

International  
Encyclopaedia  
of  
**HIMALAYAS**

**Vol-2**  
**Bhutan Himalayas**

Ramesh Chandra Bisht

A Mittal Publication

# INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF HIMALAYAS

[FIVE VOLUMES]

Ramesh Chandra Bisht



VOLUME-TWO

Bhutan Himalayas



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## Preface

With snow-created lofty peaks and serene calm defining the environment, the landlocked country of Bhutan, often known as the 'Last Himalayan Kingdom' seems to find its true identity in the majestic splendour of the Himalayas. The Himalayas, or the awe-inspiring 'Abode of Snow' rise abruptly from the subtropical lowlands of the Ganges-Brahmaputra plains of Northern India, where the small Kingdom lies.

Enveloping almost the whole of the tiny nation in the snowy embrace, the Himalayas in Bhutan can be classified into the Inner and Greater Himalayan Range. The Inner Himalayas in Bhutan are dissected by a series of fertile north-south valleys, where most of the population is concentrated. On the other hand, north of the Inner Himalayas are Greater Himalayas, occupying about one-third of Bhutan.

This book is an endeavour to compile a guide to introduce to the reader the terrain of Bhutan Himalayas. Detailing the origin and growth, geology, ecology and environment of the area, this volume provides the reader with a compelling insight into this region. With a comprehensive exploration of the topic, it is hoped that the book proves to be a worth read for the general reader.

**Ramesh Chandra Bisht**

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## Introduction to Bhutan Himalayas

Bhutan is one of the most isolated nations in the world. It is a landlocked South Asian nation situated between India, Tibet, and the People's Republic of China. The entire country is mountainous except for an 8-10 mile (13-16 km) wide strip of subtropical plains in the extreme south which is intersected by valleys known as the Duars. The elevation gain from the subtropical plains to the glacier-covered Himalayan heights exceeds 23,000 feet (7,000 m).

Bhutan often referred as the 'Land of the peaceful Dragon' is still regarded as one of the last "Shangri-La" in the Himalayan region because of its remoteness, its spectacular mountain terrain, varied flora and fauna and its unique ancient Buddhist monasteries. It is relatively unexplored pockets of Asia, which allows only limited number of discerning travellers to enter the country with special travel visa permits. Bhutan's isolation has resulted its culture and traditions remaining much the same for many hundreds of years.

One of the highest mountain reliefs on Earth can be found in the tiny country of Bhutan. Sandwiched between eastern India and the Tibetan plateau, Bhutan hosts peaks that reach between 5,000 and 7,000 metres (16,000-23,000 feet) in height. These mountains are neighbours to Mount Everest, Earth's highest peak at 8,850 metres (29,035 feet). The impressive Bhutan Himalayas are permanently capped

with snow, which extends down valleys in long glacier tongues. Because of weather patterns on each side of the Himalaya and differences in topography, the glaciers on each side of the mountain are distinctly different from one another and are likely to react very differently to climate change.

Situated in the heart of the Great Himalayas, the world's mightiest range; Bhutan is flanked on the north and north west by Tibet, the plains of north-east India to the south and south-west and the hills of India's north eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh to the east. The kingdom is spread over an area of 18000 sq. miles, with varied climatic conditions; ranging—as the terrain climbs; in horizontal bands—from the hot and humid Southern foothills, to the temperate inner Himalaya and, finally, to the nearly 7700 m high snow caps of the High Himalaya that defines Bhutan's northern frontier.

Bhutan's climate ranges from tropical in the south, to temperate in the centre of the country, to cold in the north.. The weather can vary dramatically from place to place and can vary equally dramatically from day to day or within the same day.

In the Thimphu and Paro valleys, the winter daytime temperature averages 60 degrees Fahrenheit during clear winter days but drops well below freezing during the night. Mid December to early January can be a beautifully clear and dry time in Western Bhutan. The fluctuations are not quite so great during the summer and daytime temperature often rises to the mid-eighties Fahrenheit.

Punakha and the central valleys are lower than their Western neighbours and tend to always be a few degrees warmer. The higher peaks will be snow-covered all year. The higher passes, particularly Thrumsing La- between Bumthang and Mongar, can be treacherous during the winter as snow falls frequently and ices up the road. Light snow will often dust Thimphu and Paro in winter but

infrequently will there be heavy snowstorms despite their location in the Central Himalayas.

The Summer monsoon from the Bay of Bengal affects Bhutan from late May to early October. Views over the Himalayas from the higher passes are usually obscured from May to August. There are notable advantages to visiting Bhutan during the wet season including the spectacular rhododendron blossom from March through May and the deep green valleys.

The Spring season in Bhutan can only be compared to a master artist's palette. Colours that, until now, have only existed in the imagination. Truly a spectacular time. The Autumn season, October through November, is usually very mild and clear. The Fall colours surround and embrace your senses.

Bhutan has a population of about 1 million and its state religion is the Drukpa sect of Kagyupa, a school of Mahayana or Varjrayana/Tantric Buddhism; making it the last surviving Buddhist Kingdom. In the eleven centuries since it was introduced, Buddhism has shaped the national's history and plays a vital role.

