Bhutan Before the British - a historical study

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Abstract

Among South Asian countries, the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is perhaps the least veil known, both in terms of its modern culture and its historical past. As a "buffer state" between the major cultures of India and Tibet, its history has remained largely unexplored by scholars of India and the West, and by those of Tibet. The increasing availability of authentic indigenous Bhutanese historical literature now makes such a study possible. This dissertation seeks to explore this literature and to present a diachronic account of Bhutanese history from about the 7th century A.D. to events immediately prior to the advent of relations with British India in the 1770's. The second chapter studies the available and potential sources for the study of Bhutan's history. Chapters three and four briefly deal with the spread of Buddhist culture from Tibet, and with various traditional conceptions of Bhutanese historiography. Chapter five describes the founding of the earliest unified national government during the 17th century, a hereditary ecclesiastic monarchy. In chapters six and seven are related the events which led to the abandonment of hereditary monarchy in favour of a system of rule by in-carnate Lamas. The difficulties attending this attempted alteration of the government's constitutional basis dominated political events from 16944 to 1744 and these are related in chapter eight. Early contact with Manchu officialdom during the half century before 1744 is also discussed. The fundamental change in foreign policy attitudes towards the north which emerged at this time culminated in a more open and politically mature government during the decades before about 1770. Chapter nine describes these developments, and attempts to depict the political situation which existed in Bhutan at the time of the earliest British Indian missions. Throughout this study, the major emphasis is placed on indigenous, Bhutanese perspectives.