sense of how one cannot read a stability of meaning into the Jesuits’ view of Bhutan. Some of their account, at least, must have been profoundly influenced by the *view of Bhutan they wanted to see*, rather than the one they did see. They apparently saw a heavily populated land teeming with possible disciples where the King was very welcoming of them, eager to copy a Christian religious image, honoured by their presence, and they could afford to be disparaging of the King’s religion in return. They were offered disciples and places of worship, yet they chose to or had to leave, presumably after Christianity started to outdo Buddhism in local popularity.

No one so far has discussed this document in its historical context while remaining open to its ambiguities. It has been accepted as a textual photograph of Bhutan in 1627. Baillie sees it as conveying a contrastive picture of some close-minded missionaries and a tolerant King. For example, Baillie writes,

Shabdrung shows tolerance in allowing the Jesuits to practice their religion and to offer instruction ... Conversely, the Jesuits were less open to the Buddhist religion, but perhaps allowance should be made ... they believed that it was a form of Christianity that needed to be brought back to the true faith.⁷²

However, *The Relacao* also produces other kinds of knowledge beyond that of the single-minded missionaries versus the tolerant-turned-jealous King. This is singularly illustrated in the paragraph that Aris omitted. In fact, I find this paragraph the key to the document because it shows us the shadows of uncertainties of the missionaries themselves, their slight hesitation about their true cause, the zeal for the profit of souls, their struggles – in the face of what they see – to hold on to the version of their faith they had when they left home.

This is the situation prior to the omitted section: the missionaries describe themselves in Bhutan, they are on the whole made welcome, the King appears to be curious and keen on dialogue, they have disciples, they build a chapel, they are supremely self-confident in the value of their own faith and laugh in the face of the devilish notions of the Buddhist faith of the King. They are keen to proselytise the King who does not force his subjects in any

matter. They have successfully introduced the concept of sin in the case of a man who accidentally killed another man with an arrow, they are being asked for holy water and cures, they seem confident of winning victories over the devil, they describe how the King gives people freedom and they have no obligation to defer to him or even follow his doctrine. There is, in other words, in the Kingdom, a possibility for the plurality of spiritual beliefs. The people who come to the Jesuits in all probability also continue to be devout Buddhists. This multiplicity of religious consciousness is not allowed for the Christian converts who have to be fundamentally Christian.

The last lines before the omitted paragraph indicate that since the King does not force his people – ‘he does not wish anyone to be unhappy [‘does not wish to have any of his subjects discontented’ in Aris] and everyone is free to do what he wants’⁷³ – and this freedom will greatly help them achieve their ends.

Now, consider lines from the section omitted in Aris (but included in Baillie):

This is the situation I find ourselves in at the present time ... in these journeys it seems the Lord provides in different ways ... it seems as if his mercies buy spiritual consolation ... and as it is the Lord’s custom, *like an affectionate father*, to sometimes hide himself, I wish to please him even more in order to avoid the suffering of not feeling Him so close; *here, He is like a dedicated mother* occupied in giving pleasure to her children, providing so much beauty in all that can be seen in these mountains, guiding us through these rocky paths, giving warmth and comfort ... providing abundance when there is scarcity, alleviating setbacks and difficulties, bringing gentleness into meetings with people of irascible nature – all this gives our spirits complete satisfaction ... full to the brim.

You are well aware in your colleges of the good things the Lord gives a taste of in order to attract the souls of his servants to the success of this enterprise; *however, there you care, whereas here I see and experience, and in this matter it is indeed appropriate to say that it is one thing to care and quite another to experience; but it is also true that care and expectations do not always match reality*. Yet, *he who will deeply feel* spiritual consolation in the preaching of the Holy Gospels, once involved in his work, will experience it very strongly, being *able to speak clearly to kings* about the teachings of the Lord, putting doubt even in the minds of the learned about their belief in the sects from Hell, showing them the error of their ways, helping many to escape from the mouth of Hell inside which they already are, assisting them to honour the real God, persuading them to come to know and adore Him and to make war on Hell by winning vassals; Heaven will thus be pleased at the sight of infidels gradually reaching understanding ... All this will create such a rich treasure of consolation for the soul, that the cost of whatever hard work there might be, and of sacrifices made, will be nothing in comparison. *For myself*, I particularly ask ... *to grant me the favour of your prayers, so that no impediments* are put in the way of these blessings and also that I might be able with other faithful servants to enter the enjoyment of the Lord, *earning many souls for Him, with profits, for in His infinite goodness, He has seen fit to profit from this enterprise*.

