

Bhutan

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INTRODUCTION

- (1) Area = 46,500 sq. km:
- (2) Population = 2.2million
- (3) Language = Dzongkha, Lhotsam (Nepali), English, Gurung, Assamese.
- (4) Literacy = 42%
- (5) Religion = Buddhism, Hinduism.
- (6) National Currency = Ngultrum = One Indian Rupee
- (7) Per Capital Income (PPP) = \$ 1,300
- (8) Latitude = 27° 30' N
- (9) Longitude = 90° 00'E
- (10) King = Jigme Singye Wangchuk
- (11) Head of Govt. Prime Minister = Lyopo Kinzang Dorji
- (12) Capital = Thimpu, Population = over 20,000
- (13) Number of districts = 20

Along the lofty ridges of the eastern Himalayas lies the sovereign Kingdom of Bhutan. (The Kingdom's name in the official language of Dzongkha is Drukylu.) Bhutan is larger than Switzerland, but has only less than one third as many people. The Kingdom of Bhutan, 'the land of the thunder dragon' lies in the eastern Himalayas bordered north by China and on all other sides by India. Its location between the Assam-Bengal Plain of India to the south and the Chinese-occupied Plateau of Tibet to the north gives it considerable geopolitical significance.

PHYSICAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

(a) RELIEF

“Physically, Bhutan may be divided into three regions from north to south: the Great Himalayas, the lesser Himalayas, and the Duars Plain.”¹

(b) THE GREAT HIMALAYAS

“The northern part of Bhutan lies within the Great Himalayas; the snowcapped peaks in this region attain a height of more than 24,000 feet (7,300 meters). High valleys occur at elevations of 12,000 to 18,000 feet, running down from the great northern glaciers. The Alpine pastures on the high ranges are used for grazing yaks in the summer months. North of the Great Himalayas are several “marginal” mountains of the Plateau of Tibet that form the principal watershed between the rivers respectively running southward and northward. A dry climate is characteristic of the Great Himalayan region.”²

(c) THE LESSER HIMALAYAS

“Spurs (ridges) from the Great Himalayas radiate southward, forming the ranges of the Lesser (or Inner) Himalayan region. The north-south ranges of the Lesser Himalayas comprise watersheds between the principal rivers of Bhutan. Differences in elevation and the degree of exposure to moist southwest monsoon winds determine the prevailing vegetation, which ranges from dense forest on the rain-swept windward slopes to Alpine vegetation at higher elevations. Several fertile valleys of central Bhutan are in the Lesser Himalayas at elevations varying from 5,000 to 9,000 feet. These valleys notably the Paro, Punakha, Thimpu, and Ha, are relatively broad and flat, receive moderate rainfall [from 40 to 50 inches (about 1,000 to 1,270 millimeters) or less a year], and are fairly well populated and cultivated.”³

(d) THE DUARS PLAIN

“South of the Lesser Himalayas and the foothills lies the narrow Duars Plain, which forms a strip 8 to 10 miles wide along the southern border of Bhutan. The Himalayan ranges rise sharply and abruptly from the narrow Duars Plain, which controls access to the strategic passes (known as *duars* or *dwars*) through the mountains leading into the fertile valleys of the Lesser Himalayas. Subject to

excessive rainfall (between 200 and 300 inches a year), the entire Duars tract is unhealthy, hot, and steamy and is covered with dense semitropical forest and undergrowth.

The northern part of the Duars immediately bordering the mountains consists of a rugged, irregular, and sloping surface. At the foot of the mountains small villages are found in forest clearings, but most of the area is covered with dense vegetation inhabited by elephants, deer, tigers and other wild animals. The southern part of the Duars bordering India is mostly covered with savanna (grassy parkland) and bamboo jungle.”⁴

(e) DRAINAGE

“Bhutan’s mountainous territory is dissected by numerous rivers. The main rivers from west to east are the Amo (Torsa), Raidak (Wong), Sankosh (Mo), and Manas. All the rivers flow southward from Great Himalayas and join the Brahmaputra River in India.”⁵

(f) CLIMATE

“Bhutan’s climate is perhaps more diverse than that of any other similarly sized area in the world. A temperate climate occurs only in the central mountain valleys. The remainder of the country experiences either extreme heat, as in the Duars, or extreme cold, as in the north. The climate changes with elevation, producing striking meteorologic contrasts, and differing exposures to sunlight and moisture-laden winds result in complex local variation. Three principal climatic regions can be distinguished: the hot, humid, subtropical tract of the Duars Plain and its adjacent foothills; the cooler region of the Lesser Himalayas; and the Alpine tundra region of the Great Himalayas.”⁶

