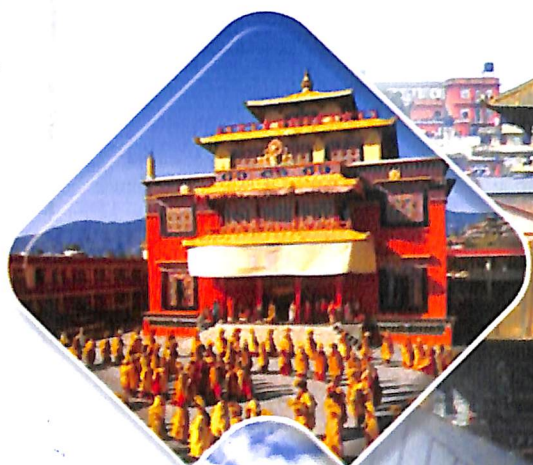


ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF  
**NEPAL**  
**BHUTAN**  
**TIBET**



Anil Kathuria



Encyclopaedia  
of  
**Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet**

Volume 2  
*Bhutan*



**Anil Kathuria**

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# Preface

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Looking for the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the most exciting elephant ride in the subcontinent, the best palace restaurant or just the heavenly people!. Whether you're seeking spirituality or are moved by the spirit of adventure, this essential Encyclopedia will take you to higher places.

The kingdoms Nepal and Bhutan are two of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Located high in the Himalayas, Nepal and Bhutan are totally isolated. In fact, Bhutan had no paved roads until 1960s and still it continues to discourage tourists and other foreigners, simply because the landlocked nation wants to protect its traditional culture. Nepal on the other hand encourages tourism, though only the heartiest people are able to hike its mountains and enjoy its majestic scenery.

Nepal is a small country, lying across in north of India. It is 900km long from east to west and only 150 - 200 km from north to south but it encompasses a remarkable range of climatic zones from below sea level to the highest mountains in the world. Nepalese Terai was in former times a malarial jungle occupying the southern strip, which defined its border with India and protected it from outside influence. The northern border with Tibet is protected by the Himalayan chain, crossed only by a few high passes.

Tibet with its slow measured pace of life, swooping lammergeier, griffons and golden eagles is the cultural heartland

of inner Asia, with vibrant blue salt lakes, rare blue sheep, rarely-glimpsed snow-leopard and of course an enduring literary heritage.

Until China took over Tibet and closed the border, many Nepalese made their living as porters, carrying goods such as salt on their backs between India and Tibet. Fortunately, mountaineering and tourist trekking, using the old trade routes began to provide an alternative source of employment for some of the porters at the time when this trade ceased.

*'Encyclopaedia of Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet'* is an effort to present an objective and concise account of social, economic and political life of the people of the region. A variety of scholarly monographs and journals, official reports of governments and international organisations, and of course foreign and domestic newspapers and periodicals are used as sources.

Suggestions for further improvement of this work are most welcome.

**Editor**

# *The Profile*

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In 1865, Britain and Bhutan signed the Treaty of Sinchulu, under which Bhutan would receive an annual subsidy in exchange for ceding some border land to British India. Under British influence, a monarchy was set up in 1907; three years later, a treaty was signed whereby the British agreed not to interfere in Bhutanese internal affairs and Bhutan allowed Britain to direct its foreign affairs. This role was assumed by independent India after 1947. Two years later, a formal Indo-Bhutanese accord returned the areas of Bhutan annexed by the British, formalized the annual subsidies the country received, and defined India's responsibilities in defence and foreign relations. A refugee issue of some 100,000 Bhutanese in Nepal remains unresolved; 90% of the refugees are housed in seven United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps. In March 2005, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck unveiled the government's draft constitution with an aim to introduce major democratic reforms.

