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AN ENDURING LINK BETWEEN TWO SAARC COUNTRIES

Bangladeshi Buddhist Saint is Revered in Bhutan

Tuhfa Zaman Ali writes from Thimphu

An enduring cultural link between Bangladesh and Bhutan is provided by a Buddhist saint from Chittagong, Vanaratna or Ngagi Rinchen, who is held in great reverence throughout this ancient Himalayan kingdom. Born in 1384, the great saint lived until 1486, for just over 100 years. His arrival in Bhutan is presumed to have taken place between the years 1426 and 1436.

first hereditary Druk Gyelpo ("Thunder Dragon King") by the high lamas and the lay chiefs of Bhutan. The royal family traces its ancestry from Terton Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), believed to be an incarnation of Padmasambhava, and they have consistently made conscious efforts to preserve the Bhutanese heritage and

uphold the Buddhist traditions. Many monasteries and temples have been built and renovated throughout the country under royal patronage, starting from the time of the first King to the present time. The Royal Grandmother Ashi Phuntsho Choegron founded the Kharbandi Monastery in 1967 on the last hillock of the

Himalayas before it meets the plains of Bengal, and in 1974, she built the magnificent Memorial Chorten ("Stupa") in the capital Thimphu in memory of her son, late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (father of the present King) to fulfil his wish to build a Chorten to represent the Mind of Buddha. The Queen Mother, Ashi Kesang

Wangchuck, commissioned the building of the Ka-Gong-Phur-Sum temple at Kurjey Lhakhang in Bumthang, and it was consecrated in June 1990.

Kurjey Lhakhang is very sacred to the Bhutanese as it is believed that Padmasambhava meditated there and left the imprint of his body on a rock.

In the same spirit, Yab Ugyen Dorji, father of the four Queens of Bhutan, has commissioned the construction of a temple near Punakha, about 70 kilometres north-east of Thimphu, at the place where Vanaratna had meditated. Yab Ugyen Dorji's elder brother is believed to be the sixth (and last) Shabdrung Sungruel or "Speech incarnation" of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The sang Choekor Monastery in Paro has also recently been restored under the patronage of Yab Ugyen Dorji.

Vanaratna, or Ngagi Rinchen, is believed to have been born in the town of Dampa or Sadnagara in Chittagong district in 1384.

The son of a King, he received the final monastic ordination from his teachers at the age of 20, became an ascetic and left his home. His travels took him to Sri Lanka, India and to Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. Vanaratna's sojourn in Bhutan is presumed to have been between the years 1426 and

1436. In a place called Tonshinkha, or Tongshuma, near Punakha, Vanaratna is believed to have drawn a thousand Buddhas on a rock with a single magical gesture. He is also said to have had a vision or dream of Padmasambhava when he was meditating in a cave.

The popular belief in Bhutan is that Vanaratna, or Ngagi Rinchen, had a dream that the soul of his mother had been reborn as a frog because of her past sins. The frog was trapped under a huge rock, and his travel to Bhutan was in search of the frog so that he could set his mother's soul free. He hid his true identity and took work with a family as a shepherd. When he went out with the cattle, he would sit in a cave on the eastern banks of the River Pho and meditate.

Then, he would cross the river on an animal's skin, and return in the evening. His employers were greatly intrigued by this behaviour. One day he crossed the river upstream, went to the western bank and never came back. Vanaratna is believed to have found out where the frog was trapped, sliced the huge boulder into half, held it apart with his foot and brought out the frog. He then killed the frog so that he could release his mother's soul of all the pain.

The boulder, neatly sliced in half, still stands there. Three small chortens stand in front of it. And, right next to the boulder, on the banks of the River Pho, amid the greenery, not far from the King's winter Phuntso-pelri Palace, rises the beautiful Lhakhang or temple that the father of the Queens of Bhutan is building in memory of the Bangladeshi Buddhist saint Vanaratna, or Ngagi Rinchen. People have been visiting the site and paying homage to the saint for ages, but once the Lhakhang is completed it will certainly attract more visitors.

Lopon ("master") Pema-la, a tutor of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck when he was the crown prince, had written a poem about the many links that tie Bangladesh and Bhutan. He mentions numerous Buddhist Pandits who had visited the Himalayan areas, and talks about Vanaratna:



The boulder, sliced in half, by the Bangladeshi Buddhist saint, Vanaratna or Ngagi Rinchen near Punakha.

'Yet from the same country of Bengal Another prince incomparable in power and wealth Great scholar Vanaratna by name Came to Bhutan.'

Staying at a sacred cave in Taktsang He had a vision of Guru Padmasambhava.

