

# The History of modern Bhutan

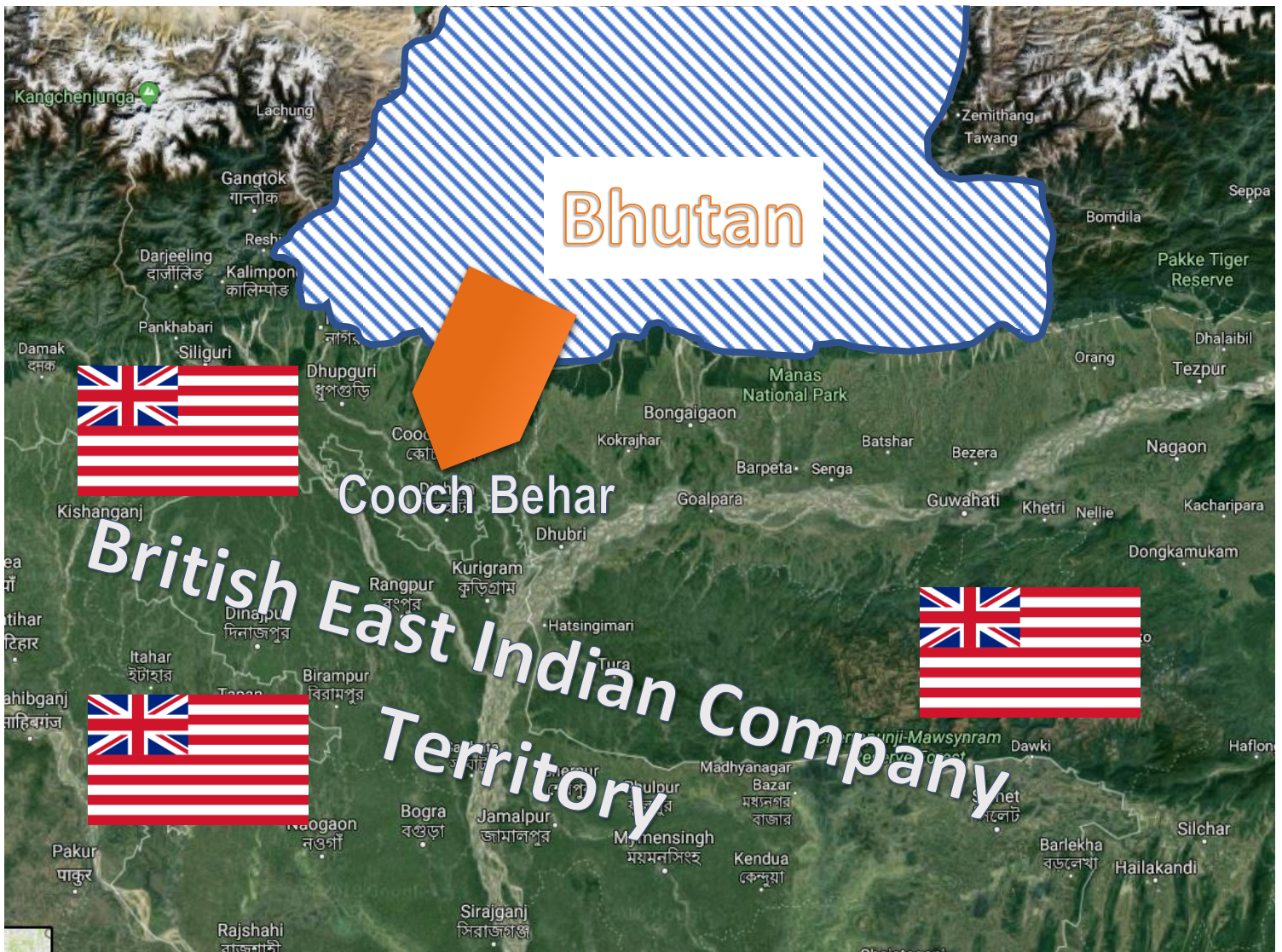
Interesting fact: The origin of the name "Bhutan" is shrouded in mystery, but did not come from the country. The name was applied from outside societies (sometimes applied to Tibet), and was adopted by the British as they increased their presence in India during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the name has stuck.