## **History**

Bhutan has been fortunate enough to never be colonised. It has therefore managed to retain a purity of culture that is entirely local with very few outside influences. Although recorded history mentions Bhutan in the 7th century, its existence as an independent entity was recognized even before that. In the 8th century, the great Tantrik mystic, Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche came to Bhutan



from Swat, in present-day Pakistan, and spread the Buddhist faith. The next defining event in Bhutan's history was the arrival of Ngawang Namgyal, the "Shabdrung" (literally, at whose feet one submits) in 1616. The Shabdrung was the father and unifier of medieval Bhutan. After repelling numerous Tibetan invasions, the Shabdrung subdued the many warring feudal overlords and brought all of Bhutan under the influence of the Drukpa Kagyud School.

His 35-year reign also saw the establishment of a nationwide administration, aspects of which still endure, and the building of dzongs as easily defensible fortresses and seats of local government. In fact, many of the dzongs one sees today were built during the Shabdrung's reign. The most recent watershed in Bhutan's history was the coming to power of Ugyen Wangchuk, the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan. Ugyen Wangchuk pacified the feuding Regional Governors who had plunged Bhutan into a state of almost perpetual civil war. Having consolidated his authority across the entire country by 1885, he played the key mediator role between the British and the Chinese. Finally, on December 17, 1907, Ugyen Wangchuk was unanimously elected by all Regional Governors and the Central Monastic Body, at the Punakha Dzong and crowned "Druk Gyalpo" (literally, precious ruler of the dragon people). The present king, the fourth hereditary monarch, is Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuk, upon whose coronation in 1974 Bhutan opened its doors to tourists.

## Geography

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a Himalayan nation, located towards the eastern extreme of the aforementioned mountain range. It is fairly evenly sandwiched between the sovereign territory of two nations: first, the People's Republic of China on the north and northwest. There are approximately 470 kilometres of border with that nation's Tibet Autonomous Region. The second nation is the Republic of India on the south, southwest, and east; there are approximately 605 kilometres with the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam,

West Bengal, and Sikkim, in clockwise order from the kingdom. Bhutan's total borders amount to 1,075 kilometres. The Kingdom of Nepal to the west, the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the south, and the Union of Myanmar to the southeast are other close neighbours; the former two are separated by only very small stretches of Indian territory. Bhutan is a very compact nation, almost a square but with just a small bit more length than width. The nation's territory totals an approximate 47,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

## People

In Bhutan, wherever one goes, one will be greeted with traditional Bhutanese hospitality. It is in the Bhutanese tradition to honour every guest with great hospitality. In general, Bhutanese people are friendly and well-disposed towards foreigners. Bhutanese people still wear their traditional dress in schools, offices and public places. On the left, the picture shows a Bhutanese girl in women's traditional dress known as 'Kira'. Men's traditional dress is known as 'Gho' and it looks like a knee-length overcoat. Bhutan's population can be divided into three broad ethnic groups: the Eastern Bhutanese known as the Sharchops, the Western Bhutanese known as the Ngalungs, and the Southern Bhutanese known as the Lhotshampas. Bhutanese people continue to live in valleys. These valleys are now connected by roads. In the past, the rivers and gorges isolated different valleys and as a result, different dialects developed and it is common to see different dialects spoken in different valleys. Believed to be the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan, the Sharchops are of Mongoloid origins, though their exact origin is unknown (Tibet being the most likely source). At present, they live mainly in the east of Bhutan. The western region is the home of the Ngalung people, who are also of Mongoloid origin. Most breed cattle or cultivate the land, and their dwellings are spread over a wide area. Their ancestors are believed to have migrated to Bhutan from Tibet over the centuries. The Northern Himalayan Zone, over 3,000 meters (9,000 feet), is the haunt of semi nomadic yak herdsman.

They spend most of the year in their black yak hair tents, but also possess dry-stone walled houses, where they spend the coldest months of the year and which are used to store their goods. Southern Bhutan is inhabited mainly by Nepalese farmers who arrived in the country at the end of the 19th century.

## **Culture**

The Bhutanese culture is one of the oldest, most carefully guarded and well preserved cultures in the world. For the people of Bhutan realise that other than their centuries old culture and revered values, there is little else that is exclusive to their small and less developed country. In a bid to prevent their ancient customs from being influenced by the West, the Bhutanese government has made it mandatory for all Bhutanese to wear only their national dress in public.