The Jesuits are struck by the beauty and abundance of the place, keen on the success of their enterprise, but they draw the definite distinction between care and experience and talk of the mismatch between expectations and reality. They refer to an ideal preacher who can convince Kings and bring about much but for their own self, they ask no impediments so that they can earn souls for the profit of their Lord. Their reflections about their own endeavour, its worth and possible merit, are not given due credence by future historians. This is important to note because the influence of such accounts upon the European imagination is not straightforward, immediate, or always accurate, but they do end up ‘constructing’ as much as ‘reflecting’ Bhutan. A closer, critical and more reflective look at the thoughts of the creators of such texts may also generate fertile sources of enquiry about the ferment in the imaginations of those who created the knowledge, as much as those were being written about.

Politics of Knowledge Production: Positionality

In this final section, I take a critical look at the links between knowledge and power as manifest in the differential value – both in terms of acknowledgement and in terms of monetary reward – accorded to the creators of knowledge, in line with their positionality within a rather hierarchical imperial context.

The desire for profit, a possible part of the early explorations into the region, becomes a central theme in the imperial era proper, and unlike the missionaries, the pursuit was not for a profit of the souls. From the eighteenth century onwards, the interpretive accounts of those bearing holy crosses become gradually supplanted by reports that seek to gather valuable information for trade and frontier affairs. If the formal missions were a means of wholesale surveying, there was another function of individual travellers – retail surveying. In keeping with the efforts of any similar imperial power, the British in the nineteenth century onwards trained and sent Indians to the Himalayas and central Asia, and Bhutan was no exception. These Indians were geographically speaking ‘explorers’, but politically speaking ‘spies’ disguised as travellers and pilgrims.

British and Indian accounts of Bhutanese history have not yet picked up on the way in which the means of gathering intelligence about Bhutan in nineteenth century were not simply the missions of Pemberton or Eden, but continued also via the means of the individual explorers. In fact, especially in the period between Eden’s visit in 1864 and White’s visit in 1905, the British sent individuals like Rinzin Namgyal (‘RN’) who was an important source of information about Bhutan. This explorer/spy was surveying Bhutan for the British in 1885. Equally, Bhutan has not been very significant for those historians who have written in general about the work of these explorer-traveller-spies in Himalayas and central Asia. As a result, this is a chapter⁷⁴ in history

of British India's intrigue in Bhutan that needs illuminating, including on the work done by these native explorers.

A 1973 book dedicated to Nehru, by Rawat, a retired Indian surveyor,⁷⁵ aimed to rehabilitate the historical position owed to the nineteenth century Indian explorers. Two decades later, in 1990, Waller provides a more interpretive but not necessarily critical⁷⁶ history of the exploration carried out by the 'The Pundits':

In the public documents of the Survey of India, these men came to be called "pundits" or "native explorers," but in the closed files of the government of British India, they were given their true designation as spies or secret agents⁷⁷

The native explorers journeyed through these areas for the British (who rewarded them with land, gold watches, and the like)⁷⁸ but their work did not receive the kind of widespread recognition it would merit for the tasks they accomplished.⁷⁹

The first recorded use of Indian explorers by the British is 1774 (also the year that the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty of friendship was first signed), and The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, that began work in 1800, continued its triangulation of the Indian subcontinent uninterrupted for the next eight decades until 1883 in the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ By the mid-nineteenth century 'systematically mapping the whole of India, [The Survey] had reached the Himalayan chain forming the northern boundary of the subcontinent and separating India from Tibet and China'.⁸¹ Progressing beyond was difficult, dangerous and complicated – against the backdrop of the political relations in the subcontinent at the time, foreigners venturing further afield would create problems if confrontations arose in areas where 'hostile activities against British citizens could neither be defended nor avenged'.⁸² The case for making greater use of Indian explorers intensified and the pros and cons were debated by British officials in a combination of rationales: the Indian explorers will be inferior to the British ones (racial supremacy); it is worth experimenting with (scientific exploration); it is a low-cost approach (economising utilitarianism).

