

Cavelti

Perspectives

About Bhutan



What about my trip to **Bhutan**? I can say without hesitation that it's the only country I've recently visited where almost no one I met had a hidden agenda, asked for a handout, or even a piece of candy. Much of this is due to the country's policy of opening up at a deliberately slow pace. Tourism, for example, is at once welcomed and discouraged. Only a limited number of visas are issued each year and, to keep the supply of permits in line with demand, a daily fee of US\$200 per visitor is imposed. Similarly, only seven flights a week come to Bhutan and the only airline allowed to land is Bhutan's own **Druk Air**.

Once tourists are in the country, though, no effort is spared to make them feel at home and expose them Bhutan's customs and culture. Food and accommodation are very simple, but I never had the impression that anyone held anything back and the motives never once seemed commercial. What I enjoyed most is that Bhutanese generosity and hospitality don't involve a deliberate effort—they come naturally. I believe that's because the vast majority of the country's population engages in farming and is completely self-sufficient; in other words, no commercial effort is necessary to survive. People freely drift in and out of the often very isolated hamlets. It's understood that whoever comes by will be looked after, without consideration of recompense. I've only had similar experiences twice in my life: when I crossed Africa 30 years ago and when I visited an even more remote part of the Himalayas, **Mustang**, in 1991.

From a scenic viewpoint, Bhutan is stunningly beautiful. Its pristine Himalayan peaks, most of them yet unclimbed, are bordered by lush valleys, which teem with subtropical vegetation and harbor countless animal species not found anywhere else. To me, the most spectacular part of the landscape is made up by its forests—endless, virgin growth of cypresses, cedars, oaks and pines, covering hills so steep it's hard to understand how the soil can support the weight of the often hundred-foot-high trunks. In the mornings, Bhutan's forests are usually shrouded in mist, which gives them the type of mysterious air one associates with an Asian kingdom.

A fragile country

As my visit progressed and I started to comprehend Bhutan's tenuous socio-economic structure, I began to realize how fragile a country this is. Despite, or perhaps because of, its guarded openness, Bhutan faces a host of challenges, from which it is highly unlikely to emerge unscathed. So far, the country has been blessed by the stable reign of a capable monastic dynasty, whose social and economic policies have mostly focused on diminishing outside pressures. While abolishing the cast system and embracing some basic democratic principles, the current monarch and his predecessor have kept other transitions intentionally gradual. The legal system, for example, remains deeply anchored in Buddhist principles, with only half of the regulations governing daily life of secular origin.



Jigme Singye Wagchuck, The 45-year old king, has been especially slow to convert an almost purely agrarian economy into a more diversified one and, in the few instances where the transition has started, the public sector is used as a bridge. As a result, an excessively large number of enterprises, from road building to tourism to food processing, are almost always owned by the state or by members or relatives of the royal family. Plans are for a private sector to be developed and some small steps in this direction are visible. But to what extent the government will succeed is highly questionable. Even if the king is intent on pursuing democratic goals, the asset base managed by his government is now so large that those with influence will likely prevent an orderly transfer into diverse private hands.

My suspicion is that the same handful of people who currently control 95% of Bhutan's private property will soon own the same percentage of the entire economy, much the way it is in much of the third world. Such an outcome would not only interfere with the king's economic objectives, but would also foil his plans for a vibrant social structure and eventually threaten Bhutan's environmental riches. Oligarchs rarely resist selling out to the highest bidder and, given the opportunity, there will be plenty of bids both for the country's forests and for unfettered access to its tourism industry. In the end, of course, all oligarchies are challenged by popular forces. And in Bhutan it's easy to see how conflict could quickly erupt.

One of the most obvious sources of discontent is internal. To the king's credit, education is strongly encouraged, even in Bhutan's most remote areas. Many children now complete high school and, for those who wish to go further, there is **Sherubtse College**, the country's only university. Moreover, the government readily pays for education abroad, if students wish to pursue post-graduate programs. But the challenge of integrating those with an education into the economy remains unsolved. Graduates have few options other than to join the civil service, where jobs are typically devoid of any challenge. Worst of all, the numbers of high school graduates will steeply rise in coming years, which will create massive social and economic tensions. Not only will it be hard to further expand the already bloated civil service, but Bhutan's educated classes will also refuse to return to a simple life of subsistence farming.

Essential facts for Bhutan

Area
47,000 sq km

Irrigated land:
340 sq km

Elevation:
lowest point: Drangme Chhu 97 m
highest point: Kula Kangri 7,553 m

Population:
approx. 600,000

Life expectancy:
male: 52.79 years
female: 51.99 years

Total fertility rate:
5.13 children born per woman

Ethnic groups:
Bhote 50%,
ethnic Nepalese 35%,
indigenous or migrant tribes 15%

Religions:
Buddhist 75%,
Hinduism 25%

Literacy:
42.2% of people over age 15
can read and write

Government type:
monarchy; special treaty
relationship with India

Constitution:
no written constitution
or bill of rights

Another conflict is that between the Bhuddist Northern Bhutanese, **Drukpas**, to whom the royal family and the country's small elite belong, and the Southerners, the **Lhotshampas**, who are ethnically of Nepalese origin and are Hindus. The government, in the name of protecting Bhutan's distinct cultural identity, imposes strict guidelines demanding adherence to the Drukpa culture, which include mandatory clothing regulations and prescriptions for religious and language practices. The Lhotshampas, who have their own cultural preferences and are eager to preserve them, view this as a violation of their basic rights. In 1985, the conflict briefly erupted into widespread violence—provoked by a Lhotsampas revolt, the Bhutanese government drove out more than 100,000 Southerners (about 20% of the country's population at the time!) who now live in UN refugee camps in southeastern Nepal. Bhutan's leaders don't like to talk about this rather shameful episode of their history and most ordinary people quickly clam up when the subject comes up. I'm convinced the official policy to keep the cultural laws enforced and discourage an open discussion will lead to major problems. Not only do the Southern Bhutanese still feel disenfranchised but, increasingly, young people in the North resent their government's policy, too. In **Thimphu**, the country's tiny capital, I talked to a couple of young men wearing Western clothing. One of them confessed to having been caught out of native dress, which led to a stiff fine and, in turn, trouble with parents and school.

