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Inbetweenness in Geopolitics**

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‘Where is Bhutan?’: The Production of Bhutan’s *Asymmetrical Inbetweenness* in Geopolitics

Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate the exhaustive ‘inbetweenness’ through which Bhutan is understood and located on a map (‘inbetween India and China’), arguing that this naturalizes a contemporary geopolitics with little depth about how this inbetweenness shifted historically over the previous centuries, thereby constructing a timeless, obscure, remote Bhutan which is ‘naturally’ oriented southwards. I provide an account of how Bhutan’s *asymmetrical inbetweenness* construction is nested in the larger story of the formation and consolidation of imperial British India and its dissolution, and the emergence of post-colonial India as a successor state. I identify and analyze the key economic dynamics of three specific phases (late 18th to mid 19th centuries, mid 19th to early 20th centuries, early 20th century onwards) marked by commercial, production, and security interests, through which this asymmetrical inbetweenness was consolidated. Bringing together sources from different disciplines combined with archival work, this account also challenges some dominant historical scholarship on Bhutan in each phase. I conclude by emphasizing that critical work at the intersection of geographical/political/historical contingencies is important to the subalternizing of geopolitics, which recognizes the myriad ways in which dominant powers have shaped both the geopolitical environment as well as knowledge-making that has constrained small states.

Keywords: Bhutan, British India, India, Imperialism, Postcolonial, Security, Geopolitics

‘Where is Bhutan?’: The Production of Bhutan’s *Asymmetrical Inbetweenness* in Geopolitics

We have to detach what was not many years ago a hostile state from its neighbours of the same race and religion as itself and to draw it to ourselves.

(Bell, Political Officer in Sikkim, 1st February 1912, HCB 1912 microfilm NAI 60)

Introduction

The founding of modern Bhutan is traced to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who came down south from Tibet in 1616. Bhutan is a country embedded in the histories of early Himalayan Buddhism (Ardussi 1977; Aris 1979; Phuntsho 2013); its ruling Wangchuck dynasty (founded in 1907), challenged the contrast between monarchy and modernity by steering the country through a unique transition to democracy in 2007 (Kaul 2008). The country had strongly asserted its distinct sense of national identity in the 1980s in order to prioritise sovereignty-preservation over internal turmoil.¹ Bhutan defies any number of typologies – being a functioning Asian welfare state, a rare carbon-negative country that prioritizes gross national happiness (GNH) over gross domestic product (GDP), and a consolidating democracy that has privileged the empirical indigeneity of political expression.

However, the central way in which outsiders have long perceived and defined Bhutan and its identity has been through its being “inbetween India and China”. So much so that is often impossible to find references to Bhutan that do not approach it through this ‘inbetweenness’. This framing, though of course not geographically inaccurate, is, nonetheless, is a powerful imaginary that came into being in particular ways and through specific constellations of motives. Through a critical reading of historical narratives and archival material, this paper uncovers the coming-into-being, the production and naturalization, of this inbetweenness perception of Bhutan through the external discourse on the country up to the early postcolonial years. Because it is not a paper about the self-definition of Bhutan, it draws upon work by non-Bhutanese that was influential in framing the inbetweenness discourse;

and this has been overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, in English language (whether in the published texts or archives) and produced by the British, and later Indian, scholars and officials.²

Where a country is located geopolitically is as much a function of its history and politics, as it is of geography (Lewis and Wigan 1997: 197-198, 203). I argue that modern Bhutan is widely perceived as a Himalayan kingdom located inbetween China and India; moreover, that this inbetweenness is not equidistant but oriented southward toward India, especially in matters of economy.³ This *asymmetrical inbetweenness*, taken for granted by many, if not most, contemporary writers, is not an inevitable product of geography but a labor of geopolitics in the region. Bhutan's growing economic and political dependence on India, and its distancing from Tibet/China, was the result of conscious British imperial fashioning the Himalayan region, even *before* the two developments in the 1950s that (re)confirmed Bhutan's southward orientation – Chinese annexation of Tibet and the Sino-Indian border dispute.

Thus, this paper is a critical analysis of the production of Bhutan's asymmetrical inbetweenness with a southward orientation; an asymmetrical inbetweenness which later comes to be naturalized and seen as inevitable. I focus on the unfolding of an economic imperative – through exploration, production, cultivation, annexation, monetization, securitization – that first created, and later naturalized, the asymmetrical inbetweenness of Bhutan, which persists into the present.

Asymmetrical Inbetweenness as a Given

In the spring of 1947, an Asian Relations Conference was held in New Delhi with the objective of promoting understanding and co-operation among the various vastly different nations of a broadly defined Asia. Bhutan's Jigme P. Dorji gave the following brief salutations to the gathered members (Asian Relations Organisation Report 1948: 35-36): “As a representative of Bhutan, a small country

perched right up on the Himalayas, I offer you fraternal greetings, cordial and pure like the air of our mountains...In the name of Bhutan, I salute you, people of Asia". The definition of Bhutan that is offered by its representative at this important turning point, a post-colonial moment in many countries of the region, is crucial. He represents Bhutan as *a small country perched right up on the Himalayas*. This self-definition is in marked contrast to the way Bhutan is defined by most outsiders who see it solely in terms of an exhaustive *inbetweenness*. To emphasize the salience of this dominant geographical imagination and its potential effects, note how Switzerland, by contrast, is never routinely introduced only as a small inbetween country. By ignoring Bhutan's self-definition and prioritizing the defining of Bhutan in terms of its location in-between two bigger neighbors -- India and Tibet/China -- Bhutan's geography becomes freeze-framed in strategic terms (such as 'buffer state' or 'sphere of influence') in a specific manner in relation to how the external world saw Bhutan.

Consider these examples of writings on Bhutan that begin by describing it in terms of its neighbors:

"Wedged between Tibet with a Communist government, in the North and West, and India with a parliamentary democracy in the South and East, the tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan" (Pandit 1964: 7).