The Indian explorers were selected from families that had a tradition of paying a human cost for the empire; their ancestors or relatives having proven their loyalty in some way.⁸³ In their searches for the big prizes – the goldfields of Tibet, 'penetrating the veil of Lhasa' – the British employed them at salaries of between Rs.16 and Rs.20 a month, further rewards dependent upon the value of their exploration work, and in return they gave their life and health to these tasks (losing life and limb, returning to dead families, suffering all manner of destitution and working till they were unfit to serve). Their work was compared favourably only among their own kind – 'A.K [Kishen Singh] surpassed even the great Pandit [Nain Singh] himself',⁸⁴ but rarely with the work of the European explorers.⁸⁵

These native explorers, worked under pseudonyms, travelled as traders, ‘mullahs’, lamas, adopting professions as desired.⁸⁶ They were trained to walk at a certain pace on any terrain and when going as a Buddhist pilgrim, they were given rosary beads specially manufactured by the Trigonometrical Survey which had 100 instead of 108 beads and every tenth bead was slightly larger than the rest. They counted the beads to represent a certain number of steps (a small bead is 100 steps, a big is 1000, and steps being measured by pace, the distance could be calculated). Another Buddhist religious device – the prayer wheel – was serviced in the interests of the imperial geostrategic exploration. The prayer wheel became, both a secret container of survey notes, and when twirled, a means of keeping privacy. Moreover, a small compass could be hidden at the top of the prayer wheel. In addition, the Tibetan tea bowl served as a mercury trough.

There was certainly no ignorance about the sanctity of religious places or customs, so the British dislike of Lamaism (White later referred to the region as ‘priest-ridden’) perhaps aided such ingenuity of using Buddhist practices or artefacts for the purposes of surveying. Different British and Indian commentators note:

Later explorers were given a Tibetan prayer-wheel with a revolving barrel, which was customarily twirled in the air by pilgrims and travellers. The barrel contained Buddhist prayers, and each revolution sent the prayers to heaven. The *prayer wheels* of Montgomerie’s pundits, however, *were used to store observations* of bearings and distances made on the march, *hidden there from the eyes of the prying frontier officials*.⁸⁷

With due piety, the disguised Lamas murmured the Buddhist prayer ‘*Om mani padme hum*’ (Oh Jewel of the Lotus), turned the prayer wheel and dropped a bead to count the distance. This helped the accurate counting of the paces, while preserving an air of devotion. The prayer wheel was fitted to take long stripes of paper on which they jotted their survey notes. *Very few strangers would venture to speak to a Tibetan devotedly twirling the wheel*. So the explorers would count the paces with the least amount of interruption.⁸⁸

In his lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in 1885 while narrating the work of Pandit Kishen Singh (A.K.), General Walker, the Surveyor General of India, makes it absolutely clear that the ‘Asiatics’ as explorers can provide observations and measurements, but *not* descriptive journals of their travels, the countries, manners and customs of the inhabitants in the way that an ‘educated European traveller’ can.⁸⁹ The Asiatic explorer Pandits were *used* – body⁹⁰ and mind – in return for land and money, by the imperial endeavour for their ‘race’ in mapping the frontiers of their empire. The educated natives would not stand such treatment or serve their ‘foreign masters’ in this way.

The people who were being surveyed had an idea (in fact, right from 1770s onwards, when Rennell had gone surveying the frontiers north of Bengal) about the purposes of imperial exploration. Yet, when the British were barred from Tibet for most of the nineteenth century after having been there previously,

they interpreted this as being due the influence of the Lamas.⁹¹ Besides geographical curiosity and strategic imperatives of the perceived 'great game', there was also an Orientalist admixture of fantastical notions that saw the imperial endeavour in the sexual terms of penetration, veils, mystery, beauty, and revelation.

Bhutan, like Tibet, was such a place for the British – hidden, quaint, mysterious. British efforts to subdue Bhutan in the 1865 Duar war (after the Eden mission) had given economic advantages but yielded no comprehensive 'penetration'. Rather, these events had made them recoil with an acute awareness of their own disadvantage in their lack of verifiable knowledge about the country and its people.

As I demonstrate below, the British were routinely engaged with gathering information on, and through, Bhutan, including in the periods between the missions by Eden and White. Contrast this with the statement made by White in 1909, where he presents himself in 1905 as the first British visitor to Bhutan in forty years.⁹² His remarks need to be read in the light of routine explorations that I present here, gleaned from a careful piecing together of information from various sources about Himalayan exploration during the period (not themselves focusing on Bhutan).

In April 1878, Kishen Singh ('A.K') was sent on his explorations of Tibet and Mongolia from Darjeeling and through the westernmost valley of Bhutan. The native explorer most often in Bhutan in late nineteenth century was Rinzin Namgyal ('RN'). Before RN, in 1883, Ugyen Gyatso followed the Lhobrak valley into Bhutan on his explorations.⁹³ In August 1885, RN was asked to travel east from Darjeeling via Bhutan to Gyala Sindong.⁹⁴ He was accompanied by a Sikkimese 'Bhotia' called Phurba ('PA'). RN travelled in Bhutan but could not cross into Tibet. Between 1885 and 1886, PA also made two independent operations in Bhutan. Godwin-Austen had accompanied Eden on his mission to Bhutan and then surveyed during the 1865 war that followed; 'pundit' Nain Singh was there in 1875 and the surveyors had also obtained observations of peaks in Bhutan from the plains below. The route-surveys of Bhutan by RN and PA in the 1880s, therefore:⁹⁵

apart from covering much new ground, tied together the separate observations of Pemberton, Godwin-Austen, and Nain Singh, as well as linking up with the survey of U.G [Ugyen Gyatso] just to the north of the Bhutan-Tibet border.^[fn] In addition, R.N returned with much useful data on the politics and administration of Bhutan. Atkinson, who wrote up the narratives of both R.N and P.A., was able to produce a new sketch map of Bhutan.