In western Bhutan; Paro, Thimphu (the capital) and Punakha (the old capital), ; in Central Bhutan; Tongsa (ancestral seat of Bhutan's ruling dynasty) and the bucolic beauty of the high valleys of Bhumthang are most visited by tourists. In the recent years, Bhutan has become a paradise for trekkers and mountaineers. Trekking through the hills of the country sighting rare botanical plants and herbs and encountering a multitude of colourful birds and rare animals; the takin, blue sheep, burket, musk deer and, in the lonely reaches of the High Himalaya, the elusive snow leopard.

Mystery surrounds Bhutan's distant past, as priceless irretrievable documents were lost in fires and earthquakes. In the 8th century CE, Guru Padma Sambhava made his legendary trip from Tibet to Bhutan on the back of a flying

tigress. He meditated at Taktsang, Tiger's Nest, in the Paro Valley. Bhutan is a small country, and is located at the south of Tibet and the north of north east section of India as Assam and Sikkim. Area is as large as Switzerland and is 46,500 square Kilometre. Most of the country are in the steep slope of the Himalayas. The king, His Majesty of the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, is the king of the 4th reign is governing. A kingdom is taking forms called the Separation of a politics and a religion, and a king takes charge of politics and a archbishop Je Khempois conducting a religion.

Bhutan's early history is steeped in Buddhist tradition and mythology. Bhutan's medieval and modern history was a time of warlords, feuds, giant fortresses and castles. The visit of Padama Sambhava in 747 AD is the important landmark in the history of the country. The kingdom's recent history begins with a hereditary monarchy that was founded in the 20th century and continued the country's policy of isolationism. It was under the leadership of the third king that Bhutan emerged from its medieval past of serfdom and reclusion.

Despite the speed of modernisation, Bhutan has maintained a policy of careful, controlled policy of development in order to preserve its national identity. Though known as Bhutan to the outside world, to the Bhutanese, the country is known as Druk Yul, 'land of the thunder dragon'. The people are known as the Drukpas.

The State religion is Drukpa Kagyupa a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It has been institutionalised in the Dratshang (Central Monk body), headed by the Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) who is chosen from among the most learned lamas and enjoys an equal rank with the King. Bhutan is the only country in the world to have adopted Mahayana Buddhism in its Tantric form as its official religion. The Buddhist faith has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the cultural, ethical and sociological development of Bhutan and its people. It permeates all



strands of secular life, bringing with it a reverence for the land and its well being. Annual festivals (tsechus and dromches) are spiritual occasions in each district. They bring together the population and are dedicated to the Guru Rinpoche or other deities. Throughout Bhutan, stupas and chortens line the roadside commemorating places where Guru Rinpoche or another high Lama may have stopped to meditate. Prayer flags dot the hills, fluttering in the wind. They allow Bhutanese people to maintain constant communication with the heavens.

The form of government in Bhutan is as unique as the country. It is the only Democratic Theocracy in the world. His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck is Bhutan's fourth king. A very special man who has kept the culture and traditions of his county intact while listening to the voice of his people. One of the six development goals HM King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has expressed is: People's participation and decentralisation in the government.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has adopted a very cautious approach to the development of tourism in the kingdom in an effort to avoid the negative impacts of tourism on the culture and the environment. In 1999, the number of tourists who visited Bhutan reached 5,361. Visitors to Bhutan must either be guests of the government or tourists. All tourists must travel on a pre-planned, prepaid, guided package tour. Independent travel is not permitted.

Bhutan's economy is based on forestry, animal husbandry and subsistence agriculture however these account for less than 50% of a GDP now that Bhutan has become an exporter of hydroelectricity. Cash crops, tourism, and development aid (the latter mostly from India) are also significant. An extensive census done in April, 2006 resulted in a population figure of 672,425. Thimphu is the capital and largest city. Most Bhutanese follow either the Drukpa Kagyu or the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The official language is Dzongkha

("the language of the dzong"). Bhutan is often described as the last surviving refuge of traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture.

Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan since 1960, lies at an elevation of over 7600 feet in a fertile valley transversed by the Thimphu Chhu River. Tashichhodzong, the main secretariat building, houses all the Ministries, the National Assembly Hall, the office of the King and the Throne Room. It is also the summer residence of the monk body and the religious chief, the Je Khempo.

For administrative purposes, Bhutan is divided into four dzongdey (administrative zones). Each dzongdey is further divided into dzongkhag (districts). There are 20 dzongkhag in Bhutan. Large dzongkhags are further divided into subdistricts known as dungkhag. At the basic level, groups of villages form a constituency called gewog and are administered by a gup, who is elected by the people.

Early records suggest scattered clusters of inhabitants had already settled in Bhutan when the first recorded settlers arrived 1,400 years ago. Bhutan's indigenous population is the Drukpa. Three main ethnic groups, the Sharchops, Ngalops and the Lhotsampas (of Nepalese origin), make up today's Drukpa population.