"Bhutan...is a small country...sandwiched in between N.E. India and Tibet" (Inlow 1978: 295).

"The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan occupies a key position between the democratic Republic of India and Communist China" (Saran 1986: 201).

"Bhutan, the world's last shangrila is located in South Asia. It is a landlocked country sandwiched between the two giant countries of Asia, namely India and China" (Kharat 1999: 1).

"Bhutan lies sandwiched between its two mighty neighbours, India and China" (Mazumdar 2005: 566).

These commentators (and there are numerous others) are not merely describing Bhutan as being in-between; they are simultaneously *locating* it in those terms. Bhutan is -- and one can take a pick from:

wedged, landlocked, nestled, located, stuck, situated between, a part of buffer state belt between -- India and China. This starting premise is often the first step of the story that reduces Bhutan to being only a small country between two big ones. This is also accompanied by lines such as: “The historical origin of Bhutan is enveloped in obscurity” (Sinha and Dandekar 1998: 59); “Emerging from a static past, after centuries of isolation, into the world of today is the Kingdom of Bhutan, a land of virile people whose origins are lost in obscurity” (Coelho 1970: 55); “The people of Bhutan, as one sees and talks with them, do not appear to have changed all that much since George Bogle wrote about them in 1774” (Inlow 1978: 296).⁴

The next step is the naturalization of Bhutan’s southward orientation, to present Indo-Bhutan relations as inevitable because of historical, strategic, cultural and economic reasons. Bhutan-Tibet linkages, which are a crucial part of the foundational myths of Bhutan, are overlooked in favor of Indo-Bhutan relations. The contemporary story of close India-Bhutan relations is given a historical depth that is based on selective memory and conscious forgetting. While it is acceptable to recognize the complicated nature of Bhutan’s historic, religious, political, cultural and economic ties with its Tibetan neighbor in the North,⁵ it is problematic to reject them outright.⁶

Further, the precise contours of Bhutan’s inbetweenness change over the centuries from eighteenth to mid-twentieth as Bhutan is produced as ‘inbetween’ for the imperial economic purposes: as I explain below, it went from being seen as north of Cooch Behar (for Rennell), to south of Tibet (for Bogle), to inbetween Assam and Nepal trade routes to Tibet from Bengal (Hastings onwards), to inbetween British India and an impenetrable Tibet (in nineteenth century, courtesy the native explorers/spies), to inbetween India and the great game territory of Tibet and beyond (Younghusband onwards, from the start of the twentieth century), to inbetween India and Tibet (until the mid-twentieth century), to inbetween India and China (1950 onwards), to being ‘landlocked’ in a belt inbetween a democratic India and a communist China (1960 onwards). In each instance, Bhutan is

taken as a passive placeholder of an inbetweenness that serves the hegemonic interests at that time by facilitating the self-definition of the imperial maneuvers.

But how did geopolitics fashion Bhutan into a position of asymmetrical inbetweenness over time? What were the strategies through which British India sought to transform Bhutan from a pre-modern polity to orient it southward? These included territorial appropriation, treaty making, paternalism in the guise of friendship, assistance, and economic dependence. In common with a standard imperial script, it is possible to trace a definite will to dominate and control, and to legitimize this as a natural state of being.

Economic imperative and Asymmetrical Inbetweenness

The British involvement in India was driven by an economic imperative, and much territorial and political aggrandizement during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, has to be understood as resulting significantly from this; what this economic imperative meant to the agents of empire was coherent, even if not a changeless constant. When Company's rule became transformed into British Raj and then into the postcolonial Indian successor state, it was an administrative machinery driven as much by security, prestige and paternalism of the empire, as by the profit motive. The specific nature of the imperial economic imperative shifted from one where commercial interests were paramount in determining Company's attitude toward Bhutan (late eighteenth century), to ascendance of production interests where fertile territories were brought under control for plantation economy (in late nineteenth century), to one where overwhelming economic dominance was a tool to keep Bhutan firmly aligned with India (in the twentieth century, and accelerated with the closure of Bhutan's trade with Tibet after Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950s and Sino-Indian border conflict in early 1960s). It is this actuation of the dynamic imperial economic imperative that resulted

in the construction and naturalization of an asymmetrical inbetweenness in the identification of Bhutan's location.

Phase I: Commercial Interests -- Primacy of the economic imperative

The standard story of the first Anglo-Bhutanese interaction dates it to 1772 and presents the East India Company's actions as a response to rivalries between native rulers, and not as a result of the expansionist dimension of the Company. Whether one reads the British or the Indian scholars writing in English – and their narratives proved to be influential in the study of Bhutan – the origin of Anglo-Bhutanese relations is traced to the British becoming aware of Bhutan in 1772.⁷ In the year 1772, they were requested for help against Bhutan by Cooch-Bihar, which lay to the north of Bengal where the British East India Company had acquired the Diwani (right to collect taxes since 1765). In 1773, the British fought the Bhutanese upon this plea from Cooch-Bihar. In 1774-75, Hastings sent a jolly Bogle without a map on a mission to Bhutan and from there to Tibet; a treaty was signed with Bhutan in 1774, but the mission was purely exploratory and economically a failure. Bogle was liked and welcomed by the Bhutanese rulers and this opened the way to subsequent positive Bhutan-British encounters in which the Bhutanese were left unmolested until they started carrying out border raids and criminal activities on the British border in the nineteenth century. I argue that this is problematic in many ways.

In this, there is little recognition of the economic imperative on the part of the British and how their actions came to structure Bhutan's asymmetrical inbetweenness. In fact, Younghusband (2005 [1910]: 4-5) explicitly absolves the British of any imperial economic interest, emphasizing that:

the far-distant primary cause of all our attempts at intercourse with the Tibetans was an act of aggression, not on our part...but of the Bhutanese...who nearly a century and a half ago committed the first act – an act of aggression – which brought us into a relationship with the Tibetans...Warren

Hastings resisted the aggression of the Bhutanese...but when the Tashi Lama of Tibet interceded on their behalf, he at once not only acceded, but went further, and made a deliberate effort to come into permanent relationship with both the Bhutanese and Tibetans.

