

A Unique Parallel

Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal*

Introduction

One would be surprised and even shocked to hear that a parallel can be drawn between Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal of Bhutan and Ögödei Khan (The Great Khan) of Mongolia: the former was a man of religion and lived and ruled by the law of compassion while the latter was a conqueror who lived and ruled by the blade of his sword. The Shabdrung forged a country the size of which was no bigger than an average Indian district while Ögödei forayed into Russia, China and Eastern Europe vastly expanding the empire left to him by his father Ghengis Khan. Nonetheless, one can draw a unique parallel between the two, separated by great distance and time, in two historic events that had impacts in the corresponding nations' history. To unravel one of these two events, a prelude to an episode in Sikkim-Bhutan history is necessary.

Prelude

Tensung Namgyal, the second Chogyal (Sk. Dharmarajah, Eng. king) of Sikkim, took three consorts¹ with the possible rationale of obtaining peace and thereby consolidating the foundations of the newly formed kingdom. His first wife came from southern Tibet² and with the marriage he sort of

* Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal is an Indian doctor running a clinic in Jaigaon, a border town abutting Phuntsholing.

¹ Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshay Doma (translated by Kazi Daosamdub. *History of Sikkim* (in Manuscript). Risley, H.H. (1989). *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, pp. 11-12.

² *History of Sikkim* (Several sources she was a Sikkimese but I have chosen to agree with the *History of Sikkim* firstly because it was written at a period closer to the event and secondly the authors would have a better knowledge of the issue basically because it is *their family history*).

purchased peace from his powerful northern neighbour. The second wife came from Bhutan³ and this marriage bought him peace from his eastern neighbours. The third wife was the daughter of a Limbuwan chief and with that peace was obtained on the western front. The south was basically a thick pristine forestland with small insignificant settlements in the plains. All sides being adequately tied up, the fledgling kingdom enjoyed absolute peace during his reign. Historians too enamoured with wars, conquests, revolts, intrigues and upheavals uniformly describe his reign as “uneventful” and leave it at that with one writer in a brief note on the history of Sikkim not even giving him a mention⁴. They ignore the fact that Tensung brought peace and stability, and thereby possibly prosperity too. Upon his death, his minor son Chagdor Namgyal, was put on the throne much to the displeasure and disapproval of his elder half-sister, Pende Wangmu, the daughter of the first queen who was of Bhutanese birth. After all, her mother was the senior-most queen and she was years older than the child put on the throne. When nothing worked in her favour she sought assistance from Bhutan which came in the form of an army descending on Sikkim and an eventual conquest of that country⁵. The Bhutanese ruled for about seven years and very mysteriously withdrew to the east bank of the Tista river retaining what is today the Kalimpong sub-division of Darjeeling district. Why this unprovoked withdrawal took place has perplexed many and this paper will try to arrive at an answer.

Possible explanations

There are various versions given by different writers but none worth the ink spilled on the paper. A.R. Foning, a local

³ Although Bhutan as a unified nation did not exist the term is used purposely for convenience sake.

⁴ White J.C. (1971 (1909)). *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-one Years on the North-East Frontier 1887 – 1908*. Delhi: Vivek Publishing House.

⁵ Hasrat, Bikrama Jit (1980). *History of Bhutan*. Thimphu: Education Department, p. 64.