(g) PLANT AND ANIMAL LIFE

“Bhutan’s flora is notable for its great variety and its continuous transition from tropical through temperate to exclusively Alpine forms. The zone of moist, tropical deciduous vegetation occupies

the south, in the Duars Plain and adjoining hills. Forests cover the hills, and along the Manas and Sankosh rivers in central and eastern Bhutan, they form a sanctuary where samba, gaur, rhinoceros, elephant, and other wild animals are plentiful. To preserve this wildlife and flora, the government of Bhutan has established the Manas wildlife Sanctuary along the banks of the Manas River, which adjoins India. Tall, dense grasses used in the manufacture of paper and pulp are an important plant resource in these lower altitudes.

Forest of pine, with some oak, dominate the slopes between 3,000 and 6,000 feet. At higher elevations the forests contain a mixture of many species – pine, oak, walnut, rhododendron, ash, poplar, willow, aspen, and magnolia. The most valuable forests are located between 6,000 and 9,000 feet; these magnificent forests contain cypress, fir, spruce, and juniper. Birch can be found up to the timberline at 14,000 feet. Alpine shrubs and grasses grow on the higher slopes of the Great Himalaya Range.”⁷

(h) SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

“Bhutan is a relatively sparsely populated country, though its population is increasing at a rate of perhaps 2% of a year. Its most sparsely populated sections are the cold and rugged Great Himalayan region and the unhealthy malarial tracts bordering the Duars Plain. The adverse physical conditions in both these areas limit most of the population in two region: the fertile and intensively formed Lesser Himalayan valleys of central and western Bhutan and the southwestern portions of the country near the Indian border.

Nearly nine-tenth of Bhutan’s population lives in very small, scattered villages, though there now are also a handful of towns whose inhabitants number in the thousands. Southern Bhutan’s domestic architecture resembles that of neighboring areas of India, while in the Great Himalayan region and the Lesser Himalayan valleys the architecture is typically Tibetan.”⁸

“Bhutan had no urban settlements until the late 1960s. Since

then, however, with road construction and economic development, some of the larger villages have grown into towns. The government classifies a few dozen of these communities as “urban centers,” though they contain only about 10% of the nation’s population.”⁹

“The national capital, Thimphu, was a mere cluster of houses in the 1960s but has developed into a sizable town. Its venerable *dzong* has been rebuilt and enlarged to house the Bhutan government secretariat. After Thimphu, Paro is Bhutan’s fastest-growing town. Since 1983, scheduled air service between Paro and the cities of Calcutta (Kolkatta), New Delhi, Dhaka (Bangladesh), Bangkok (Thailand), and Kathmandu (Nepal), has stimulated Paro’s growth.”¹⁰

THE ECONOMY

“Bhutan by world standards is one of the poorest countries. Its economy is largely a subsistence economy. People are engaged in subsistence farming; and barter is practiced. The transition to market economy has changed social life. Life expectancy: 49 years. Urban population is 7%.”¹¹

(a) DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

“With the assistance of India, Bhutan’s development planning began in 1959 and culminated in the launching of its first five-year plan in 1961. The Main priority was to end the country’s geographic isolation, and consequently much of this plan’s budget was devoted to improving Bhutan’s road network. Besides continued road building, subsequent five-year plans emphasized the development of Bhutan’s rudimentary education and health-care systems and the exploitation of the country’s agricultural and power resources.

Bhutan itself has been able to finance less than 10% of its total development expenditures. For the other 90%, it has depended on external assistance from India, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Asian Development Bank. The success of the five-year plans has depended largely on the regular flow of funds from India and

upon the availability of Indian technical personnel.”¹²

(b) AGRICULTURE

“The Bhutanese economy is mainly agrarian; most of the population is engaged in agriculture and livestock raising. The amount of land available for agriculture is only a fraction of the total area of the country, however, and an adverse climate, poor soil, and steep slopes have made it necessary to leave a large land area covered with forest growth, meadows, and grasslands. The relatively low, well-watered, and fertile valleys of central Bhutan have the largest percentage of cultivated land. Because of the great variations in altitude and climate, a variety of crops is grown in Bhutan. Rice, corn (maize), potatoes, citrus fruit, and wheat are the chief crops. Yaks, cattle, sheep, pigs, and horses are raised on Bhutan’s scattered pastures.”¹³

(c) FOREST RESOURCES

“About 70% of Bhutan is covered with forests. A 62-square-mile wildlife sanctuary has been established at Manas in southern Bhutan; it contains many valuable species of animals, including the golden langur (a slender long-tailed monkey), which is rare elsewhere in the world.”¹⁴

(d) MINERAL RESOURCES

“Large deposits of limestone, marble, dolomite, graphite, lead, copper, slate, coal, talc, gypsum, beryl, mica, pyrites and tufa have been found in Bhutan.”¹⁵

(e) INDUSTRY, FINANCE AND TRADE

“Modern manufacturing began in Bhutan in about 1970 and has grown rapidly. Three sectors – foods processing, cement, and wood products – form much of the country’s industrial base. Nearly all Bhutan’s manufacturing industries are located in the south, close to the Indian border. Phuntsholing, with nearly half of Bhutan’s

manufacturing industries, is the largest industrial centre.