In such accounts, British interest in Tibet is a consequence, not cause, of Bhutan-Tibet-British India relations and adventures. Bringing together a diverse range of rare scholarly sources that are generally not read together in the same frame or discipline, here I piece together the argument that the origins of Anglo-Bhutanese interaction were part of a process that began in the late eighteenth century when the East India Company became more than a trading company and acquired political foothold in Bengal.

The British actions were not merely a one-off reaction to a request from a friendly native state of Cooch-Bihar to help against arrogant Bhutanese. In fact, they resulted from proactive policies of augmenting and using native rivalries, political intrigues and superior military toward the bigger goal of commercial expansionism and profiteering throughout the region. The British in Bengal had a strong constellation of economic motives for trying to push up north after 1765. They had become a dominant power in the region and wanted to maximize the commercial advantage of their position; trade needs information and intelligence. They were aware of the economic viability of Cooch Bihar. They had prior knowledge of Bhutan (before 1772) both from Renell having an injurious encounter with Bhutanese mercenaries in 1766, and from his foray into Bhutan in 1767 (Field 1962: 341-342, also corroborated in Bishop 1989: 28).⁸ By late 1760s, the British presence and their repeated attempts to survey the frontiers and explore profit opportunities was coming up against areas that they wanted trading rights in, and passage rights through. The British wanted a non-Nepal route (such as via Bhutan) to try to reach Tibet and open commercial relations with that lucrative trade hub that connected to China and to Kashmir and Central Asia (Mosca 2013: 129-130). In addition, the Company was politically dominant in India but was financially in a poor state with a desperate desire to find markets and profit (Gilbert 1975: 89, and *passim*). The financial state was such that even the

white officers in Bengal conspired against Clive to resign en masse, in what was termed a ‘white mutiny of 1766’, when their supplementary payments were cut (Lenman 1968: 40). The Company had “fiddly finances” – a total deficit of over £ 5.2 million – in 1767, the year when parliament in London demanded to see the ledgers annually, it became insolvent in 1771, survived a “storm of 1771 to 1773” (Mann 2002: 254, 256-7, 268). Its Court of Directors *wrote to Bengal in 1768 about peaceful economic penetration* and again in 1771 instructed the Governor in Bengal to find possible ways of increasing the sales of its European commodities and other staples by appropriate measures *including by exploration of the interior parts of Bhutan*.⁹ In 1772, Hastings became the Governor of Bengal (and in 1773, the Governor General of India) and he was keen on ‘natural boundaries’, expanding commerce with Tibet, finding a way other than through Nepal to do so. Hastings also had adequate appreciation for the commercial trade and cultivation value of the Cooch Behar region.

After the turmoil with Tibet, in 1760s Bhutan was a strong force in Cooch Behar and had a resident there with some troops and a powerful say. By 1772, Bhutan had become involved in a dispute over succession in Cooch Behar (this is the dispute that is meant to have supposedly made the British aware of Bhutan when Cooch Behar appealed to the Company and they fought the Bhutanese). The Company stood to gain from intervening on behalf of Cooch Behar as their expenses were paid and they were promised half the state’s revenues. Bhutan’s aggression in Cooch-Bihar some years later (after 1760s) provided the British with a reason to send troops against them to secure an economically viable region (Field 1962: 344), to remove Bhutan’s zone of influence (i.e., Cooch Behar) between Company territory and Bhutan, and to explore the possibility eventually of open relations with Tibet by passing through Bhutan. By 1774, the Druk Desi (‘Deb Raja’) in Bhutan had changed and the terms of the 1774 Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty meant that the Company gained the possession of Cooch Behar and certain other areas that were under Bhutan, which now had to pay annual tributes to the Company and could not shelter any sanyasis or others who opposed the British.

Also, though the Bhutanese had *already* solicited peace (by March 20th, 1774) *before* the British received a letter from the Panchen Lama (on March 29, 1774) interceding on Bhutan's behalf, this letter nonetheless became an excuse to try to open communication with Tibet which was already desired for trade purposes (Field 1962: 344, Deb 1973: 82). To follow this up, Bogle was sent on a Mission to Bhutan and Tibet (he reached Shigatse but was not allowed to proceed to Lhasa or to China, though the mission was far from unsuccessful). Bogle went through Buxa Duar *with* map/s of Tibet.¹⁰ He was received without animosity, but certainly not without suspicion, by the Bhutanese. His mission was a mixed economic success. In the following years, Hastings sent repeated missions to Bhutan (the riches of Tibet were the bigger goal), which tried to get in through different routes in the Duar region and brought back intelligence about the great commercial value of these fertile plains. As Gandolfo's study of European cartography of the Himalayas suggests, by 1774, the Himalayan states had a good idea about the aims of the British in view of their repeated surveying as "a prelude to intrusion and conquest" (Gandolfo 2004: 118-119). Bogle, as he went into Bhutan along the route, went planting potatoes along halting-places "at the desire of Warren Hastings" (White 1996: 242 [1909]). The crop failed, but it makes the intention clear. He insisted upon continuing to Tibet in spite of repeated attempts by the Druk Desi ('Deb Raja') of Bhutan to dissuade him (this insistence upon routes and territorial incursion is a behavior common to most British Missions to Bhutan). Bogle proceeded and met the Tashi Lama, whom he claimed to befriend. On his way back from Tibet, he met a much colder reception in Bhutan. His report on the visit – apart from other things such as an extensive catalogue of Tibet's economic resources, assessment of demand creation, and the economic value of relations with Tibet (for more detail, see Diskalkar 1933) – made it clear that the trade concessions in certain commodities that he could not obtain in Bhutan were impeded by the Bhutanese who feared their loss of profit and monopoly advantage in dealing with Tibet from their territory. His observations on the tax system in Bhutan would also have impressed upon him the in-kind nature of the taxes in the interior and the lower relative worth of the barter and tax goods when taking into account the transportation cost to trade marts such as those in Tibet or down in the plains.