amateur historian, indirectly implies that the VIth Dalai Lama wrote to the Deb Raja asking him to restore Chagdor's kingdom⁶ but there are no records of the Bhutanese acknowledging the letter or of their acquiescence to the same, if the letter was written at all. The matter looks most unlikely because the Dalai Lama had died (murdered?) a year earlier, 1706⁷. Another historian, Dr. P.N. Chopra, comments that on "On Chakdor's pleas, the Bhutanese King relented and withdrew his forces from Sikkim which was again taken over by Chakdor with the exception of Kalimpong and adjoining areas."⁸ By citing "King" if Chopra meant it to mean the Deb Raja then it must be mentioned that the Bhutanese are mum on that matter and alternatively if it meant the Shabdrung then the hypothesis falls flat because he had already died (gone to "retreat") was the term used then, way back in 1651, fifty-six years earlier. The senior diplomat turned writer, Vincent H. Coelho, is a bit closer, but still distant to the truth with his claim that "Chakdor Namgyal was prompted to return to Sikkim" on the demise of the Dalai Lama, but he goes off the mark with the statement that the Bhutanese withdrew upon Chagdor Namgyal's arrival.⁹ The argument does not hold water because when Chagdor returned his friend and patron, the VIth Dalai Lama had already passed away, and so had any hopes of active or passive support, and the returning Chogyal was no victorious king or general coming home heaped with honour and glory. Bhutanese were the conquerors and it just does not stand to reason why the victorious army should withdraw from its conquest simply because a defeated and vanquished king decides to return. The most unlikely conclusion comes from a man who should have known better. J. Claude White, the Political Officer to Sikkim and Bhutan, twenty-one years in the region, displays his gross negligence and ignorance of local history by writing

⁶ Foning, A.R (1987). *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd, p. 269.

⁷ *History of Tibet, Conversations with the Dalai Lama*, p. 185.

⁸ Chopra, P.N (1979). *Sikkim*. New Delhi: S Chand and Co., p. 27.

⁹ Coelho, V.H (1970). *Sikkim and Bhutan*. Delhi: Vikas Publications, p. 13. See also *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, p. 12.

that “The Tibetans drove them [the Bhutanese] out and Chador in gratitude founded the great monastery of Pemiongtchi, the largest and entirely Tibetan in character.”¹⁰ This claim cannot be substantiated since all historical records are absolutely quiet as far as Tibetan military intervention is concerned simply because such an event never took place. Dr. Aparna Bhattacharya is another historian who also goes off track with the contention that “on the intervention of Tibet, Deb Raja, or the Gyalpo of Bhutan, withdrew his forces from Sikkim...”¹¹ Firstly, the Deb Raja was never addresses as Gyalpo (Monarch) and then she fails to qualify the type of intervention resorted to by Tibet. The only Tibetan intervention that can be verified is found in the faithfully recorded compilation on the history of Sikkim by Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshay Doma where they let us know, “It is said that the Tibetan General sent a letter to the Bhutan Government, to the effect that the Tibetan Government, should be the father, the Bhutanese the mother and Sikkim State the child. They should bear friendship and love to each other so that they should try to increase the prosperity of each other, as they are one nation.”¹² When it comes to the Tibetan involvement even the Royal family is careful with their words and they commence the sentence with a hesitant “It is said that...” leaving a hint that it could be just a rumour, a bluff or simply a good piece of propaganda. It therefore is absolutely patent that the various reasons given for the Bhutanese departure cannot be trusted upon but what is also equally manifest is that the Bhutanese troops *did* withdraw to the east bank of Tista river. As to the reason for the withdrawal they will be dealt with shortly.

¹⁰ White, J.C., pp. 16-17. Rao, P. Raghunanda (1978). *Sikkim: The Story of its Integration with India*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, p. 3.

¹¹ Bhattacharya, Aparna. *The Prayer Wheel and the Sceptre, Sikkim*. Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Ltd, (no year of publication), p. 61.

¹² *History of Sikkim*

A Parallel in history

When Ghengis (Chenggis) Khan died in 1227, the Mongol empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.¹³ The main expansionist phase had just come to an end as the armies returned home to elect a new Khan.¹⁴ The Mongol army withdrew from wherever they were to elect the new leader. Ögödei (pronounced Oh-go-day) Khan was selected as the leader and he took upon the title of “Great Khan” and the empire was divided amongst Ghengis Khan's sons. Ögödei received the *khante*¹⁵ of most of Eastern Asia including much of China. He followed his father's footsteps and under him the speed of expansion reached its peak. By April 1241 the Mongols had overcome the joint army of German and Polish troops¹⁶ and in the span of just a few weeks the victorious Mongols decimated several large armies and killed over 200,000 of Europe's finest warriors, including the famed Teutonic knights.¹⁷ In early December the Mongolian army crossed the Danube River and was all set to conquer Vienna.¹⁸ As news spread of the ferocity of the Mongols, Europe trembled in anticipation of an attack¹⁹ and all Europe could hope for was a miracle. To the sheer disbelief of the