Traditional literatures, however, do not mention the size of the country and even modern records give varying figures. School students were taught just a few years ago that Bhutan is over 47,000 sq. km and many sources still have this figure but the official Bhutanese version today is 38,394 sq. km. The variance is no doubt mainly due to the lack of exhaustive and accurate surveys and a clear demarcation of the border with China. Serious adjustments were made recently to the size and shape of Bhutan and the triangular swathe of mountainous area along the bend leading to the Kulha Khari peak in the north-central part of Bhutan is now no longer part of Bhutan. While the size in some areas changed with more accurate measurements, this area is said to have been always within Chinese control although it was shown as part of Bhutan in Bhutanese and commercial maps. Thus, the recent update in Bhutan's area has brought about visible changes to both the shape and size of the country and has alarmed many Bhutanese and their friends. It is quite possible that there may be further changes to Bhutan's size as its border with China becomes fully demarcated.

❖ From *The History of Bhutan* by Karma Phuntsho

Following notes taken from "*Bhutan ,the Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom sandwiched between India and China*" address by Harald N. Nestroy.

❖ The decline of Moghul India at the end of the 18th century allowed Bhutan to gain almost total control of the Indian principality of Cooch Behar, its direct neighbour in the south. Bhutan had annexed and fortified the 11 duars or gateways including the adjacent agricultural land, at its border with the plains of Bengal. The clash with the British East India Company was inevitable. Soon enough, the pretender to the throne of Cooch Behar (Khagenda Narayan), sought British help to oust the Bhutanese. A small British force was dispatched in December 1772 to the area and, despite heavy losses, uprooted the Bhutanese contingent from Cooch and captured two Bhutanese forts in the foothills. The result was a peace treaty concluded between India and Bhutan in 1774.



- ❖ A series of wars were fought with the British over control of the region. The Treaty of Sinchula was concluded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which opened Bhutan up to trade with the British.
- ❖ The two decades following this Treaty saw progressive weakening of the central authorities and the increase of conflicts in Bhutan between the regional princely rulers, the Penlops. The Shabdrung, in theory the supreme power, proved to be an institutionally weak office: as the successors were chosen by reincarnation, usually as boys of 2 to 4 years, one of the Penlops was ruling as regent in his place until the new Shabdrung came of age. Misuse of the power and reluctance to give it up, regularly shown by the regents, resulted in growing instability. The struggle for power centred on the two rival factions headed by the Penlops of Paro and Trongsa who, by the beginning of the 20th century, emerged as the strongest political figures.

- ❖ This instability in Bhutan was alarming the Anglo-Indian Government. Because with the expansion of the British Empire on the subcontinent, one of the most important questions in this area was: would Bhutan seek an accommodation with the new powerful southern neighbour or maintain the traditional ties with Tibet which was by now largely influenced by China. For some time Bhutan was able to balance these two alternatives, but in 1903 the matter came to a head. In India's Viceroy Lord Curzon sought to control Tibet as a way to curb Russian expansion in the north.
- ❖ While the Penlop of Paro was favouring the traditional ties with Tibet against British India, the Penlop of Tongsa, **Ugyen Wangchuck**, decided to offer his services as mediator and interpreter between the British and the Dalai Lama. He accompanied the expedition to Lhasa.
- ❖ Despite two bloody encounters of the victorious British corps with the Tibetan army, the subtle mediation of Ugyen Wangchuck with the Regent and the Tsongdu, the assembly of the monks, (the Dalai Lama had fled ) was successful: a new British-Tibetan treaty, confirming and enlarging the previous one, in particular favouring trade between Anglo-India and Tibet, was signed in 1904.
- ❖ Through this apparent success, and the subsequent support from the British side, the position of the Penlop of Tongsa within Bhutan was strengthened. The British were about to bring about a consensus of the Penlops and Abbots to agree to convert Bhutan into a hereditary Kingdom. On December 17th, 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck, the Penlop of Tongsa, was elected the first Druk Gyalpo, the Dragon King of Bhutan. Under his strong leadership, the country enjoyed stability unknown until then, and the beginning of a fruitful relationship with Anglo-India.



King Ugyen Wangchuck

Why would the British want Ugyen Wangchuck to be elevated as “King of Bhutan”?

- ❖ Bhutan became a protectorate of British India in 1910, allowing the British to “guide” its foreign policy and defense.