Until the 1960s Bhutan did not have a currency; its people bartered for those goods they could not produce themselves. Now the country has a cash economy as well as a national bank. Among other functions, the national bank serves as a channel for the issue of *ngultrum*, the national currency.

Because Bhutan is landlocked, trade and transit arrangements with India play a critical role in its economic life. Free trade with India prevails; imports from that country comprise about 90% of Bhutan's total imports and include machinery and equipment, petroleum products, food grains textiles and clothing, and transport equipment. Bhutan's exports to India, which amount to about 95% of its total exports, consist of agricultural products such as cardamom, potatoes, and oranges; forestry products such as sawed timber and rosin; and cement."¹⁶

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

"Bhutan's development plans have stressed the improvement of transport and communications. The 120-mile Phuntsholing-Paro-Thimphu national highway is part of a network of roads the Bhutan government has built to open up the country. The total length of the network is about 1,500 miles. Highways have been constructed through difficult mountain terrain, linking Indian roads to Thimphu and to Paro in western Bhutan, to Tongsa in central Bhutan, and to Tashigang in eastern Bhutan. The construction of a lateral east-to-west road has also been completed.

Druk Air, the national airline, operates between Paro and India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Thailand. Indian engineers have assisted the Bhutan government in laying telephone lines and exchanges. The principal administrative centres of Bhutan have telecommunication links with India. A postal service between Bhutan and other countries was inaugurated in 1963, when the first series of Bhutanese stamps were issued."¹⁷

HISTORY

“Bhutan’s rugged mountains and dense forests long rendered it almost inaccessible to the outside world, and the country’s rulers reinforced this isolation by banning foreigners until well into the 20th century. Then, under pressure of neighbouring countries with strategic interests in Bhutan, a slow change began, and the lack of outside contacts became a hindrance to modernization. Bhutan’s government is now committed to the twin policies of modernization and economic development.”¹⁸

(a) THE PERIOD OF ISOLATION

“The historical origins of Bhutan are obscure. It is reported that over three centuries ago an influential lama from Tibet, Shepton La-Pha, became the king of Bhutan and acquired the title of *dharma raja*. It seems probable that Bhutan became a distinct political entity about this period. La-Pha was succeeded by Doopgein Shepton, who consolidated Bhutan’s administrative organization through the appointment of *penlops* (governors of territories) and *jungpens* (governors of forts). Doopgein Shepton exercised both temporal and spiritual authority, but his successor confined himself only to the spiritual role and appointed a minister to exercise the temporal power. The minister became the temporal ruler and acquired the title of *deb raja*. The institution of two supreme authorities – a *dharma raja* for spiritual affairs and a *deb raja* for temporal matters – existed until the death of the last *dharma raja* in the early 20th century. Succession to the spiritual office of *dharma raja* was dependent on what was considered a verifiable reincarnation of the deceased *dharma raja*, and this person was often discovered among the children of the ruling families. When the last *dharma raja* died in the 1930s, no reincarnation was found, and the practice and the office ceased to exist.

For much of the 19th century Bhutan was plagued by a series of civil wars as the *penlops* of the various territories contended for power and influence. The office of the *deb raja*, in theory filled by election

by a council composed of *penlops* and *jungpens*, was in practice held by the strongest of the governors, usually either the *penlop* of paro or the *Penlop* of Tongsa. Similarly, the *penlops*, who were to be appointed by the *deb raja*, in practice fought their way into office. Throughout most of Bhutanese history a continuous series of skirmishes and intrigues took place throughout the land as superseded *jungpens* and *penlops* awaited an opportunity to return to power.