No less a figure than Charles Bell (who succeeded White as the Political Officer, Sikkim, and was the principal architect of the 1910 Treaty between Bhutan and Britain that placed the former's external relations under guidance of the latter; a clause finally removed in 2007) seems to have travelled to Tibet through Bhutan

in 1904. In connexion with the Tibet-Bhutan boundary, he mentions his ‘tour of exploration through Bhutan to Tibet in 1904’.⁹⁶ Moreover, surveyors were sent to Bhutan even in 1903. Major Ryder describes his travels through Bhutan on a Tibet Frontier expedition, which commenced in September 1903. He describes how the inhabitants of the Chumbi Valley have a monopoly on trade from Phari Dzong down to Sikkim, saying (*italics added*):⁹⁷

A short halt here enabled me to get the lower end of the valley surveyed, and *to detach Sub-Surveyor Dalbir Rai*, who followed the valley down to the plains, and, returning to Gnatong by the adjoining valley, *completed a most useful piece of work, including a hitherto unsurveyed portion of Bhutan.*

The British had a fair knowledge of not just western but also eastern Bhutan. In 1886, RN asked ‘again’ the ‘Thimbu *Jongbon*’ [Thimphu Dzongpon] who – had allowed him to travel throughout his jurisdiction but said that he could not grant a passport for travel in eastern Bhutan – wrote to the ‘Deb Raja who asked the explorer to report to him personally’.⁹⁸ RN engaged a Lama as guide and travelled through Eastern Bhutan. The travel of RN and his observations on 1880s Bhutan is reported in Rawat. Later, in 1913, Bailey and Morshead also travelled part of their journey from Yarlung and then Tawang and through Bhutan into India.

In tracing Bhutan in history and politics through the travel accounts, it is very uncommon to find any mention of these traveller-explorer-spies. The status of the various kinds of travellers who visited Bhutan for different reasons, is ignored. The specifically ‘imperial’ aspect and intention of these visits is ignored. It is often assumed that when looking at the records left by travellers, one can easily distinguish between what is knowledge and what is bias in their writings – knowledge is transparent and biases are excusable. While some things are taken as history, some other things are rationalised as being ‘unfair but not unreasonable’. It is this simplistic view of who produces knowledge and whose views count and whose don’t, that I have identified and challenged here; production of knowledge about Bhutan was very much part of an imperial matrix of power even though Bhutan was not formally colonised.

Conclusion

The knowledge production about Bhutan by outsiders confronts us with representations and re-constructions of encounters that were asymmetric in terms of who had the power to be heard and have their views reproduced. The texts on Bhutan and the Bhutanese are not monotonic in emphasis; they are often riven with many competing interpretations and motives, and mitigated by the changing, conflicting, contradictory interests and identities of the principal and lesser actors, who nonetheless, shared and internalised a basic understanding of their endeavour to ‘know’ the Other.

History is a contested story produced, in part by determined leadership, but also by accidental individuals, conflicting agendas, abandoned intentions, and an irreducible element of chanciness, in countries both big and small. Yet, in the broad-brush narratives of conventional geopolitics with an imperial hang-over, small countries, especially when they are of non-Western provenance, are often represented in a way that displaces the focus away from their own internal dynamics. The picture that the imperial/imperious outsider narratives construct is less about the developments happening in Bhutan⁹⁹ and more about the extent that the narrators consider themselves to be the initiators, prime movers, catalysts or obstructors of changes in Bhutan.

British and Indian scholars have generally presented the relations of Bhutan with British India, or Bhutan with India, with a focus on justifying their country's paternalism and benevolence, respectively. Historical recounting in relation to Bhutan has functioned through a specific kind of telling – where British writers of Bhutanese history have tended to ignore imperial manipulation by Britain and neglected the favourable aspects of Bhutan's relations with India, and Indian writers of Bhutanese history have generally completely ignored the historical manipulation of Bhutan by India and neglected the favourable aspects of Bhutan's relations with other countries including Britain. I do not attribute this to ill-will or malice, but rather to the lack of synthetic knowledge about what have been constructed as peripheral non-Western regions of the world, and been subjected to multiple and overlapping imperial forces.