## **Economy**

The economy, one of the world's smallest and least developed, is based on agriculture and forestry, which provide the main livelihood for more than 90% of the population. Agriculture consists largely of subsistence farming and animal husbandry. Rugged mountains dominate the terrain and make the building of roads and other infrastructure difficult and expensive. The economy is closely aligned with India's through strong trade and monetary links. The industrial sector is technologically backward, with most production of the cottage industry type. Most development projects, such as road construction, rely on Indian migrant labour. Bhutan's hydropower potential and its attraction for tourists are key resources. The Bhutanese Government has made some progress in expanding the nation's productive base and improving social welfare.

# Introduction

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Under British influence a monarchy was set up in 1907; three years later a treaty was signed whereby the country became a British protectorate. Independence was attained in 1949, with India subsequently guiding foreign relations and supplying aid. A refugee issue of some 100,000 Bhutanese in Nepal remains unresolved; 90% of these displaced persons are housed in seven United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps.

Maoist Assamese separatists from India, who have established themselves in the southeast portion of Bhutan, have drawn Indian cross-border incursions.

## Meaning and Description

Bhutan is a Buddhist state where power is shared by the king and government. The country's name in the local dialect means Land of the Dragon. In Bhutan, thunder is believed to be the voices of dragons roaring. In about 1200, a monastery was set up called the Druk (Thunder Dragon) with a sect called the Drukpas, named after it. The name and the emblem of the dragon have been associated with Bhutan ever since. The dragon on the flag is white to symbolise purity.



The two colours of the flag, divided diagonally, represent spiritual and temporal power within Bhutan. The orange part of the flag represents the Drukpas monasteries and Buddhist religious practice, while the saffron yellow field denotes the secular authority of the dynasty.

Regarding the dragon, it represents Druk, the Tibetan name for the kingdom of Bhutan. The jewels clamped in the dragon's claws symbolise wealth. The snarling mouth represents the strength of the male and female deities protecting the country. The Himalayan Kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan share a history of influence by Tibet, China, and India, and an interlude of British colonial guidance.

Although the kingdoms are not contiguous, each country is bordered by China to the north and India on its other peripheries. Both kingdoms are ruled by hereditary monarchs and are traditional societies with predominantly agricultural economies; their cultures, however, differ. Nepal's Hinduism, a legacy of India's influence, defines its culture and caste-structured society.

Bhutan's Buddhist practices and culture reflect India's influence by way of Tibet. The two countries' legal systems also reflect their heritage. Nepal's judicial system blends Hindu legal and English common law traditions. Bhutan's legal system is based on Buddhist law and English common law.

Bhutan is traditionally called 'Druk Yul'. It is a land-locked country with no access to sea. It is located in the eastern Himalayas bordered by India in the south, east and west and by the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in the north. It has an area of 46,500 sq. km. between latitudes 26 45° North and 28 10° North and between longitudes 88 45° east and 92 10° east. At its longest east-west dimension, Bhutan stretches around 300 kilometres and it measures 170 kilometres at its maximum north-south dimension. Bhutan shares about 1075 km of land boundaries with its neighbours—China 470 km, India 605 km. It is roughly the size of Switzerland.

The origin of Bhutan and its earlier history is unknown. Guru Padma Sambhava, an Indian saint made his legendary trip from Tibet to Bhutan at the end of eighth century.

Bhutan's history is shrouded in mystery, prior to the arrival of yet another Tibetan Lama (monk), Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal from Ralung Monastery of Tibet in 1616. After being threatened in Tibet, he escaped to Bhutan, in 1616.

Before Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal's arrival, numerous clans ruled in different valleys of Bhutan, having internecine war and quarrel among themselves and with Tibet. The arrival of Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal is considered as the most important era in the history of Bhutan. Zhabdrung literally means, "at whose feet one submits". Over the next thirty years, he conquered and unified the country under his central leadership, which otherwise was fragmented into petty principalities, ruled over by the tribal feudal chiefs.

Zhabdrung established himself as the country's supreme leader. He ruled over Bhutan for thirty-five years until his retirement in 1651 AD. During his reign of 35 years, he built dzongs (fortress), monasteries, and religious institutions. He established the Drukpa Kargyupa school of Tantric Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan.