His practical suggestions included the cultivation of tea on British Indian territory which the Company (instead of China) could supply to Bhutan and Tibet, and holding off from an expedition on Bhutan, instead establishing commercial relations with Assam and conquering it.

Thus, it ought to be clear that the British wanted to push upwards to the north *before* the dispute between Bhutan and Cooch Behar, and the Bhutanese had *already* solicited peace before the British received the letter from Panchen Lama. Between Bogle in 1774-75 and Turner in 1783, Hastings appointed three more missions to Bhutan – Hamilton in 1775-76, Hamilton again in 1777, and then Bogle again in 1779 (this last was unable to be carried out; initially postponed as Teshu [Tashi] Lama had undertaken a journey to Peking, then Bogle died in Calcutta on April 3, 1781) – in pursuit of commercial advantage by trying to bargain a conciliatory stance on Bhutanese territorial claims for a continuation and extension of British commercial privileges. At every step, these intrusions were assessed and resisted; for example, Hamilton was not allowed to a new route, which he had demanded. It was only with the appointment of Cornwallis that the British policy in the Himalayas took a back seat for a while. But, in the nineteenth century, the economic imperative continued to be channeled through the cultivation promise of the fertile lowland areas of Bhutan.

It took some time for these motives to be built upon, and there was no direct continuity between Bogle's suggestions and the British takeover of Assam in 1826, or the annexation of the fertile Duar regions of Bhutan in 1865, but the gradual progressive comprehension of geography, economic advantage, and power relations began to take form in a way that *located* Bhutan as being inbetween the Company and the satisfaction of its desires for commercial expansion in Tibet and through that in China. The needed path to Tibet, China, and elsewhere, lay through the territory of Bhutan. In this context, therefore, Bhutan was not automatically inbetween anywhere in the patterns of normal trans-Himalayan trade. The British constructed it as being so through their actions, motivations, and their perceptions.

Phase II: Production Interests -- Marrying economic imperative with territorial occupation

The standard story of Bhutan in the nineteenth century consists of the various native and European missions¹¹ -- especially Bose and Ray in 1815 (Bray 2009), Pemberton in 1837-38, Eden in 1863-64 – which were necessitated due to Bhutanese misbehavior (cross border raids, pillaging, and other misdemeanors). By far, the object of most attention is the mission led by Ashley Eden, since Eden was reportedly mistreated in Bhutan and this moral outrage precipitated the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65, at conclusion of which, the Treaty of Sinchula (also known as the ‘Ten Article Treaty of Rawa Pani’; it was updated in 1910 to become the Treaty of Punakha) was signed and the Bhutanese Duars (literally ‘doors’) were annexed in 1865. Contrary to the standard story that presents the Anglo-Bhutan war and the annexation of Duars as a punishment meted out for Bhutanese misbehavior, I argue that the British annexation of Duars did not proceed from the Eden Mission, rather, the Eden Mission proceeded from the British desire to annex the Duars, a policy which was about for years before the 1860s. Like the case of 1772 Bhutan and Cooch Behar episode, Eden’s maltreatment¹² merely became an excuse for what had been long in the making.¹³

As the Company gave way to British rule in India, the transition was marked more by continuity than change. Since the British discovery of tea cultivation possibility in the region in 1823, the commercial interests became predominantly cultivation ones; by 1826, Assam had been annexed. Over the years, fertile land was annexed on one pretext or another. In 1838, Pemberton had already observed that “The Duars were the most valuable of the Bhutan territory” (Das 2005: 27). In the immediate aftermath of the Pemberton Mission in 1837-38, Jenkins actively advocated the annexation of the Duars. The Assam Duars, which were suitable for tea cultivation (recall Bogle’s suggestion about cultivating tea), were annexed first by 1841. Then, in the 1850s, there was repeated suggestion that

the Bengal Duars also be annexed even though the frontier troubles were not exclusively due to the Bhutanese.

The British did not wish to recognize or feel comfortable with Bhutan's trade links in the other directions (viz., Tibet, Nepal, Assam, Bengal) that seemed to exhibit baffling patterns of overlapping jurisdictions. They continued surveying and trying to establish stable boundaries based on their own understanding of clearly defined property rights. In this, they demanded paper proof of ownership of land – deeds, contracts, and other modern legalistic instruments of ownership or possession. A telling reply to such a request from the Collector of Rungpore about Bhutanese authority over some villages was made by the Deb Raja (Druk Desi) in later part of the nineteenth century (translated in Misra 2005: 243, letter dated 14 Maung 1193, from Goalpara Papers in Guwahati, 1866-1870): “It is not customary for us Bhutias to be regulated by records, but by the custom of possession...[T]he English and the Bhutias are very different in their modes of transacting”.

The British policy was also to monetize relations to their advantage wherever possible. They created different standards of value than the ones they inherited from traditionally transacting neighbors such as Assam and Bhutan. As Gupta (1974: 105) explains, unlike the Assam Kings whose tributes from Bhutan they inherited, the British would convert Bhutan's tribute from Deva rupees into Narayani rupees and the latter being of higher value, the tribute even though the same in total as before, was automatically in arrears. Jenkins had been in favor of annexing the Bengal Duars and giving the Bhutanese a share of the revenue. This way of conducting the relations was preferable to the British because it meant that revenue could be directed towards factions in the country with the intent of centralizing and consolidating control; revenue could be withheld if there was a problem or be used as a means of furthering strategic imperial aims.