In this article, I have highlighted the keen relationship of knowledge-making on Bhutan to perceived interests and power constructions, drawing attention to the inevitably subjective nature of the ostensibly authoritative accounts. An appreciation of the politics of outsider knowledge production about Bhutan – in terms of the systematicity, selectivity, and positionality – has the potential to inform, and be informed by, other similar understudied areas, and contribute to a much better future understanding of the facets of contemporary present.

Notes

1. I focus on outsider knowledge production because this is what came to be significant in how Bhutan was understood in history by the non-Bhutanese. My argument in this paper, thus, does not apply to the contemporary commentaries on Buddhist religious texts or cultural and anthropological studies of Bhutanese society and its customs.
2. See Said, *Orientalism* and the sub-field of critique it generated.
3. In relation to the Himalayan region, Po'dar and Subba, "Demystifying" provide a critique for the representation of Himalayan Lepchas; Mostowlansky, "Where Empires Meet" looks at the orientalist construction of Gilgit Baltistan as a frontier region; Ahmad, "Orientalist Imaginaries" examines the orientalist representations in relation to Kashmir.
4. See Ryley, *Ralph Fitch*.

5. More detail on such journeys can be found in Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers*. See Aris, *Sources* for a version of Cacella and Cabral's narrative with notes.
6. See Rawat, *Indian Explorers*.
7. White, *Sikkim & Bhutan*; Bell, *Tibet Past and Present*; Williamson, *Memoirs of a Political Officer's Wife*; Rustomji, *Enchanted Frontiers* (Nari Rustomji had the exceptional post of an Indian Advisor to Bhutan; this post was abolished after he left in 1966); Bhattacharyya, *Bhutan*; Pant, *Mandala*.
8. See Kaul, "Where is Bhutan?"
9. Bray refers to the peripheral way in which this mission has been treated. He also refers to the odd fact that Rammohan Roy (part of this mission to Bhutan, the founder of Brahmo Samaj, prominent Bengali reformist who later died in Bristol) is referred to as 'the other man' going with Krishnakanta Bose; Bose himself left the Company without a pension in 1821. See Bray, "Krishnakanta Basu," 13, 19. [Bray uses the spellings Krishnakanta Basu and Rammohan Ray].
10. The exact text has minor variations in Ryley, *Ralph Fitch* and in the subsequent versions. I have chosen the original Hakluyt 1599 version here.
11. Mancall's, *Hakluyt's Promise* is a contemporary biography of Hakluyt. In *America's debt*, Porter writes, "During his lifetime, Hakluyt, a cleric, academic and occasional spy, never travelled further than Paris. But ... he 'invented the grammar of colonisation' and kept the idea alive ...". Hakluyt's name lives on not just in the form of Hakluyt Society named after him, but also in the name of Hakluyt & Company (founded in 1995 by former MI6 officials), a corporate investigation firm that has several contemporary business and government leaders as its advisors.
12. See Todorov, *The Conquest of America*.
13. Consider that Rabban Bar Sauma (and his student Rabban Markos, or Yaballaha III), a Turkic Mongol monk of Nestorian Christian faith travelled a remarkable journey from China to Europe in the thirteenth century *before* Marco Polo's return to Europe from China. West-East journeys are well known (there were missions of Europeans to Mongol courts) but the reverse journeys of the early travelers from East to the West are little known! Bar Sauma's travel narrative has been translated in English from Syriac the last, and only, time in Montgomery, *History of Yaballaha* and Budge, *The Monks*. Even this was a translation of a part, not the entire travels.
14. Ryley, *Ralph Fitch*, 117–8.
15. In *Ibid.*, viii.
16. See Wolf, *Europe and the People*.
17. Ward, "Some Geographical and Medical," 490.
18. Ward's team also carried out a genetic sampling and fingerprinting of the population in Lunana and Thimphu, and brought back a collection of seeds of plants likely to be of botanical and horticultural interest. As Chaplin states in "The Natural History," 127, "It is by now a truism that science was handmaid to empire". In the context of the region I examine, science was never an entirely neutral endeavour.
19. Ward, "Some Geographical and Medical," 505.
20. Coelho, *Sikkim and Bhutan*, 55–56.
21. *Ibid.*, 56.
22. White, *Sikkim & Bhutan*, 99.
23. Das, *The Dragon Country*. Nirmala Das was the wife of the Indian Representative in Thimphu. In her book on Bhutan, she refers to S.S. Bhattacharyya, 'an Indian scholar', 'Imperial Gazetteer', 'Hiuen [sic] Tsang', and 'Sir Ashley Eden', to state that plausibly Bhutan was a Hindu Kingdom in early history. It is rather disingenuous to draw upon 'Sir Ashley Eden who had visited Bhutan in 1864' as an authority on Bhutan without