In 1907, after the *dharmaraja* had died and *deb raja* had withdrawn into a life of contemplation, the then-strongest *penlop*, Ugyen Wangchuk of Tongsa, was “elected” by a council of lamas, abbots, councillors, and laymen to be the hereditary king (*druk gyalpo*) of Bhutan; the lamas continued to have strong spiritual influence. Bhutan’s present king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, is the fourth in this line of hereditary rulers.”¹⁹

(b) FOREIGN CONTACTS AND RELATIONS

“Despite its long isolation, Bhutan was the object of several foreign invasions over the centuries. In 1720 a Chinese imperial army invaded Tibet and established suzerainty over both Tibet and Bhutan. Control over Bhutan changed several times thereafter, and the country’s exact territorial extent was not clear. The British intervened in Bhutan in 1772-73 and again in 1864-65, at which time the defeated Bhutanese signed a treaty ceding control of their southern border passes to the British. The Bhutanese also agreed to accept British mediation in any future disputes between Bhutan and its neighbours in return for an annual British subsidy.

Ugyen Wangchuk became Bhutan’s *druk gyalpo* in 1907 with British approval, and in 1910 the Bhutanese government agreed in a treaty to be guided by Great Britain in external affairs in return for an increased annual subsidy and the promise of noninterference in Bhutan’s internal affairs. In subsequent decades, Bhutan gradually became oriented toward British-ruled India, though much of its trade continued to be with Tibet.

In August 1949 Bhutan concluded a treaty with India in which

the latter newly independent nation took over Britain's role toward Bhutan. As part of this arrangement, India paid an annual subsidy to Bhutan, and a strip of land in Assam, known as the Dewangiri, was transferred to Bhutan. India also refrained from interfering in the country's internal administration. The occupation of Tibet in 1950 by the People's Republic of China prompted Bhutan to further strengthen its ties with India. China's suppression of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and its vague assertions to sovereignty over some Bhutanese territory lent urgency to the Chinese threat, and in the 1950s India took measures to strengthen its defensive garrisons along Bhutan's northern border with Tibet.²⁰

“Bhutan joined the UN in 1971 and the Non-Aligned Movement in 1973. In 1983 Bhutan became a founder-member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).”²¹

“Though Bhutan for long resisted the lure of tourism, it is the principle source of foreign exchange now. The kingdom was opened to tourism in the autumn of 1974.”²²

(c) BHUTAN SINCE 1960

“Beginning in the early 1960s, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk embarked on a program to develop the country's backward economy and modernize its quasi-feudal social system. New roads and hospitals were built, and a system of secular schools was begun as an alternative to education in Buddhist monasteries. Modernization of the social system began with the abolition of slavery, the restriction of Bhutia polyandry and Nepalese polygamy, and a slight liberalization of royal rule. Bhutan's government institutions were also modernized, though the king retained firm control over the nation's political life. Political instability occasionally surfaced, notably in 1964, when the prime minister was murdered in a dispute between rival political factions, and in 1965 when an unsuccessful assassination attempt was made on the king himself. The country's current king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, became ruler on the death of his father, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, in 1972. Jigme Singye Wangchuk has proved to be a

capable and energetic leader who has continued the policy of modernization and development while simultaneously trying to preserve Bhutan's rich cultural heritage and natural environment."²³

THE PEOPLE

"There are three major ethnic groups in Bhutan: the Bhutia, Nepalese, and Sharchops. The Bhutia, who are also called Ngalops, are the largest ethnic group and make up as much as 60 % of the population. They are the descendants of Tibetan immigrants who came southward to Bhutan from about the 9th century onward. The Bhutia are dominant in northern, central, and western Bhutan. They speak a variety of Tibetan dialects, and the most common of these, Dzongkha, is Bhutan's official language."²⁴

"In southern and southwestern Bhutan, an ethnically mixed population with a predominance of Nepalese settlers is found. The Nepalese, or Gurung, are the most recent arrivals in Bhutan and constitute about one-third of the population. They speak Nepali and practice Hinduism. Their growing numbers prompted the Bhutanese government to ban further Nepalese immigration beginning in 1959. The Nepalese are also prohibited from settling in central Bhutan. Little assimilation takes place between the Tibetan and Nepalese groups, and discrimination against the Nepalese constitutes a major internal political problem for Bhutan.