By mid-nineteenth century, Bhutan was inbetween the growing pincers of certainty-creation on two fronts: one, the geographical knowledge explorations that were targeting the region up north, especially Tibet, and two, the cultivation potential of the areas of its south. While Tibet remained mostly out of bounds of the British Empire, the asymmetry of Bhutan's inbetweenness was consolidated. Bhutan came to be economically dependent on British India through a mix of war, treaty, annexation of most fertile lands, monetization, and replacement of revenue with subsidy. Bhutan's commercial and trade importance became secondary to the wider territorial and economic interests of British India. Selective territorial annexation became feasible and desirable as the main interest of the British in the region shifted from trading regionally to producing cash crops like tea and timber that could then be traded globally. British imperial economic imperative of mid-nineteenth century -- desire for fertile land for tea plantation under European settlers with the labor of migrants from the plains of Eastern India and Nepal -- played a very important role in orienting Bhutan's economy to the south. Acquisition of fertile land for tea cultivation by British India (and this land become even more vital to post-imperial India as the partition of the country into India and Pakistan meant that this land was part of the narrow corridor that linked mainland India to its northeastern territories -- the so-called 'Chicken's neck') became a loss of most fertile lands by Bhutan in return for a cash subsidy. This cash subsidy was fixed at Rs. 25000 from mid-1860s to 1910, and as I will explain, was not only unreflective of the growing value of the lost land due to its increasing productivity, but also an instrument of dominance through manipulation.

I paraphrase Beadon (HCB 1860-69, microfilm NAI 18), Eden's ally and Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in 1864, who spelt out the economic advantages of annexation by stressing on the fertility of the land, its potential and the ethnicity of its dwellers. Beadon was against temporary occupation of the Duars to punish the Bhutanese because the resources could not be fostered properly during a temporary occupation and it might draw the attention of the Bhutanese government to the resource value of the land. He recommended that as the Bengal Duars at that moment were worth 1.5 lakhs,

and all management including policing likely to be less than 1 lakh, they could offer the Bhutanese government 25000 (one-sixth of the then current value). Then, they could use the inhabitants of the Duars who are not Bhutanese but in the plains “Bengalees”, and in the slopes of the outer hills “Mechis, Gurrows, Cacharees, Purbutteahs, and other tribes” who are all industrious cultivators of the soil to break the wastes and clear the jungle; they would be helped by the labor of immigrants from the adjoining British districts and Cooch Behar, the enterprise of European timber merchants and tea and cotton planters, and so the British could reclaim the land as they did in the terai regions of Darjeeling district. Having annexed Darjeeling in 1850, except for the jungles reserved for growth of valuable timber, the revenue from the areas cleared, had more than doubled in 14 years. In order to accomplish the annexation, they would use Native Infantry troops in the frontline. If the Bhutanese should fail to negotiate or agree to terms after the British annex the Bengal duars, or do anything else to remotely annoy the British, they could always be dealt with by sending “force into the country... to impose conditions of peace at the seat of the Government”.

Beadon gives an instructive lesson in imperial economic logic. The frontier land when cultivable for profit, was annexed; when waste-land, was sold off. The cultivators of the land were the native plains and hill people who were moved around for profit-maximization, the enterprise was that of European timber merchants, the armies that fought to annex these lands were native infantry soldiers, and the profits were due to the British. The amount of revenue to the Bhutanese was fixed at an annual sum, not at a proportion, because as Beadon says, the returns were bound to multiply manifold over the years. Moreover, having deprived the Bhutanese of their most valuable and significant territories, the British now could further manipulate their allegiance by withholding the money if they had any cause for complaint.

The gradual and intensive operation of the economic imperative in imperial purposes ensured that Bhutan became dependent on the revenue from the subsidy and also became oriented southwards.

The subsidy value was increased (this was a crucial weapon in the hands of the British) in 1910 in return for a further compromise on the part of Bhutan – their external relations would be directed by the British. Bhutan's relations northwards had never been entirely smooth, and the economic relations with the north had traditionally been significant (Luo and Jian 2017), but the imperial purposes functioned effectively to direct its economy southwards. The northern trade with Tibet was almost completely cut off by mid-twentieth century due to India-China hostility. Bhutan was thus produced as 'land-locked' between India and China by this time. There was nothing necessarily blockaded about Bhutan's relations in any direction – north, south, east or west. It was its own center in several ways when Rennell went surveying in the 1760s. But as the economic potential of the country was mapped and realized, the possibilities for its various territories assessed, they were gradually bought under British control with a clear policy of imperial economic profit. With the official circumscribing of Bhutan's foreign relations, coupled with the dependence on revenue from the south, its asymmetrical inbetweenness was stressed. The myth arose that Bhutan had somehow always been isolated, impenetrable, and hostile, and that its natural relations were down south with India because geography did not permit it any other interaction. In fact, the Himalayas themselves, once a thriving center of various kinds of commercial and other liaisons and activities, became transformed into the symbolic barriers between the big nations. Bhutan became a country seen as being trapped between a democratic India and a communist China; when it was a country that had its own sense of identity that was apparent before India and China had unified themselves through nationalist political struggles.

Phase III: Security Interests -- Economics as Politics through other means

The British imperial period until the twentieth century was guided by the economic imperative that operated on calculations of profit and extraction. So, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British assessed Bhutan in terms of its natural and mineral resources, cultivation potential, trade

produce of other kinds, and trade route access. The imperial economic imperative was one of making more profit by restructuring relations between people and things, by reorienting trade patterns if possible, and by clearly categorizing and monetizing prior relations between governance units to their own advantage. Bhutan's most resource rich and cultivable areas (the Duars) were annexed over the course of the nineteenth century, the populations of these regions were catalogued as being not really Bhutanese, and other settlers were brought in to increase profit. The point of economic aid or infrastructural development in Bhutan did not arise for the imperial power, even in theory, until the start of the twentieth century.