His reign was marked by the introduction of the unique dual system of governance called the Chhoesid. This new system was characterised by the sharing of power and authority between the Deb Raja or the Desi who was the head of secular affairs and the Dharma Raja or the spiritual head, called as Je Khempo. He also codified laws for the country.

The laws were based on medieval theocratic principles called the Tsa-Yig. The successive 'Dharma Rajas' were the incarnations of the Shabdrung whereas the post of the Deb Raja was like that of the Prime Minister. In course of time the Dharma Rajas preferring religious matters withdrew themselves into seclusion while the Deb Rajas consolidated their authority exercising sole responsibility over the secular affairs. The

seventh and eighth Zhabdrung reincarnates (avtars) died in 1931 and 1953.

The dual form of governance continued until the birth of the *Wangchuk* dynasty and establishment of hereditary Monarchy in 1907. Ugyen Wangchuk was elected as the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan on December 17, 1907. The present King Jigme Singye Wangchuk is the fourth hereditary king

Nepal has existed as a kingdom centered in the Kathmandu Valley for more than 1,500 years.

The country is known for its majestic Himalayas and has nine of the fourteen peaks in the world over 8,000 meters, including Mount Everest and Annapurna I.

Modern Nepal began its evolution in the sixteenth century with the founding of the House of Gorkha by Dravya Shah in 1559. In the late eighteenth century, Gorkha conquests extended the kingdom through the Himalayas for almost 1,500 kilometres from the western boundary of Garhwal, India, through the territory of Sikkim in the east.

In the early nineteenth century, Gorkha power came into conflict with the British East India Company. The resulting Anglo- Nepalese War (1814-16) was devastating for Nepal: the Treaty of Sagauli reduced the kingdom to the boundaries it has since occupied, less than 900 kilometres from east to west. For almost thirty years after the treaty was concluded, infighting among aristocratic factions characterised Nepal.

The next stage of Nepalese politics was the period of hereditary Rana rule—the establishment of a dictatorship of successive Rana prime ministers beginning with Jang Bahadur Kunwar in 1846. During the period of Rana rule, which lasted until the end of 1950, Nepal was governed by a landed aristocracy; parliamentary government was in name only.

This period provided stability, but also inhibited political and economic development, because the Ranas isolated the country and exercised total control over internal affairs.

Although during this period Nepal was a constitutional monarchy with universal suffrage granted at age eighteen, political parties were not formed until the mid-twentieth century and were later banned. The longevity of the Rana dictatorship was also a result of a partnership between the rulers and the army. Patronage ensured loyal soldiers: the military supported the Rana prime ministers and, later, the Shah monarchs, who were figureheads during Rana rule.

In January 1951, the Ranas were forced to concede to the restoration of the monarchy, which then assumed charge of all executive powers: financial management, appointment of government officials, and command of the armed forces. The latter power became an increasingly useful tool for enforcing control. In 1962 King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev devised the centrally-controlled partyless council system of government called *panchayat*. This system served as the institutional basis of the king's rule and was envisioned by the palace as a democratic administration although it functioned only at the king's behest.

Incorporated into the 1962 constitution, the *panchayat* system was established at the village, district, and national levels. Successive changes in government and constitutional revisions did not weaken the powers of the absolute monarchy. In fact, a May 1980 referendum reaffirmed the status quo of the *panchayat* system and its continuation as a rubber stamp for the king. Elections in 1981 and 1986 were characterised by the lack of political programmes.

Government by an absolute monarch behind a democratic facade lasted for some thirty years. Although many party members were exiled to India, opposition to the government and the *panchayat* system continued to grow, particularly in the late 1980s when the outlawed political parties announced a drive for a multi-party system. A coalition between the Nepali Congress Party and the Communist Party of Nepal was formed in late 1989. The increasing disillusionment with and unpopularity of King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev's regime



and the worsening economic situation caused by the trade and transit dispute with India added to the momentum of the incipient pro-democracy movement.