Most of the people in eastern Bhutan are ethnically related to the hills tribes living in adjacent areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Sharchops, as these people are called, are Indo-Mongoloid in origin and are believed to have been the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan."²⁵

ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

(a) GOVERNMENT

"Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy whose sovereign is styled

the *druk gyalpo* (“dragon king”). The present king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, is the fourth in a royal line that was established in 1907. The government of Bhutan was traditionally autocratic, with no law codes, courts, or any of the features of modern public administration. In the 1950s and 60s, however, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk took the initiative in adapting the country’s system of government to the modern era and began to share administration responsibility, which was formerly his alone. In 1953 a national assembly known as the Tshogdu was established in Bhutan through the king’s initiative. It has 151 members who are elected by village headmen or are chosen by the king and the country’s official Buddhist monastic order. The Tshogdu meets twice a year and passes legislation enacted by the king. The Royal Advisory Council was established in 1965 to advise the king and his ministers on important questions and to supervise the implementation of government programs and policies. A Council of Ministers, set up in 1968, is composed of the ministers of the various government departments.”²⁶

“From Oct. 1969 the absolute monarchy was changed to a form of democratic monarchy. The National Assembly (Tshogdu) was reinstated in 1953. All Bhutanese over 25 years may be candidates. Ten monastic representatives are elected by the central and regional ecclesiastical bodies, while the remaining members are nominated by the King, and include members of the Council of Ministers (the Cabinet) and the Royal Advisory Council. The Royal Advisory Council (Lodol Tsokde), established in 1965, comprises 10 members. Council of Ministers is known as Lhengye Shungtsog.

Recent reports indicate that the mountain Kingdom is inching towards democracy. A political transformation is under way, its main force being the reformist monarch Jigme Wangchuk. A Royal edict placed before the 510-members National Assembly in June’98 said a two-third majority in the House could force the king to abdicate. The Assembly (its terms: 5 years) will also throw up the Council of Ministers, one of whom will remain as chairman for a year. A draft constitution was released in Dec. 2002.”²⁷

“For administrative purposes Bhutan is divided into a number of districts, each with a district officer who is responsible to the minister of home affairs. Village headmen are elected by the people of their villages for a three-year term.”²⁸

(b) EDUCATION

“Until the early 1960s, no formal schools existed in Bhutan except those for religious instruction. Since then considerable progress has been made in education, and primary and secondary schools have been established throughout the country. Sherubtse Degree College at Kanglung in eastern Bhutan is affiliated with the University of Delhi. There are also several teacher-training schools and technical-vocational schools.”²⁹

“Most of Bhutan’s million or so inhabitants are so scattered that education cannot go to them. Children must forgo family life for much of each year if their parents elect to send them to one of the country’s half a dozen central schools.”³⁰

“Fortunately, Colombo Plan and United Nations funds help make it possible for a limited number of young Bhutanese to receive advanced education in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Great Britain, and the United States.”³¹

“Free education is available, but there are insufficient facilities to accommodate all school age children. Many students receive higher technical training in India.

All Bhutanese nationals are obliged to wear the national costume. Under law, Bhutanese women are treated as equal to men.”³²

(c) HEALTH AND WELFARE

“Bhutan also ranks low in terms of health indicators. Its infant mortality rate is high even for South Asia, and the country’s ratio of physicians to the general population similarly lags behind those of its neighbours. Most of the population lacks access to safe drinking water, and infectious gastrointestinal diseases are widespread as a

consequence.”³³ “At least one child in four dies of gastrointestinal disease in its first year. A third or more are dead before they are five.”³⁴ “Respiratory ailments, especially influenza and pneumonia, also are widely prevalent, and the incidence of parasite infestations, skin diseases, tuberculosis, malaria, and goitre is high in most parts of the country. As a result, the average life expectancy in Bhutan remains low, even for a developing country.

A network of small hospitals and rural clinics and dispensaries is scattered throughout the country, but Bhutan’s only general hospital is at Thimphu. The rural clinics are staffed by paramedical personnel, with each serving 4,000 to 5,000 people spread over a relatively large area.”³⁵

(d) CULTURAL LIFE

“The three main ethnic groups of Bhutan display considerable variety in their culture and life-styles.

The Bhutia, or Ngalops, share a common heritage of Tibetan culture, language, religion. They form the largest of the three ethnic groups. Most of the political and social leaders of Bhutan are of Bhutia heritage.

Bhutia houses are built of timber and stone and have thick, pounded mud walls to keep out the cold. Most such houses have two stories: livestock are kept on the ground floor, while the family lives above. Inside the house a family will usually have a shrine consisting of a small Buddhist image in a corner.

While the Bhutia family system is basically patriarchal, family estates are divided equally between sons and daughters. Both men and women are free to choose whom to marry, and members of both sexes can initiate a divorce. Ordinary Bhutia villagers may not be able to afford meat in their daily meals and often must rely on a dish of rice, potatoes, and chilies. Beside meat, the yak also supplies milk, from which butter is made for use in lamps on the shrine altar.

The Sharchops are closely linked to the Bhutia because they

share a common religion in Tibetan Buddhism, though among the Sharchops there is often a strong element of the older pre-Buddhist Bon religion. Sharchops built their houses of stone and wood, often on stilts on the hillslopes. They generally clear the land for agriculture by burning the vegetation, use a plot for several years, and then move to another site when the productivity of the soil declines.