Following the forceful entry into Tibet, with Bhutanese support, of the Younghusband expedition in 1903-04, Bhutan was recast on the map as a strategic area. It bordered on profitable British controlled fertile territory, and therefore, it was necessary to keep it pacified and under British influence. This was achieved by mentoring and recognizing, through awards and honors, the leadership within Bhutan; minimizing the rival influence of religion (Lamaism with its Tibetan links worried the British) in order to centralize political control in the secular sphere; and by taking control of its external relations through the 1910 treaty, generally ensuring that Bhutan remained a stable frontier territory. However, in addition, it was also important for the British to provide the Bhutanese with a rationalization for why it was important to function within the imperial sphere of influence in the south rather than in the north. This was sought to be achieved in two ways: first, through the durbar invitations and other persuasive discourse of the Political Officers, it was impressed upon Bhutan that the superiority of the British did not come from their use of force but from their status as an important world power that people bowed down to as a result of their accomplishments in diverse fields of development,¹⁴ and second, by attempting to pass on some of this development to Bhutan as an advantage that could be gained by engaging favorably with the British. This is where economic aid and infrastructure development comes in.

The standard story is that Bhutan chose to stay in a self-imposed isolation until 1960s, and it was really the Chinese invasion of Tibet that prompted it to reach out for development aid. This is evident in oft-repeated statements such as: “emerging out of its centuries old isolation in the late fifties with a socio-economic background relevant only to the 17th century if not earlier...” (Das 1986: 83). I argue that while the run up to the India-China confrontation in 1962 will certainly have affected Bhutan’s trajectory of foreign economic policy, it is not factually correct to say that Bhutanese leadership chose isolation for its own sake; before India’s independence, their appeals for development aid were often rejected, and after 1947, the price of such aid had to be carefully weighed against Bhutan’s sovereign status.

For instance, in 1911, the Bhutan Durbar, through Rai Ugyen Kazi Bahadur, applied for the services of a Sikkim Road Pioneer to survey the alignment of a road from Sinchula near Buxa Duar to Paro; it needed a sanction of 150 ₹¹⁵, but even this small amount was rejected (HCB 1911 microfilm NAI 38a). This was the case in spite of the PO pointing out that the British had given assurance to the Maharaja of Bhutan to assist in developing the resources of his country (something that was a part of 1910 treaty negotiations but not put in writing), and mentioning that the proposed road might be of benefit to British India as well as to Bhutan as it would lead from “British India into the heart of Bhutan”, and thus, be a good line of road to Tibet. The answer was a ‘No’ to the 150 rupees.

Bhutanese leadership might have perceived the significance of education, health, and modernization, but policy implementation required money. Bhutanese taxes were in-kind and inadequate for launching programs of socioeconomic development; Bhutanese trade could not finance modern reform. The amount of the treaty subsidy was grossly inadequate and the imperial government repeatedly refused to increase it. Contrary to its stated aims, and regardless of its moral claims, the imperial imperative is never to develop another state unless there is a strategic need to do so. In the British case, there was a clear understanding that the policy was to keep the frontier states pacified

but in a state of poor infrastructural development as a security measure so as to enable the tenuous equilibrium in those regions to endure. Basu (1996: 48) refers to the statement made by the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck to the National Assembly in 1971: “Had they given the assistance that we asked for, Bhutan might have progressed far more than we have progressed today...I am prepared to recount how hard we tried for British aid and how reluctant they were to grant that aid.”

With the end of British rule in India, post-colonial Indian leadership was aware of the legacy of the empire and had inherited some of its realpolitik attitudes (occasionally made worse by the euphoria of emergent nationalism and its self-righteousness). This considerably narrowed the real potential for dialogue and understanding in the beginning years. The patronizing treaty relationship was continued with Bhutan although with new gestures of increased subsidy and return of some territory. The greater subsidy, potential for developing trade connexions, and education and skills training, was utilized by Bhutan’s leaders alongside a modernization of political structures within the country to make decision making more consultative and participatory.

But economic aid and infrastructure development in Bhutan could not be conceived without its political consequences. It is worth noting that the strategic influence – both human and skills component – of assistance (language training, education of Bhutanese in Indian lingua franca Hindi as a medium of instruction in Indian schools, military training such as that provided by IMTRAT – Indian Military Training Team – which also set up a permanent base in Haa)¹⁶ *preceded* the infrastructural development assistance. Apart from linking the capital city Thimphu to the border in the south, the next road network in Bhutan went horizontally and was in line with preventing strategic connectivity to minimize Chinese influence or incursions from the north.

Much more active efforts to orient Bhutan’s economy towards India began after 1960, by which time Bhutan’s degrees of freedom had been severely curtailed by the Chinese control of Tibet and the

consequent stopping of trade links up north. India's understanding of, and also influence in, Bhutan increased in the period of time after 1955 onwards. Vohra (1980: 88) refers to the economic development of Bhutan being the main topic of conversation during the 1958 visit of Indian PM Nehru to Bhutan. He mentions that although India's interest "mainly lay in constructing access roads but apart from the annual subsidy of Rs five lakhs to which Bhutan was entitled under the 1949 Treaty, Bhutan never accepted any aid till 1958". A tabulation of India's development assistance (ibid.: 91) committed to Bhutan during 1961-1979 shows a year on year percentage (often in double digits) increase; the only exception is 1970-71 when it registered a 5 percent reduction – this was the year Bhutan became a member of the UN on 21 September 1971.

By 1960, it was clear to Indian bureaucrats that there was a need for closer ties with Bhutan and that this would (gradually) mean working with compatible incentives that furthered Bhutan's interests while drawing it within India's economic ambit. This was, at times, a decision with consequences for development patterns within Indian states when the materials such as minerals to a plant in India could be supplied both from Indian states and from Bhutan, the latter might need to be prioritized. The official discussions and opinions of the various ministries reflect these dilemmas.