The dissolution of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, and the successes of the pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had an impact in Nepal. In part as a result of the participatory experiences of Nepalese in India, movements arose to effect changes in Nepal's government and society. Nepal's long-standing history of continuity of rule and relative stability was challenged when the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, or pro-democracy movement, was formally established on February 18, 1990, almost forty years after the end of Rana control. Demonstrations and rallies—accompanied by violence, arrests, and even deaths—were held throughout the country. Political unrest became widespread. Ethnic groups agitated for official recognition of their cultural heritage and linguistic tradition and demonstrated against the monarchy. The goal of the pro-democracy movement, however, was to establish a more representative democracy and to end the *panchayat* system.

The demonstrations and protests characterising the pro-democracy movement gained momentum when the ban on political parties and activities was lifted in April 1990. That same month, the prime minister resigned, the Council of Ministers and the Rashtriya Panchayat (National Panchayat, or Parliament) were dissolved, and talks with the opposition were begun. A multi-party interim government replaced the *panchayat* system.

The king nominated a four-member council, established a Constitution Recommendation Commission, and announced that he would begin an official inquiry into the deaths that had resulted from the pro-democracy demonstrations. In mid-May, a general amnesty was declared for all political prisoners. A draft constitution was announced in the summer of 1990. King Birendra wanted the draft amended to give him more leverage, but subsequent negotiations did not yield as much as he desired.

In November 1990, the king finally approved and promulgated a new, more democratic constitution that vested sovereignty in the people.

The *panchayat* system finally ended in May 1991, when general elections, deemed "generally fair, free, and open" by an international election inspection team, were held. Approximately 65 per cent of the populace voted. Although more than forty political parties registered with the election commission, only twenty political parties—mostly small, communist splinter groups—were on the ballot. The Nepali Congress Party won 110 of the 205 seats in the House of Representatives, and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) won 69 seats. Previously operating in exile and behind the scenes, the various Communist and other parties and coalitions became a powerful presence in the newly constituted bicameral Parliament. Nepal continued its gradual move toward a multiparty democracy.

Pro-democracy protests continued unabated. Demonstrations were held on February 18, 1992, the second anniversary of the founding of the Pro-democracy movement. In early April 1992, rival student groups clashed, and communist and leftist opposition groups called for a general strike as a response to double digit inflation and a more than 60 per cent increase in water and electricity tariffs. As a result of skirmishes between the police and demonstrators, a curfew was imposed. In addition, the government banned primary and secondary schoolteachers from political activities and from joining or campaigning for political parties.

Elections to the village development committees and municipalities were held in late May 1992; the elections pitted the various Communist factions and other parties against the Nepali Congress Party administration of Prime Minister Girija Prasad (G.P.) Koirala. More than 90,000 civilian and security personnel were assigned to safeguard the elections. In contrast to the May 1991 parliamentary election, the Nepali Congress Party routed the Communists in the urban areas and even

made some gains in the rural areas. The Nepali Congress Party won 331 positions, or 56 per cent of the seats, in the municipalities; the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) won 119 seats, or 20 per cent of the seats; and other lesser parties won the remainder of the seats. In newly established village development committees, the Nepali Congress Party won 21,461 positions; the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) won 11,175 seats.

The Nepalese army has long been intertwined with the monarchy; the 1990 constitution, however, changed the relationship between the military and the king. For the first time, the military no longer was solely an instrument of the king; it was also subordinate to the authority of Parliament. Although under the Constitution the king retains his title as the supreme commander of the army, the functional commander in chief is appointed on the recommendation of the prime minister. Although both the king and the government are responsible for implementing national security and military policy, the king's power to declare a state of national emergency and to conduct foreign affairs has national security implications.

Nepal is noted for its famed Gurkha soldiers. Gurkhas served both at home and abroad in the British, Indian, Singapore, and Brunei armies. Their remittances to Nepal were of primary importance to the economy and served as an important source of foreign exchange. By 1997, however, the number of Gurkhas serving in the British army is expected to be reduced from 8,000 to 2,500 persons, and the Gurkha garrison in Hong Kong is scheduled to be withdrawn gradually in the period up to 1995. As of April 1992, a token number of Gurkhas was serving in a United Nations Peacekeeping force in the former Yugoslavia.