The Nepalese are predominantly Hindus and have caste and family ties to Nepal and India. Because they live in warmer climate of southern Bhutan, their houses are made of bamboo and thatch. The Nepalese do not eat beef, and some of them abstain from meat altogether. Instead, they eat the rice and curry dishes common to the Hindus of Nepal and India. Their caste system separates different social levels and influences the choice of marriage partners and other social relationships. The Nepalese in Bhutan lack the same loyalty to the monarchy that is predominant among the Bhutia and Sharchops. In response, the government has tried to integrate the Nepalese into the national life. For example, a government order has made the Dzongkha language compulsory for all Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. On their part, the Nepalese have protested this and other attempts at “national integration” under the hegemony of Bhutanese language and culture, and a serious political and cultural division between the Buddhist Bhutanese majority and the Hindi Nepali-speaking minority continues to exist.”³⁶

THE FUTURE OF BHUTAN – THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

“Once upon a time, in the high hills far away, was a magic kingdom with a secret. The people were poor, but, thanks to the secret, they were happy. They loved their forests and fertile valleys, their snow-capped mountains and gurgling rivers, their white-washed temples and red-robed monks. And they loved their king, for he was good and wise, and kept the secret well.

Since they were far away, not many people knew of their happiness.

But the king in his goodness and wisdom decided this had to change. This made the people uneasy. And he wanted to give up many of his powers, which made them afraid. The king was married to four beautiful sisters and had many children. But he worried that future kings might not be as good and wise as he. So he wanted the people to rule themselves. To help them, he bequeathed the secret of his golden rule. And he gave it a name: Gross National Happiness.

Shangri-La-di-da

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is not in fact an idyll in a fairy tale. It is home to perhaps 900,000 people – estimates vary wildly – most of whom live in grinding poverty. It is grappling, like most other countries, with the boons and curses of globalization, trying to preserve its own traditions while opening its doors to prosperity, Bhutan, however, is different in ways that draw both foreigners and the Bhutanese themselves into romantic flights of fancy about the country.

First, few places have been so romanticised as Shangri-La, or remained so backward and so isolated for so long. Serfdom was abolished only in 1956, by the third king in the present dynasty. After China's crushing of an uprising in neighbouring Tibet in 1959, he went beyond the freeing of the serfs to embark on a tentative opening up. The fate of other Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms and theocracies – Sikkim (absorbed by India), Mustang (Nepal) and Tibet itself (China) – was warning enough of the perils of isolation. Bhutan, squeezed between two giants, agreed in 1949 that its policy would be “guided” by one of them, India. It still has no diplomatic relations with the other, China.

Bhutan's first paved road dates only from 1961. Before 1968 it had no banks. Until 1999, there was no television and no access to the internet. Thimphu still advertises itself as the world's only national capital without a traffic light.

Second, Bhutan has taken unusual steps to safeguard its heritage. Most visibly, weaving and costume are protected by rules making

traditional dress compulsory in public places. Men wear a *gho*, a long one-piece robe belted and hitched up at the waist, leaving a big pouch in the upper folds. It looks a little like a dressing gown, but is typically worn with knee-length socks and sturdy lace-ups. Women wear the *kira*, a floor-sweeping straight dress topped with a blouse and short jacket. Both are elegant. Traditional architecture, too, is promoted. Even new houses are traditionally painted – white with ornate decorated window-frames, and the occasional mural, such as a big flying phallus, a symbol of a popular Tantric master, known as the Divine Madman, who made good use of his.

Third, there is Gross National Happiness. When, in the 1970s, Bhutan's fourth and present king said that he cared more about this than about Gross National Product, it seemed something of a throwaway remark. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who succeeded to the throne in 1972, is a moderniser like his father, but this seemed a simple statement of the obvious: that economic growth alone does not bring contentment. Over the years, however, the idea has taken hold. At home, Bhutan's rulers find it a handy excuse for some of their quirkiest policies. Abroad, some development theorists have latched on to the idea as an alternative to the globalisers' creed of growth-oriented market economics.

So a new set of initials – GNH – is now used to abbreviate a small academic industry. At an international conference on GNH in Thimpu last February, 60 papers were tabled. Then, in June, Bhutan's prime minister, Jigme Thinley, based his annual report on the government's performance on the tenets of GNH.

Even in Bhutan, however, opinions differ about GNH. For its adherents it offers a guide to policy that will enable Bhutan to pick and choose in the globalization supermarket, modernising on its terms alone. Bhutan's experiment, in this view, also offers important lessons to other poor countries.