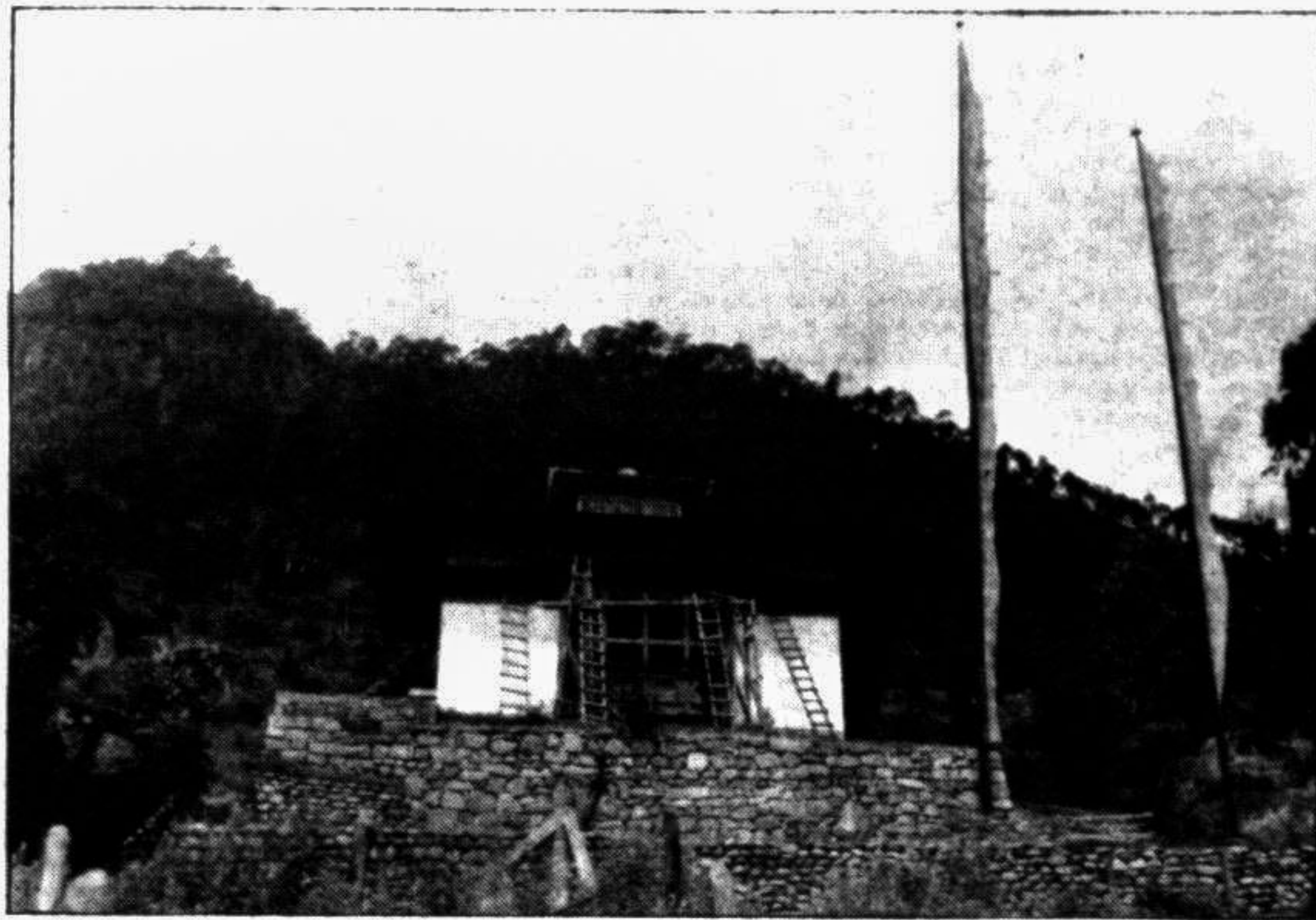
Having assumed the aspect of a yogin He worked for innumerable sentient beings.

The place where he visualised One Thousand Buddhas Is always remembered as Tongshuma at Kalje; Here, cleaving the rock by thunder-bolt, He helped his insect-reborn mother trapped within attain nirvana.

Always there appeared In the Kingdom of Bengal Many Panditas and Mahasiddhas Who greatly worked for the benefit of all mankind.

In the holy country of Bengal Appeared numerous saints, learned and accomplished. In person or through transmission, with the Kingdom of

Sandalwood They established close religious links.'



The temple that the father of the Queens of Bhutan is building in memory of the Bangladeshi Buddhist saint Vanaratna, or Ngagi Rinchen.

WITH every change of government in the country, we open our doors to leaders and functionaries of the ousted administration. They have plenty of time to kill; many need sympathetic shoulders to cry on; and some just want to become friends again with those who, until the other day, were just useful contacts.

Many of them still have the old habit of talking non-stop, quite forcefully, often detailing the mistakes and blunders of their own leadership, which led to the fall of the government. "Had I been in charge..." but the sentence is seldom finished.

In a way, "Had I been in charge..." should be a good topic for a conversation piece between The Daily Star and a former Number Two of the previous regime. After all, a real second-in-command is supposed to be always within the whispering distance from the big boss, a de facto Number One in the shadow. The question is, is there any genuine second-in-command in any regime — or, for that matter, in any political party — in this country? (If it is any consolation to anyone here, the same question can be raised about most democracies, especially in South Asia.)

If we cannot make a former Number Two join a conversation on "Had I been in charge..." how can we ever

make a politician talk on the second most fascinating (to me, anyway) topic we have in mind: "What is the worst political mistake of my life?"

Why should a politician admit his past mistakes since he must remain free to make new ones?