The difficulty of replacing Nepal's long tradition of autocracy with a democracy, coupled with the economic challenges posed by physical geography and location, was daunting. As of 1992, many of the prescribed changes had only just been instituted, or were still to come. Many observers

expected that the populist experiment of a multiparty democracy would meet with eventual failure and that the monarchy and the army would return to some type of power-sharing formula.

Nepal's population, estimated in 1990 as approximately 19.1 million, is very diverse. The country is home to more than a dozen ethnic groups, which originate from three major ethnic divisions: Indo-Nepalese, Tibeto-Nepalese, and indigenous Nepalese. Ethnic identity—distinguished primarily by language and dress—constrains the selection of a spouse, friendships, and career, and is evident in social organisation, occupation, and religious observances. Hinduism is the official religion of Nepal, although, in fact, the religion practised by the majority of Nepalese is a synthesis of Hinduism and Buddhism and the practices have intermingled over time. The socio-economic ramifications of the country's diversity have proven problematic for Nepal in the late twentieth century.

Considered a least-developed country, Nepal depends heavily on farming, which accounts for most of the country's gross domestic product. The work force is largely unskilled and mostly illiterate. Nepal's industrial base was established in the 1930s, but little progress has been made in improving economic performance. In the early 1990s, tourism was one of the largest sources of foreign exchange; visitors from the United States were the most numerous.

Social status in Nepal is measured by economic standing. Landownership is both a measure of status and a source of income. Women occupy a secondary position, particularly in business and the civil service, although the constitution guarantees equality between men and women. Nepalese tribal and communal customs dictate women's lesser role in society, but their status differs from one ethnic group to another and is usually determined by caste.

As of 1992, education was free and compulsory for five years; however males had literacy rates about three times higher than the rates for females and higher school enrolment



levels. There were relatively few other social services in the country. The absence of modern medical care, clean drinking water, and adequate sanitation resulted in the prevalence of gastro-intestinal diseases. Malnutrition was also a problem, particularly in rural areas. A period of drought in 1992 was expected to cause further food shortages, especially of grain. The country has consistently had high morbidity and death rates.

Economic assistance from other countries, especially India, has been vital to Nepal. Since the 1980s, however, bilateral aid and multilateral assistance programmes from countries other than India have been an increasingly important part of development planning. Nepal has received aid from both the United States and Communist countries.

In the late twentieth century, Nepal's foreign policy continued to be affected by its geo-strategic location between China and India and its attempt to maintain a balance between these powerful neighbours. Nepal's relationship with India is governed by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship and its accompanying letters, which established an informal military alliance whereby both countries are required to consult and "devise effective countermeasures" in case the security of either is threatened. Since the 1970s, however, Nepal exhibited greater independence in its foreign policy, establishing bilateral diplomatic relations with other countries and joining various multilateral and regional organisations.

Nepal, for example, belongs to the United Nations and its affiliated agencies such as the Group of 77, as well as the Nonaligned Movement and the Asian Development Bank. It is also a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded in 1985, initially under a slightly different name, as an institutionalised framework for regional cooperation; its permanent secretariat was established in 1987 in Kathmandu. It does not accept compulsory United Nations International Court of Justice jurisdiction.

One of India's long-standing sources of power over Nepal has been India's control of access to raw materials and supply routes. The effect of this control was especially evident during the 1989 trade and transit dispute—and its aftermath—when the foreign trade balance was negatively affected and the economy took a downturn.

In early 1992, Nepal's relations with India were clouded by controversy over the December 1991 agreement for cooperation on a hydroelectric and irrigation project at Tanakpur, near the southwestern Nepalese-Indian border. The Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and other leftist parties opposed the project, which they regarded as against Nepal's national interest because the site, on Nepalese territory, was not covered by a formal treaty. The constitution stipulates that treaties need parliamentary assent if exploitation of the nation's natural resources is involved. Prime Minister G.P. Koirala said he had signed a memorandum of understanding, not a treaty. The opposition took their case to the Supreme Court.