For critics, however, GNH is at best an empty slogan – one that risks “including everything and ending up meaning nothing”, in the words

of Dorji Penjor of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, the thick-tank that held the conference in February. At worst, say some foreign observers, GNH provides ideological cover for repressive and racist policies.

Some of GNH's exponents, such as Mr. Thinley, seem a bit bemused by the vogue. He is no longer prime minister, a post that rotates each year among five of the ten-member cabinet. But, as home minister, he still sits in his *gbo* and orange ministerial shawl in Thimphu's 17th-century *dzhang*, a fortress that serves as both monastery and government of office. It is a suitable seat from which to expound on merging tradition with modernity.

Happiness has four legs

Mr. Thinley is suspicious of efforts to turn GNH into a science, or to devise indices measuring happiness along the lines of the UN Development Programme's human-development index (which ranks Bhutan 134th out of 177 countries). Yet he has done more than any other government to underpin the king's insubstantial aphorism.

He says there are four "pillars" to GNH. The first is "sustainable and equitable socio-economic development". Revealingly, some at the conference modified this to "economic self-reliance". Bhutan's economy is tiny, and its foreign links tinier still. Subsistence farming still sustains some four-fifths of the population. The priority remains road-building. Even the main "highway" from Thimphu to Paro is in many places only wide enough for one car. Mr. Thinley boasts that motorable roads now connect all but one of Bhutan's 20 districts, though many villages can still be reached only on foot.

In 2003 Bhutan's total exports, almost all of which went to India, worth just 5,700m Bhutanese ngultrums (about \$120m). Electricity generated from Bhutan's River accounted for about half the exports. The other sources of foreign exchange were, and are, aid – especially from India – and tourism. About 7,000 tourists visit each year. They are charged at least \$200 a day, shared cosily between the government and private travel agents. The only foreign investment of note is in two smart resorts.

Yeshey Zimba, the trade minister, says the government no longer limits the number of visitors. It regulates itself, thanks to the difficulty of getting to Bhutan. Mr. Zimba is, by local standards, an ardent supporter of globalisation: “There is nothing we can do to prevent it.” Indeed, Bhutan is embracing it, and trying to join the World Trade Organisation. Nobody seems quite sure why. Mr. Zimba argues that it is like the United Nations, which Bhutan joined in 1971: “Everybody is a member.”

The second pillar is the pristine environment. Bhutan is one big mountainous forest. Only 16% of its land is arable, so there is pressure to fell trees and sell timber. Ministers worry that logging could swiftly turn the fragile ecology into a “mountain desert”, and a law requires the proportion of tree cover to be kept above 60%. In fact, the tree cover is spreading, having increased from 64% to 72% of the country in the past ten years, says Mr. Thinley.

Similarly, few of Bhutan’s mineral resources – coal, possibly tungsten, and limestone suitable for cement – have been dug up. The hydropower projects are mostly “run-of-the-river” schemes with far less impact on the environment, and far less human displacement, than huge dams would have.

This wonderful record has a cost, of course, and, as a guide to policy, it is where GNH parts company from GNP. Yet it is in the third pillar – the “preservation and promotion of Bhutan’s culture” that things start getting really tricky, and one group’s GNH starts looking like another group’s grief. Nobody could quarrel with Bhutan’s wish to preserve its unique cultural heritage. But what is it?

For most Bhutanese, the cultural inheritance is dominated by a strain of Tibetan Buddhism. Bhutan was unified in the 17th century by a Tibetan lama. It has thousands of temples, an “alter room” in every home, and many boys still become monks for life. Officially, the number is actually growing.

Bhutan, however, has many ethnic groups, some of them migrants. Though Hindu Nepalese started migrating to the fertile

south of Bhutan in the late 19th century, the big influx of economic migrants came in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in the late 1980s, the government started pushing “one nation, one people” as a principle. The dress rules appeared. Nepali, which was taught as a third language (after the national tongue, Dzhonkha, and English) in some schools, was dropped from the curriculum. Nepali-speaking southerners had to produce documents to prove their citizenship. Some protested. Some were expelled. Others fled.

Between 1988 and 1993, thousands of Nepali-speakers left Bhutan, many ending up in refugee camps in Nepal, which now house about 100,000 people, a tenth of whom were born there. A further 20,000-30,000 are believed to be in India. Efforts to agree with Nepal on the fate of those in the camps are subject to endless delays and bickering.

The issue has been costly for Bhutan. Its image is dented. Shangri-La seems less alluring if its bliss relies on keeping an eighth of the 1990 population in a grim exile. Some aid donors, such as the Dutch, have turned off the tap in protest.