- letting the reader know that Eden's views on Bhutan and the Bhutanese (see Eden, *Political Missions to Bootan*) arose from his experience of being humiliated there during a Mission in 1864 that led to the Anglo-Bhutanese war. From a careful scrutiny of publications of the time (for instance, Rennie, *Bhotan*, 23) it would appear that he was equally at fault.
24. Kakodkar, *Bhutan and Sikkim*, 3. Avadhuth Kakodkar was a First Secretary to the Office of the Political Officer in Sikkim.
 25. Like the Kurosawa movie *Rashomon*, there are a variety of interpretations about this event, which occurred in 1964. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan* and Rustomji, *Enchanted Frontiers* are two prominent ones.
 26. Coelho, *Sikkim and Bhutan*, 87. However, note that he also observes: 'In their own special way, they have a voice in their government: they hold opinions and make them known, in no uncertain manner, as to what should or should not be done' (56). Similarly, Ward, "Some Geographical and Medical," 498, reports having witnessed that: 'Before any decision involving the whole area is taken the Gup calls a meeting of representatives from each village'. This evidence of the democratic spirit would corroborate the success of the political reforms brought about by the third King during his reign (1952–1972).
 27. The Bhutan State Congress (BSC) was a localized party in the south of Bhutan which claimed (inaccurately) in its notification that 'Bhutan is a religious country. The Bhutanese live in the North and the Nepalese in the south. It has no written law and the Governors (Dzongpons, Trums, etc) and other petty officials do whatever they like with the people' (National Archives of India file NAI 21(7)-NEF/55).
 28. I note that compilations of 'Some Early travellers in Bhutan' (for example, Ward, "Exploration") that cover the period from 1627 to 1967, include no post Indian independence (1947-) travellers. Generally speaking, there is a methodological nationalism at work when writing about Bhutan over the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, whereby British and Indian commentators have sought to emphasise the paternalism and civilising influence on Bhutan through British or Indian interactions respectively.
 29. Wangchuck, *Treasures*, 15–16.
 30. See Eden, *Political Missions to Bootan*.
 31. Das, *Assam-Bhutan Trade Relations*.
 32. The British missions usually wanted to enter and travel through Bhutan from different Duars to get as much intelligence as possible; they were often insistent that they do so. Pemberton was delayed and had detours because he wanted to enter via the Banksa Duar and not the Buxa Duar route used by Bogle and others. Further, the officials felt that they deserved ultimate deference, absolute compliance, and fawning devotion of every leader and ruler, even when the countries were independent of British rule. They meticulously noted whether their superiority was rightly recognised, reporting whether 'they were received everywhere with marked distinction', 'waited upon by Subahs of every district through which they passed', 'properly treated', and so on.
 33. White, *Sikhim & Bhutan*, 241.
 34. See Field, "A Note."
 35. In White, *Sikhim & Bhutan*, 248, 251.
 36. In *Ibid.*, 10–11.
 37. On the politics of such exceptions more generally, see Fiskesjö, *The Thanksgiving Turkey Pardon*.
 38. In White, *Sikhim & Bhutan*, 11.
 39. *Ibid.*, 12.
 40. White, *Sikhim & Bhutan*, 7–10.