Military relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi were cordial. In March 1992, the Indian chief of army staff visited Nepal and was made an honorary general of the Royal Nepal Army, an uncommon occurrence.

Nepal's relations with China were low-key and an exercise in caution. Nonetheless, India interpreted sales of air defence weapons by China to Nepal in 1988 as interfering with its treaty arrangements with Nepal. Nepal and China, however, signed technical and economic cooperation agreements in March 1992.

Bhutan has its own distinct history, although it shares Nepal's Himalayan geography and neighbours. Only one-third the size of Nepal, Bhutan also has a much smaller population: estimated at about 600,000 persons in 1990 as compared to a population of over 19 million in Nepal.

The precursor of Bhutan, the state of Lhomon or Monyul, was said to have existed between 500 BC and 600 AD. At the

end of that period, Buddhism was introduced into the country; a branch of Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion of Bhutan. Bhutan was subject to both Indian and Tibetan influences, and small independent monarchies began to develop in the country by the early ninth century. Religious rivalry among various Buddhist subjects also influenced political development; the rivalry began in the tenth century and continued through the seventeenth century, when a theocratic government independent of Tibetan political influence united the country. From that time until 1907, the Kingdom of Bhutan, or Drukyul (literally land of the Thunder Dragon), had a dual system of shared civil and spiritual (Buddhist) rule. In 1907 the absolute monarchy was established, and the hereditary position of Druk Gyalpo, or Dragon King, was awarded to the powerful Wangchuk family. Since 1972, Jigme Singye Wangchuk has held the position of Druk Gyalpo.

The Druk Gyalpo controls the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. The monarchy is absolute, but the king is admired and respected and is referred to by the people as "our King." The Council of Ministers and Royal Advisory Council are part of the executive branch of government. The legislative branch is made up of the unicameral National Assembly, or Tshogdu, whose members are either indirectly elected or appointed by the Druk Gyalpo. Bhutan has neither a written constitution nor organic laws.

The 1953 royal decree on the Constitution of the National Assembly is the primary legal, or constitutional, basis for that body and sets forth its rules and procedures. The Supreme Court of Appeal, in effect the Druk Gyalpo, is the highest level court; judges are appointed by the Druk Gyalpo. There are no lawyers. The civil code and criminal code are based on seventeenth-century concepts.

Under Jigme Singye Wangchuk, Bhutan's centrally-controlled government system has been instrumental in initiating greater political participation. In the early 1990s, however, there were still no legal political parties—although

there were elite political factions—and no national elections. There was no overt communist presence. Each family was allowed one vote in village-level elections.

Local government was divided into zones, districts, sub-districts, and village groups, and meetings were regularly held at the village and block (*gewog*) levels, where issues were decided by public debate. The complex administrative network of consultation and decision-making by consensus obscured the need for national elections. At the 1992 session of the National Assembly, support for the hereditary monarchy was unanimously reaffirmed.

Like Nepal, Bhutan has a diverse population. It is home to four ethnic groups: Ngalop—of Tibetan origin; Sharchop—of Indo-Mongoloid origin; aboriginal, or indigenous, tribal peoples; and Nepalese. In the early 1990s, the first three groups made up about 72 per cent of the population. According to this estimate, the Nepalese comprised approximately 28 per cent of the population; other estimates suggested that 30 to 40 per cent might be Nepalese. The Nepalese constituted a majority in southern Bhutan, where, in an effort to maintain traditional culture and control, the government has tried to confine their immigration and restrict their residence and employment.

In the early 1990s, only approximately 15 per cent of the Nepalese in Bhutan were considered legally permanent residents; only those immigrants who had resided in Bhutan for fifteen or twenty years—the number of years depended on their occupational status and other criteria—were considered for citizenship. Nepalese immigrants who were asked to leave, because their claims to citizenship did not conform to the 1985 Citizenship Act, openly voiced their discontent with the government. Illegal immigrants often were militant anti-nationals.