¹³ Dr. Timothy May, Assistant Professor of History, Young Hal, North Georgia College and State University.
<http://www.accd.edu/sac/history/keller/Mongols/empsub1.html>

¹⁴ www.greenkiwi.co.nz/footprints/mongolia/ghengis-history.htm

¹⁵ Khanate (or Chanat) is an old Turkish word describing a political entity ruled by a "Khan". In Modern Turkish the word used is hanlık. This political entity is typical for people from the Eurasian Steppe and it can be equivalent to tribal chiefdom, principality, kingdom, and even empire.

¹⁶ *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th Edition, 1997, Vol. 8, p. 886 b & c.

¹⁷ “Korea under the eye of the Tiger”, Chapter 6, *Koryo Under the Mongols - Expanding the Realm*
<http://www.koreanhistoryproject.org/Ket/C06/E0602.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.fsmitha.com/h3/h11mon.htm>

¹⁹ May, Dr. Timothy, Assistant Professor of History, Young Hal, North Georgia College and State University.
<http://www.accd.edu/sac/history/keller/Mongols/empsub1.html>

petrified Europeans, a miracle did happen: the Mongolian troops simply withdrew and headed home. The Europeans did not know then, and for quite sometime later, why they were spared the wreck of a war and the humiliation of a definite defeat. In Mongolia the Great Khan, Ögödei, had died (11 December) and the generals along with their troops simply went back to select and assert allegiance to the new ruler.²⁰

Conclusion

No matter how insignificant the Bhutanese expansion may appear in comparison to the empire built by Ögödei Khan, both the Mongols and the Bhutanese were the conquerors. Their enemies did not fancy any chances of successful resistance or victory, and both the armies withdrew from their vantage without any provocation or threat of confrontation. To this parallel one can add another and that is to be noted in the reasons for the withdrawal of the troops. As in the death of the Great Khan the troops were required to return to confirm allegiance and protection to the new ruler²¹ and thereby prevent unnecessary power struggle. So it was also with Bhutan for in 1706 the death of the founder of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, so long kept secret, was made public. The late Michael Aris evaluates the possible problems faced by the top ranking officers at the death of a leader like Shabdrung: "No matter how masterful and energetic a character he might be, a ruler is always dependent on his officers. Much of the daily business of the government lies in their hands, but the legitimacy and strength of their authority depend entirely upon that of the ruler. In the event of his death, unless the succession is secure and favours the continued authority of his officers, their position is in real danger."²² So possibly the leaders in Bhutan needed a secure

²⁰www.encyclopedia.msn.com/encyclopedia/761571469_3/mongol_empire.html

www.fssmitha.com/h3/h11mon.htm

http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96gedei_Khan

²¹ <http://www.fssmitha.com/h3/h11mon.htm>

²² Aris, Michael (1979). *Bhutan*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd.,

succession that favoured “the continued authority” of the senior leaders and this would not have been possible without the strength of the army. In a system where the successor is a mere child who was deemed the reincarnation while the effective governance went to the regent or the Deb Raja endorsed by a “representative” of the deceased Shabdrung the chance of political disruption was more than real. The army withdrew home either to support the chosen ruler or they came to show allegiance to a candidate of their preference: but their presence was vital all the same. One must also bear in mind that the declaration of the death of Shabdrung had the potentiality of, besides internal power struggle and national chaos, the more dangerous, possibly anticipated, likelihood of external interference. After all Tibet had invaded Bhutan four times in twenty short years²³ and with the Shabdrung gone, the power centre becoming vacant, what less could the Bhutanese expect, especially if a large bulk of its force was doing service on foreign soil.

pp. 234-235.

²³ Aris, pp. 212, 219, 224, and 227.