41. In the case of Bhutan, the historic racialisation and emergent Bhutanese ethnonationalism, combined with real and imagined perceptions of Indian domination, eventually became the 'Southern Problem'.
42. Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, xi.
43. Ibid., viii.
44. Ibid., ix.
45. Ibid., 197.
46. On aspects of this in the context of the Northeastern and Northwestern Himalayas, see Gardner, "The ready materials"; Gogoi, *Making of India's Northeast*; Gohain, "Selective Access".
47. Collister, "Bhutan and the British," 198–9.
48. National Archives of India NAI 1950 file 9(8)-NEF/50: 1
49. PO Dayal had been in his post since 1948 and had negotiated the Indo-Bhutanese Friendship Treaty, which was signed in 1949. This Treaty was built upon previous Bhutan treaties in 1910, 1865, and 1774; it was last updated in 2007 to finally remove a clause present since 1910 that required Bhutan to seek India's guidance in the conduct of its external relations.
50. National Archives of India NAI Northern Division 1953 file N/53/7162/104.
51. See Voltaire, *Romances, Novels, and Tales*, 207. Voltaire was likely referring to some geographical imagined composite of Tibet/Bhutan. He used the reference to Boutan in multiple contexts; here's an example (in Gorton, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, 309): "There is not a single prince in Europe who does not assume the title of sovereign of a country possessed by his neighbor. This political madness is unknown in the rest of the world. *The king of Boutan never called himself emperor of China ...*".
52. I have not seen the 1967 edition and it is likely that the title 'Myanmar' was introduced in a later edition to replace Burma. It would be interesting to ascertain whether Sikkim (which was an independent kingdom not incorporated into India until 1975) featured as a neighbour in the original edition.
53. Mehta, *Our Neighbours*, 26.
54. Ibid., 27.
55. Though, of course, Aris in "Bhutan: internal development" is not writing for children in his entry on Bhutan's relations with outside powers up to 1952 in the Cambridge Encyclopaedia.
56. Mehta, *Our Neighbours*, 29–30. The people of other neighbouring countries – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh – are not generalised at all in terms of their personality attributes. This kind of benevolent summary of 'the people' is most expansive and most positive in the case of Bhutan, and for Sherpas and Gurkhas in Nepal, and the women of Myanmar.
57. The research on religion and history of this period has generally focused on Jesuit travels to Tibet. Occasionally there are references to Bhutan. For instance, Guttelman, *Letters* refers to Cabral's travels to Bhutan-Tibet-Nepal.
58. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers*.
59. Aris, *Sources*.
60. Baillie, "Father Estevao Cacella's."
61. He provides no text translation but an account of their journey in one of the chapters, see Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers*, 120–63.
62. Aris, *Sources*, 9.
63. Ibid., 186.
64. Ibid., 8. In relation to Bhutan and Britain, his view of events could be Britain-centric; for instance, Aris ("Bhutan: Internal Development") presented an overly neutral view

- of British relations with Bhutan in the nineteenth century, when as a historian he must have known better. Also, therein, he misreports the year Britain concluded a treaty with Bhutan as 1911.
65. Having read Aris, *Sources* and Baillie, "Father Estevao Cacella's Report", I refer to both as necessary. In the rest of *The Relacao* document, the Baillie translation conveys the same sense as in Aris, with differing emphasis. Where Aris translation says, 'The peoples of this Kingdom are white even though since the people are not clean they do not appear to be white' (181), Baillie says, 'The people here are white although it does not show because of their poor standard of cleanliness' (32). Other differences are along the lines such as: 'damnable resolution' (Aris, 171) versus 'evil character' (Baillie, 15), or 'I were rid of him' (Aris, 171) versus 'I slipped away' (Baillie, 16). There are some other differences too: for instance, some authors (Das, *The Dragon Country* and Chakravarti, *A Cultural History*) report the gift of firearms and a telescope as assistance that the Jesuits offered to the Shabdrung in a war against Tibet but which he refused. Baillie omits any mention. Aris is not sure whether these were the visitors that made this gift. Wessels mentions the Shabdrung writing to Tibet.
 66. Baillie, "Father Estevao Cacella's Report," 2.
 67. *Ibid.*, 3.
 68. In cases where it is accurate, such as when describing Shabdrung's physical appearance, I can tell by comparison with Bhutanese iconography. In general, sources from within the Bhutanese religious and historical context will likely have a greater continuity.
 69. What we see and report is always already influenced by our background perceptions about things. See Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*.
 70. The population of entire Bhutan, in which Paro is not even the most populous city, in 2019, is under 750,000 people.
 71. Aris, *Sources*, 175; Baillie, "Father Estevao Cacella's Report," 22.
 72. Baillie, "Father Estevao Cacella's Report," 3.
 73. *Ibid.*, 29.
 74. Stanley, "The Nineteenth-Century Mapping" that details the technologies of using the artefacts for surveying, and Stewart, "The Pundits" that refers to the contributions of the native explorers in general. However, none of these, or any other work that I am aware of, examines this in the specific context of Bhutan.
 75. Rawat, *Indian Explorers*.
 76. I agree with Fisher ("Review," 910) that Waller, *The Pundits* 'does not ... analyse the British racial presuppositions that defined the position of these Indian agents in the Survey', neither does he question the 'British depersonalization of them'. Moreover, 'While the British Raj had many economic, political, and military agendas for these northern borderlands, Waller mentions them only in passing'.
 77. Waller, *The Pundits*, 1. The Indian explorer spies were generically called 'Pundits', though it was a role for Hindus and Muslims both, and also of people from other areas such as Sikkim.
 78. Rawat, *Indian Explorers*, xvi–xviii details some of these: while Nain Singh ('Chief Pundit') and his cousin Kishen Singh ('AK') were given land, gold watches, medals, and titles (C.I.E or 'Companion of the Indian Empire' and Rai Bahadur), Chhumbel, the Ladakhi cook and porter who went the distance with explorers, got hardly any recognition.