The Ngalop (a term thought to mean the earliest risen or first converted) are people of Tibetan origin who migrated to Bhutan as early as the ninth century. For this reason, they are often referred to in foreign literature as Bhote (people of Bhotia or Tibet). The Ngalop are concentrated in western and northern districts. They introduced Tibetan culture and Buddhism to Bhutan and comprised the dominant political and cultural element in modern Bhutan.

The Sharchop (the word means easterner), an Indo-Mongoloid people who are thought to have migrated from Assam or possibly Burma during the past millennium,

comprise most of the population of eastern Bhutan. Although long the biggest ethnic group in Bhutan, the Sharchop have been largely assimilated into the Tibetan-Ngalop culture. Because of their proximity to India, some speak Assamese or Hindi.

The third group consists of small aboriginal or indigenous tribal peoples living in scattered villages throughout Bhutan. Culturally and linguistically part of the populations of West Bengal or Assam, they embrace the Hindu system of endogamous groups ranked by hierarchy and practice wet-rice and dry-rice agriculture. They include the Drokpa, Lepcha, and Doya tribes as well as the descendants of slaves who were brought to Bhutan from similar tribal areas in India.

The remaining population were of Nepalese origin. According to government sources 28 percent of the national population was Nepalese in the late 1980s, but unofficial estimates ran as high as 30 to 40 percent, and Nepalese were estimated to constitute a majority in southern Bhutan. The number of legal permanent Nepalese residents in the late 1980s may have been as few as 15 percent of the total population, however. The first small groups of Nepalese, the most recent major groups to arrive in Bhutan, emigrated primarily from eastern Nepal under Indian auspices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Bhutan also had a sizable modern Tibetan refugee population. The Tibetan expatriates became only partially integrated into Bhutanese society, however, and many were unwilling to accept citizenship. Perceiving a lack of allegiance to the state on the part of Tibetans, the government decided in 1979 to expel to India those who refused citizenship. India, after some reluctance, acceded to the move and accepted more than 3,100 Tibetans between 1980 and 1985. Another 4,200 Tibetans requested and received Bhutanese citizenship.

Bhutan's official language is Dzongkha. Given the geographic isolation of many of Bhutan's highland villages, it is not surprising that a number of different dialects have survived. Bhutan has never had a rigid class system. Social and educational opportunities are not affected by rank or by birth. Bhutanese women enjoy equal rights with men in every respect. Bhutanese men wear a gho, a long robe tied around the waist by a small belt called kera. The women's ankle length dress is called a kira, made from beautifully coloured and finely woven fabrics with traditional patterns. Necklaces are fashioned from corals, pearls, turquoise, and the precious agate eye stones which the Bhutanese call 'tears of the gods'.

Spicy chilies (ema) and cheese (datse) blended with a wide variety of vegetables, meats, poultry and fish are found on many Bhutanese menus. Bhutan's professional chefs temper their natural tendency to over spice dishes by preparing food more suitable to western taste ranging from Continental to Chinese and Bhutanese to Indian.

Bhutanese people celebrate different festivals like the Bhutanese new year and other seasonal festivals like the summer solstice etc. But the most common festival is known as Tshechu. It is in fact a religious festival, and is celebrated all over Bhutan, usually after the end of harvest season. The Thimphu Tshechu in the capital of Bhutan is held in mid September. The main highlight of the Tshechu is the performance of the masked dances by the monks. There are many kinds of masked dances all involving different moves, masks and costumes. All of them special religious significances. According to legend, all these dances appeared in the past Buddhist master's vision during their meditation. The steps and moves are strictly followed as it was performed in the past. Alteration of the steps is seen as sacrilegious and would not be attempted by any masked dance teacher.

The Thimphu Tsechu held every year in the capital city, this is one of the most attended Tsechus by the Bhutanese

themselves. Tsechus are held annually district to district and are a great time of rejoicing for Bhutanese. Family members travel great distances to be reunited at this time of year.

The Paro Tsechu is held each year in early to mid April with dates set by the lunar calendar as is Chinese new year. The Tsechu is a commemoration of arrival of the Mahayana Buddhist saint Guru "Rimpoche" Padmasambhava (747 CE) and his influence on Bhutan. Different from the original form of Buddhism begun by the Indian Guyatama Buddha about 500 BCE, The Guru Rimpoche established a Buddhism similar to Tibetan Lamanism with the synchronisation of the indigenous "Bon" religions of the Himalayas and their magical powers. The Guru Rimpoche used his own powers and authority to convert local demons to Buddhism.

This victory of the Buddhist doctrines of "Dharma" over evil powers is the theme of the Bhutanese Tsechu celebration. Lasting several days the Tsechu is an epic pageant of dance and drama. The "gods of death", the dance of the stag and the hound, kings and queens, the triumphal entrance of the Guru are all portrayed here in dance. The Tsechu is a Bhutanese act of worship of the ideals of Dharma. During most of the year Bhutanese life revolves around planting and harvesting. Held during breaks in the farmer's spring planting and fall harvest, tsechus afford travellers a rare glimpse into Bhutanese traditions. Most Buddhist monasteries are closed to outsiders except during the tsechu season.