To take an example from 1960, on the issue of developing rail links to supply dolomite and limestone from Bhutan to steel plants in India, the request from the Lessee of the Quarries in Bhutan refers to the increased need for dolomite in India and the scope for Bhutan to supply it if the railway siding could be extended (up to the Dolomite Hill in Samchi [Samtse] Bhutan from either Banarhat or Binnaguri station). The Bhutan Government would like this to happen, the Political Officer Pant thought "we should give this facility to the Bhutan Government rightaway" (NAI 18(14)EAD/60). A Deputy Secretary from the Ministry of Steel, Mines & Fuel (SMF) opposes: "there is not a strong case for moving the Ministry of Railways for allowing a freight concession to Bhutan as dolomite and limestone *are available within the country*, and even if a concession were given as suggested, the

limestone and dolomite from Bhutan would *still be very expensive*". The PO's sentiments (dated 23rd July 1960), as conveyed to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reflect different concerns (italics added):

...I felt that it was necessary that we help the processes that would link up the economy of Bhutan with the economy of India; an easy market for minerals now being mined in Bhutan shall have to be found in India and India alone...We must do everything in our power to orient the economy of Bhutan towards India and forge a strong nexus between the two countries and not to try to isolate it by setting up artificial barriers.

The draft reply of another official (Under Secretary, SMF) , in its rough version (on file, but cancelled out of the final letter) contains the following remarks (italics added): "...Bhutan, although a poor country, has been ~~a little~~ *somewhat touchy about her political position...we have decided to afford all possible assistance and concessions which would tend to draw Bhutan into our sphere of influence. The implications of linking Bhutan with the economy of India cannot also be over-emphasized*". Another note in the file (from MEA) has the observation: "There can be no two opinion (sic) about the fact that *the more Bhutan is drawn in the ambit of our economic sphere, the closer would be our ties with her*". This example illustrates how economic/infrastructural assistance was a clearly motivated by the political aim of keeping Bhutan securely in India's sphere of influence. In 1961, a year after these deliberations, the first five-year plan was launched in Bhutan with India financing it almost entirely.

This placing/locating of Bhutan in India's sphere of influence politically and as part of India's security frontier construction strategically was therefore not an automatic or a 'natural' development. For all the reference to political diplomacy, these attempts to bring, and keep, Bhutan firmly within post-colonial India's ambit, have relied upon two consistent tropes to facilitate the argument about the natural and inevitable nature of Bhutan's asymmetric orientation – firstly, to sharpen the contrast

with the British relationship to Bhutan (which is emphasized for its domination, in order to highlight a difference in how post-colonial India viewed Bhutan), and secondly, the nature of Chinese designs on Bhutan (which are presented as uniformly hegemonic). To illustrate with a few examples (all emphases added):

The Government of India's policy of treating Bhutan *as a neighbour and as a friend rather than as a subservient satellite, as the British had done*, fully justified itself (Das 1974: 51).

Bhutan, though comparatively much smaller in area and *more or less a protectorate of India*...Till just the other day, India had assumed the right to speak on behalf of the Bhutanese, but the Bhutanese and Chinese are to hold direct talks on their disputed border in the near future...*It is time the Bhutanese were told in no uncertain terms that they can go thus far and no further* (Avtar 1986: 193, 197-199).

Bhutan and India, therefore, need to develop greater understanding of each other's perceptions *so that China may be prevented from exploiting the differences between them to the detriment of their interests and to its own advantage*...*India should strive to make its relations with Bhutan increasingly close*.

(Rahul 1997: 49)

Both these tropes – of always already British hegemony and uniform Chinese hostility – carry a complexity that is denied by much methodologically nationalist outsider scholarship on Bhutan. However, most crucially for my argument here, such discourses deny agency, vitality, and existence to a sovereign country, by limiting it within a paradigm of asymmetric inbetweenness that has been constructed for imperial interests over time. India's relationship with Bhutan was never entirely smooth or inevitable; it had several ups and downs, and has needed work and interaction. Post-imperial India was more successful in its attempts to secure influence in Bhutan through economic aid and infrastructural assistance, than in timely understandings of Bhutan's cultural and identitarian aspirations as a sovereign state with a status anxiety stemming from its encounters with different imperial powers.

Conclusion

Bhutan's asymmetrical inbetweenness construction is nested in the larger story of the formation and consolidation of imperial British India and its dissolution, and the emergence of post-colonial India as a successor state. Here, I have focused on three key phases that created Bhutan's marked economic orientation toward the south; more broadly, this analysis also highlights how apparently apolitical geographical concepts in fact reflect and perpetuate imperialist power relations, and this could justifiably be used as a way of understanding the historical basis of the contemporary geopolitical constraints faced by other small states, including in the region.

The story of Bhutan's contemporary geopolitical location as in-between India and China with proximity to the former is often written by scholars and officials who share the dominant ideas of the political machineries that they are a part of. British imperial scholarship has generally been from the point of view of the imperial missions, and in line with their tasked objectives, not been reflexive about their commercial nature of their imperial projects; Indian scholarship, in line with a nationalist understanding, has by far sought to emphasize the economic assistance and friendship extended by India to Bhutan. Bhutanese scholarship too has sometimes uncritically relied upon British and Indian sources. There are a few exceptions, of course, and I have highlighted them at instances in this paper. Critical work at the intersection of geographical/political/historical contingencies is especially hard in an area where the approach tends to be hegemonic and big state downwards rather than small state upwards, but this is also what makes it urgent. I see this endeavor as a part of subalternizing of geopolitics that recognizes the myriad ways in which dominant powers have shaped both the geopolitical environment as well as knowledge-making that has constrained small states.

The endeavor of subaltern geopolitics as I envision it, is to revisit accepted narratives that create a problematic idea of strategy and zero-sum games. Transborder challenges predominate in the world

and part of changing national honor-based clashes is to change the ideas through which we perceive and understand those encounters. Bhutanese scholars such as Ura (2002) have pointed out the historic vulnerabilities faced by small states.¹⁷ An important instance is the Doklam issue that nearly brought war to Bhutan in recent years; this has been the result of the strategic perceptions of India and China; perceptions that come about where states construct strategy in rivalrous and possessive terms.¹⁸ I hope that by challenging the naturalized inbetweenness as the exhaustive way of framing Bhutan, it becomes possible for other scholars to argue against seeing small boundary states, sovereign or not, merely as real estate, as buffers, as transit routes, for the bigger countries, for a game of power play.