When it comes to seeing leading figures of the last government, it is said to be different this time from previous occasions. For a variety of reasons, they are not particularly

visible, except in the case of some, in the luxurious seclusion of the parliament or, as in a few cases, in the suffocating isolation of a court room. They need more time to come in from the cold. We can wait.

MY own love-hate relationship with a politician — almost any politician — in this country has always followed three distinct phases. Each one has its own charm and frustration, a few hilarious moments and some professional satisfaction.

However, seldom does any of the phases produce genuine human contacts or any intellectual interaction. (My apologies if I use 'intellectual' in a totally wrong context.)

During the three different phases, the same politician undergoes total transformations.

He starts off as a "man with a promise" when, being far removed from the corridor of power, he talks in idealistic

manifesto of the party. But this "man of promise" can sometimes be most discontented.

For one thing, he is concerned about the growing in-fighting within the organisation, about the increasing alienation of the younger generation, to which he himself belongs even if he is past 40, by the elders and, last but not the least, about anti-party rumours circulated by a section of the hostile press.

In short, he is a good company and useful up to a point, but unreliable and as self-seeking as any young politician of today. Get to know him well, but trust him at your own risk.

During the second phase when the "man with a promise" turns into "man in power", the transformation can follow more than one unpredictable course. In all fairness, I will concede that if the touch of power brings out the worst in some, if not most, politicians, a few may look upon their new challenge with a degree of humility, perhaps even with a realisation that this chance of doing some good for the country may not come again. A man in this rare category works hard, retains something of the idealism he once possessed as a political activist and clears his office files with reasonable speed. What's more, he himself reads most of the daily newspapers and weekly journals, without relying on his staff to provide him with a distorted summary of news and views from the daily press. (The distorted version of what appears in the daily press usually places exaggerated emphasis on praises showered on the minister, plays down constructive suggestions made by newspapers and blacks out direct criticism of any move made by the boss.)

A "man in power" is more likely to be one whose vision of yesterday has turned into an ambition for tomorrow and he can no longer distinguish one from the other. His concern over broad national issues lingers on for a while, but soon the range narrows down to such matters as his political future, proximity to the leader, the TV and press coverage and the attention he commands from the leader and his colleagues at cabinet meetings. If he is pleased with the distribution of portfolios in the cabinet

MY WORLD

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placed under his care, such as livestock and fisheries, rural co-operatives and environment, into a major triumph in development. But this success does not necessarily ensure his political survival. Above all, while he is there in the government, he remains in a minority.

The transformation casts its shadow over the dealings of our "man in power" with his former friends, the journalists. Depending on his mood and/or his immediate concern, he

can be alternately aloof or arrogant, friendly or preoccupied. But he tries his best, often with little success, to give the impression that he remains in full command of the situation. From time to time, he invites a friend from the press for what he calls "a chat at home". He uses such occasions for picking up gossip, not ideas, or for delivering monologues, with the visitor serving as nothing other than a listening board. The exercise helps in bringing down the tension level of the minister.

In a matter of years, our "man in power" turns out to be nothing more than a shadow of the "man with a promise" that we knew in the past.

simple: "Blame your predecessor for all your problems."

The leader followed the advice. At a mass rally and later during a TV address, he put all the blame for the troubles facing the country on the previous administration. "Give me more time to solve the problems I have inherited..." he said.

The solution worked. People went back to work, the transport strike was over and the universities reopened.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the situation got out of control again. This time, the railway went on strike, newspapers brought up charges of corruption and trade circles circulated rumours of devaluation.

In despair, the leader brought out the second envelope, opened it and read the advice: "Announce a shake up of the administration and a major reshuffle of the cabinet."

The advice was scrupulously followed. It worked. At a mass rally, people cheered the leader who smiled and waved. It was like a second honeymoon.

It turned out to be a short honeymoon. Within a few months, another crisis hit the country. The patience of the country seemed to be running

polite show of interest, as he (or she, as the case may be) said goodbye to his predecessor.

For a while, there was a honeymoon between the people and the new leader. Then, in a matter of months, problems cropped up. The leader was in despair. He went to the iron safe, brought out the envelope marked one, opened it and read the advice. It was

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Well, life in Bangladesh for all former "men in power" gets harder every day!

WHENEVER there is a change of government in a crisis-torn country, the following story is repeated by someone who has a good sense of humour.

The outgoing head of the government was paying a farewell call on his successor.

After they had exchanged pleasantries, the new leader asked his predecessor if he had any advice to offer about running the administration.

"Oh, yes," said the old fox. "I have left three sealed envelopes in the iron safe, marked one, two and three."

When you face the first major crisis, open the envelope, marked one, and read my advice. You open the second envelope during the second crisis and the third one in the next one."

The new head of government listened to all this with a

He starts off as a 'man with a promise' when, being far removed from the corridor of power, he talks in idealistic terms, listens to others with a show of attention and, from time to time, emphasises his commitment to what he calls constructive politics.

out, while the leader was left with no choice but to open the third — and the last — envelope and read the advice which his predecessor had written in hand. The advice was simple: "Prepare three envelopes for your successor."

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