Television and Internet

Social tensions are also likely to be aggravated by the simultaneous introduction of TV and the internet just over a year ago. The government seems to believe that this "technological revolution" will be a panacea—an article written by a government functionary naively proclaims that Bhutan will soon become an exporter of information technology. I think the outcome will be quite the contrary. Young people watching television will see first-hand what effect properly organized uprisings can have and those wishing to freely speak about democracy (which is not currently tolerated) will soon exchange their views by e-mail. In short, my fear is that information technology will quickly destabilize the country. Which is not to suggest that the king should ban television or the internet, merely to note that his policy of gradual change, which so far has been very successful, is in for a rough ride.

There are other problems confronting the country. Just like its neighbor, **Nepal**, tiny Bhutan, with its six hundred thousand people, is nestled between the world's two most populous nations, **India** and **China**. But while Nepal likes to keep an open relationship with both these giants, Bhutan is firmly in the clutches of India. Wherever I saw a particularly ambitious project, whether it was the construction of a hydroelectric plant or the costly renovation of a temple, I was invariably told that the Indians were paying for it. India has actually made it known that it doesn't wish for Bhutan to accept the countless offers of financial aid from the industrialized world—it prefers to pay for all the kingdom's modernization efforts from its own pocket. India's agenda is unmistakable: in the event of future hostilities with China, Bhutan will be its buffer.

Sometimes I even wondered whether this assessment of mine was too guarded. Indian troops are stationed in various parts of Bhutan; the official explanation is that they're here to give training and technical assistance to the Bhutanese Army.

Parallels with Afghanistan

The last time I encountered a relationship of similar dependence by a small country on a powerful neighbor was when I visited **Afghanistan** in 1976. As I crossed the **Hindu Kush**, scores of Soviet soldiers were busy building a highway across the **Salang Pass**. Before long, the locals explained, there would be a tunnel right through the mountains—all in the name of friendship. Shortly after the tunnel was completed, three years later, the Soviets invaded.

Moreover, in Bhutan's case, its huge neighbor has the perfect pretext if it ever wishes to annex the kingdom. Bhutan's southwest adjoins the Indian state of **Assam**, a hive of separatist activity. Only a few hours before we passed through the same stretch of highway in the border area between Bhutan and Assam, terrorists blew up 29 people riding in a truck! 27 of them died. The rebel group, known as **ULFA** (United Liberation Front for Assam) is known to operate out of the jungles of southern Bhutan, which could easily pave the way for an Indian invasion at any time.



Tashigang zhong

In between treks and climbs, at the campfire or at the dinner table of a guesthouse, I had the opportunity to ask both ordinary Bhutanese, as well as civil servants and members of the country's small elite about their hopes for the future. Without fail, members of the peasant class praised their monarch, while those elevated a few notches by education expressed admiration for their monarch but expected trouble ahead. The most disturbing talks were those with members of the country's "establishment"—the few who actually have some degree of clout within the bureaucracy or who own private sector enterprises. Without being challenged in any way, they were almost hysterically defensive about the current order of things. Almost invariably, their statements included the notion that democracy would only harm the country and that the incidents of conflict between South and North that we'd heard about were mere fabrications of the Western media. Given the fact that no foreign newspapers are available inside Bhutan and that few in the West have ever heard of the place that is a bizarre contention.

But such considerations are alien to most Bhutanese, who remain sheltered in the remoteness of their valleys and the contentment of a self-sufficient lifestyle. One of the highlights of our trip was attending a **tsechu**, a high Buddhist holiday, in remote **Tashigang**. People arrived on the backs of trucks and, in most cases, on foot—often after walking a day or two, wearing ornate silk costumes handed down through generations to be worn only once a year on this occasion.

In our case, getting there had even been harder—we'd walked in from another district, a four-day trek that had first taken us 10,000 feet uphill, then 8000 feet down, first on snow, then down iced-over creek beds, and eventually along swampy jungle paths. It was all worth it, though.

Once in Tashigang, a hamlet perched high on a cliffside, we joined the locals in the courtyard of the imposing **zhong**, or fortress, that accommodates the monastery. The two-day affair, which included stunning religious dances and ceremonies--always in the courtyard of a fortress erected in 1659--culminated in the unfurling at dawn of a huge banner, five stories high and nearly as wide, that had been meticulously embroidered with Bhuddist scenes centuries earlier and never seen the light of day. Before the sun rose, the banner was taken down again, to be kept for the next festival.

All in all, I enjoyed my time in Bhutan immensely. Visiting a country in which not many places have electricity or plumbing, and not knowing where we'd next pitch our tent, helped gain perspective. But it was Bhutan's incomparably dazzling, yet serene, environment and its cheerful and open people that really made the difference. I felt like I'd stepped back in time, into a world far simpler, less hurried and more caring, made possible by the fluke of the country's remoteness, the self-sufficiency of its farming communities and the king's determination to modernize slowly. But time and circumstance are catching up with Bhutan. I don't know where its destiny lies, but I'm certain that the window that gave me this glimpse into the past is rapidly closing. □

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