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Endnotes

¹ Bhutan's self-definition has always included a strong insistence upon a distinct national identity. Hutt (2003) provides a trajectory of Bhutanese nationalism (from territorial to civil to essentialist) and its effects on the population of southern Bhutan. An important reason for this trajectory was sovereignty-preservation and maintenance (see Rattan 1989: 137). In 21st century, the Bhutanese idea of nation has been reformed in more internally inclusivist terms.

² In comparison, the Chinese and Tibetan external discourse on Bhutan, though outsider, has not been as extensive, and is not translated into English, and thus, has not played a similar role in how the dominant scholarship about Bhutan has been produced and circulated.

³ Mathou (2005: 513-516) refers to the apparent paradox in China-Bhutan relations; Bhutan is the only neighbour that does not have diplomatic relations with PRC, its total trade (in US\$ 10000) in 2005 with China was 51 and 1360410 with India. India is Bhutan's major trading partner, provider of development assistance in the form of loans and grants, and principal investor in Bhutan's hydropower sector. While India's own economic relationship with China has deepened over the years, any possibility of moves forward on Bhutan-China relationship is widely and zealously perceived as a strategic threat and a sensitive issue in India.

⁴ This view of Bhutan being ahistorical and isolationist is incorrect, and rightly refuted by the rare serious scholarship that exists (Deb 1976: xi; Basu 1996: 14).

⁵ The complexity of Bhutan-Tibet links mean all the following: Bhutan has not proactively advocated for Tibetan autonomy, Dalai Lama has not visited Bhutan, there is informal cross-border trade in north Bhutan, Bhutan has Tibetan refugees who have lived there for decades, there are Bhutanese Buddhists who follow Tibetan sects, Tibetan cultural affinities exist among Layaps and linguistic affinities among Lunaps in north Bhutan.

⁶ See, for instance, the following (Bhattacharya 1965: i, 2-3): "...Bhutan has been under the cultural and ethnical influence of the people of India...since the early dawn of the Indian civilization... Bhutias had so much affinity with the Hindus that both peoples worship Mahadeva...no historical evidence to show that in the early ages the territory of Bhutan was ever dominated by the Tibetans".

⁷ This is a generally standard year to begin such accounts, as evident in book titles like: *India and Bhutan: A study in interrelations, 1772-1910* (by Kohli 1982). Bhutanese scholars traditionally did not write in English; only recent work such as Phuntsho (2013) is able to draw upon religious texts and provide a richer narrative with a parallel history.

⁸ Black (2018) refers to the appointment of James Rennell as a prelude to systematic British surveying and mapping of India. Rennell was transferred to the Company in 1763. The report of his exact location in these two journeys of 1766 and 1767 varies, generally stated that he was ‘on the frontiers of Bhutan’ (for instance, in Rodd 1930: 293). Field (1962) resonates specific details from Cammann (1951) and Petech (1950) that contain persuasive evidence sourced from Tibetan accounts (such as the *Autobiography of the Third Tashi-Lama* and *Life of the Fourth Tashi-Lama*) as opposed to the British ones. This is in marked contrast to the conventional view, which is endlessly cited by numerous British scholars, who draw upon Markham (2010 [1881]) or White’s (1996 [1909]) account, and later Indian scholars who reproduced the same imperial British sources. One has to look outside the South Asian frame, or in the passing references to Bhutan made in Tibetological studies, and across disciplines, to find alternative accounts of this period as they pertain to Bhutan.

⁹ On December 9, 1771, “the Court of Directors enquired regarding the possibility of the Northern trade and of sending explorers to Bhutan and Assam” (Sarkar 1931: 121, fn.15). Compare this with the statement by Ashley Eden in 1864, “There is nothing, apparently, on record to show that previous to the year 1772 the Government of India had any political cognizance whatever of Bootan” (HCB 1860-69 microfilm NAI 18).

¹⁰ Specifically, d’Anville’s *Pays de Pouronké*, as per Markham’s account of Bogle papers. See also Gandolfo (2004: 118-119).

¹¹ There were also travellers such as Thomas Manning in 1811, other notables who accompanied the missions, such as Godwin-Austen who went with Eden in 1864-65, covert missions such as by native explorers/spies such as Pundit Nain Singh in 1875, Pundits Rinzin Namgyal and Phurba in 1885-86.

¹² Rennie (1866: 23) advises caution in taking Eden’s account at face value.

¹³ “In 1856 Dalhousie threatened the permanent annexation of the Bengal Duars” (Deb 1976: 7). Another perspective is found in Gier (2014: 122): “When the Bhutanese made clear that they supported the Indian rebels in the mutiny of 1857, the British were forced to act”.

¹⁴ This was replicated by the Indian Political Officers, at least in the 1950s.

¹⁵ This symbol meant rupees. Compare this with the expenditure of nearly Rs 10,000 on the treaty visit, excluding arms and ammunition.

¹⁶ IMTRAT presence in Haa province is centered on the Haa Dzong and has been the subject of much debate in Bhutan's National Assembly over passing decades because the Dzongs are administrative and monastic centres for the Bhutanese.

¹⁷ Ura (2002: 135) writes: "Small states are left to cope on their own, with risks, threats and disasters, which are considered distant crises of no international significance. The interests of small states can be subordinated to contiguous powers, large corporations, big economies, and even external paramilitary outfits."

¹⁸ Penjore (2004) provides the backdrop to the start of the (still continuing) Sino-Bhutan border talks. To discuss the Doklam issue as it arose in 2017 is beyond the scope of this present article.

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