Many of the “refugee”, claims the government, were recent illegal immigrants; some had never been in Bhutan; most had emigrated of their own accord and forfeited citizenship, for which they would have to reapply. Of the 12,000 in the camps whose status has been “verified”, Bhutan admits only that 297 were expelled. Some 75%, it claims, left voluntarily and the rest were non-Bhutanese.

Many north Bhutanese insist the government had to act. The country risked being swamped, they say, by Nepalese who could wander over the open border with India and occupy Bhutan’s most fertile land. In their camps the Nepali-speakers may hang portraits of Bhutan’s king. But, it is said, once they are securely in Bhutan, the portraits are those of the king of Nepal. Some foreigners in Thimpu, while not defending the government’s means, have some sympathy for the ends. Others deplore continued discrimination against Nepali-speakers.

And now, traditional television

Mr. Thinly insists the idea of GNH is inclusive. Nepali is spoken in the National Assembly. The one newspaper, *Kuensel*, a weekly, appears in English and Nepali as well as Dzongkha. But, besides “preserving and promoting” Bhutan’s culture, the government is also defining, limiting and sometimes even inventing it. Some “tradition”, such as the requirement that everybody should wear a long shawl (whose colour denotes the wearer’s status) when visiting government offices or temples, are fairly recent discoveries. In September it was decreed that any women wearing their scarves draped over one shoulder were flouting a two-shoulder custom. Last year the Dzongkha Development Commission coined 400 new words to help a liturgical language cope with the modern world.

Who controls the past, as Big Brother knew, controls the future. Bhutan is a friendly and engaging place but there is an Orwellian tinge to its government. Last month it became the first country to ban tobacco. Citizens must return to their village each year to obtain their identity card. Those who travel abroad surrender their passports on return and can reclaim them only by going to Thimphu.

All that could perhaps change with the building of the fourth of Mr. Thinley’s pillar, good governance. Democracy, for now, is of the trickle-down variety. In 1981 the king introduced 20 district committees, elected by households. Ten years later decentralisation was extended to 201 committees representing “blocks” of villages, elected by individual voters. Reform is now to be entrenched in a new constitution. In January the king will tour the country, drumming up support for this – a document that will take away much of his power.

Sonam Tobgye, the chief justice and chairman of the drafting committee, admits many are uneasy about the changes – especially the replacement of the king’s role as ombudsman, to whom everybody has the right of appeal, with a supreme court. Some in the Thimphu elite fear electoral democracy, worrying that it may one day threaten their interests in favour of the poor rural majority. They also fear the

emergence of political parties, which may form along ethnic or regional lines. Some hope that party politics can be avoided in favour of civilised debate and continued consensus. Mr. Tobgye, though, is adamant: “Democracy can’t work without parties.”

The chief justice is also an optimist, arguing that you “must trust human being; with friction there is energy.” Until recently, Bhutan’s rulers showed little such trust. Like over-protective parents, they shielded their people from evil influences.

The big exception is television. Until 1999 there was none, except for a lucky few with secret satellite dishes or video-players. Then, when Bhutan started producing its own, very limited, television programmes, it also opened up to cable operators. In an unusual big bang for such a cautious regime, viewers suddenly had access to a full 46 channels, offering everything from news to near-naked fashion models to wrestling.

Sok Sian Pek, who conducted a “media impact study” for the communications ministry, says television has wrought huge changes in the towns. People adjust meal-times for their favourite programme. Most popular are Indian soap operas (understanding of Hindi is spreading fast). Ms. Pek scoffs at those who blame television for rising crime, but does detect concern at the changes in family life it has brought.

Similarly, Karma Phuntsho, a Bhutanese scholar of Buddhism at Cambridge University, laments the consumerism sweeping Bhutan. People, he says, are becoming restless and materialistic. “The invisible culture is at stake.” In Thimphu’s bars, young people are glued to Spanish football matches, or listen to pop music (performed by young men in *ghos*), or play video games in a dingy arcade. Many carry mobile phones, introduced last year. The shops are small, but full of imported goods. Traffic lights will surely come. In its capital at least, Bhutan, sad to say, is becoming more like everywhere else.

GNH, in one sense, is an expression of that nostalgia, and an

appeal for alertness about what might be lost under the incoming tide of modernity. But an 80-year-old woman in a village near Paro has a different perspective. Asked about the changes she has seen, she can think of nothing bad to say about them: electric light, which came ten years ago, is better than a smoky kerosene lamp; taking a bus up the new asphalt road, down which all those evil influences roar, is better than walking along a muddy path. The good old days? Bah.”³⁷

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