79. Sometimes the native explorers' accounts were not even trusted. One explorer, Kinthup, who was illiterate, was only belatedly recognized in relation to a riparian issue when he was proven right by others.
80. Waller, *The Pundits*, 15.
81. Ibid., 18.
82. Ibid., 21.
83. Major Mason ("Kishen Singh," 429–30) mentions that the father and uncle of Kishen Singh ('A.K') had previously gone disguised as fakirs to Daba Dzong, northwest of Lake Mansarowar and given themselves as security for the release of two British explorers (Moorcroft and Heaney) in 1812. Mani Singh, Kishen's cousin, and Nain Singh, a relative, were engaged as interpreters by Stratcheys on their travels in Tibet.
84. Mason, "Kishen Singh," 439.
85. Referring to the different values obtained by Kishen Singh using traverse method and Sir F. De Fillippi using wireless telegraphy [the former being correct], Mason ("Kishen Singh," 437) says: 'Had still more reliance been placed upon the evidence collected by him [Kishen Singh], the map of the headwaters of the Yurungkash would not have remained incorrect for nearly fifty years'. In discussing how only the Europeans could qualify in the 'race for Lhasa', Anand (*Geopolitical Exotica*, 138) details how true exploration was always claimed as a position of 'civilised man', and native surveyors in Tibet were seen as liable to be distracted, or lacking inherent observation skills in comparison to Englishmen, or limited by their disguise and restricted to lower orders of society.
86. Kishen Singh ('A.K') hired himself as a yak driver at one point. Mason ("Kishen Singh," 439) explains that: 'A yak is a slow mover, often wanders from the path, and sometimes grazes as he goes'. This made for intense observation and better surveying.
87. In Waller, *The Pundits*, 28.
88. Rawat, *Indian Explorers*, xvi.
89. Walker, "Four Years' Journeyings," 79.
90. Native explorers arrive back to base in India: 'in a condition bordering on destitution, their funds exhausted, their clothes in rags, and their bodies emaciated with the hardships and deprivations they had undergone' (ibid., 78). Sir Richard Temple also notes the contrast with British geographers:

"Had he [A.K] been an Englishman he would have looked forward to returning to his native land where the applause of the public, the thanks of Parliament, the gracious approval even of the Sovereign would have awaited him. But what had the poor man to look forward to?" (ibid., 90–91).
91. Walker, "Four Years' Journeyings," 81.
92. White went to Bhutan in 1905 (along with others including Major Rennick of Intelligence Department). He says, 'This was the *first occasion for forty years that an Englishman had visited Bhutan*, and was a *sharp contrast* to the visit paid by Eden in 1864' (*Sikhim & Bhutan*, 105, italics added).
93. See Rawat, *Indian Explorers*, 203.
94. Waller, *The Pundits*.
95. Ibid., 232.
96. Bell, *Tibet Past and Present*, 5.
97. Ryder, "Exploration and Survey," 371. In 1904, Major Ryder, along with Mr Hayden of the Geological Survey, attempted to cross into Bhutan:

"Towards the end of March Mr. Hayden ... and I, with an escort of twenty rifles, made a short excursion across the plain to explore Lingshi La, a pass crossing the

snowy range into Bhutan. Before, however, reaching this point, we were met by a small Tibetan force and requested to return.”

98. See Rawat, “Indian Explorers,” 189–200.
99. For instance, Bhutanese history is seen as the inevitable outcome of external impulses (British India, India, China) that brought about a change from a country to a state (a legal entity with territory, population, government, and sovereignty) to a nation (a defined and imagined community of people) to a coherent nation-state of the multi-ethnic variety. In a chronological sense, these changes did happen, but they were not inevitable, and they were only partly induced by the catalysis effect of big powers.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to the editors, reviewers, and to Daphna Vardi Howe for her help and liaison. I would like to acknowledge the research support I have received at different times for my Bhutan-related work from the University of Westminster, British Academy for South Asian Studies (BASAS), The British Academy, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). I also wish to put on record my appreciation for the librarians and archivists at the University of California Berkeley, Australia National University (ANU), and the National Archives of India (NAI). Earlier work relating to some aspects of this article was presented at the International Society for Bhutan Studies (ISBS) Conference held at Magdalen College, University of Oxford.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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