In the 1980s, the Bhutanese, believing their identity threatened by absorption of a growing Nepalese minority and the specter of annexation by India, promulgated a policy of *driglam namzha*, “national customs and etiquette.” This policy,

sought to preserve and enhance Bhutanese cultural identity and bolster Bhutanese nationalism. The policy mandated the wearing of national dress for formal occasions and the use of the official language, Dzongkha, in schools. In 1989, it was decreed that Nepali, which had been offered as an optional language, was no longer to be taught in the schools.

Subsequent government decrees contributed to a growing conflict with ethnic Nepalese, who sought to maintain their own identity and viewed these edicts as restrictive. Ethnic strife increased as the aftereffects of Nepal's Pro-democracy movement spread to Bhutan, where Nepalese communities demonstrated against the government in an effort to protect their rights from the *driglam namzha* policy. Expatriate Nepalese political groups in Nepal and India supported these anti-government activities, further alienating the Bhutanese.

Bhutan's military force, the Royal Bhutan Army, is very small; in 1990 it numbered only 6,000 persons. The Druk Gyalpo is the supreme commander of the army, but daily operations are the responsibility of the chief operations officer. The army's primary mission is border defence although it also assists the Royal Bhutan Police in internal security matters.

Bhutan, like Nepal, is considered a least-developed country. Its work force is largely unskilled, and a wide gap exists between the rich and the poor. Farming is the mainstay of the economy and accounts for most of the gross domestic product. Although Bhutan did not begin to establish its industrial base until the 1950s, careful economic planning and use of foreign aid have resulted in measurable improvements in economic efficiency and performance over the last four decades. As is the case in Nepal, tourists bring in a major portion of the country's foreign exchange.

Social status in Bhutan, as in Nepal, depends primarily on economic standing in the community. Specifically, it depends on landownership, occupation, and perceived religious authority. The society is male dominated. Although as of 1992 the government officially encouraged increased participation

of women in political and administrative life, women remained in a secondary position, particularly in business and the civil service. Bhutanese women, however, do have a dominant social position, and land often passes to daughters, not to sons. Bhutan's traditional society is both matriarchal and patriarchal; the head of the family is the member in highest esteem. However, men predominate in government and have more opportunities for higher education than do women.

As of now, education in Bhutan is free for eleven years but not compulsory. Men have literacy rates about three times higher than those for women, and school enrollment levels are higher for males. As is the case in Nepal, social services are not widespread. Modern medical care is lacking, as is clean drinking water and adequate sanitation. Not surprisingly, gastro-intestinal diseases are widespread. Nutritional deficiencies are also prevalent; serious malnutrition, however, does not appear to be a problem. Like Nepal, the country had high morbidity and death rates in the early 1990s.

Foreign aid, grants, and concessionary loans constituted a large percentage of Bhutan's budget in the early 1990s. Like Nepal, Bhutan received foreign assistance from the United Nations, the Colombo Plan, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, as well as official development assistance and other official flows. Because Bhutan had no formal diplomatic relations with the United States as of 1992, no official aid was forthcoming from Washington.

As has been the case in Nepal, Bhutan's foreign policy has been affected by its geo-strategic location. From the seventh century until 1860, the country's foreign policy was influenced by Tibet; next followed a period of British guidance over foreign affairs. After India received independence from Britain in 1947, Bhutan came under India's influence. Thimphu and New Delhi's relationship is governed by the 1949 Treaty of Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Bhutan—in force in perpetuity—which calls for peace and



non-interference in internal affairs and New Delhi's guidance and advice in external relations.

Like Nepal, however, Bhutan is exhibiting greater independence in its foreign policy, and by the early 1990s was, in effect, autonomous in its foreign relations. Thimphu has established bilateral diplomatic relations with other countries and has joined various multilateral and regional organisations. Bhutan belongs to the United Nations, as well as to organisations such as SAARC, the Nonaligned Movement, and the Asian Development Bank. It does not accept compulsory United Nations International Court of Justice jurisdiction.

Both Nepal and Bhutan were facing refugee problems in the early 1990s; statistics on the number of refugees come from diverse sources and are discrepant. In April 1992, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that since 1986 more than 30,000 ethnic Nepalese had left Bhutan because of political discontent, poor employment prospects, or because they were considered illegal immigrants. A much higher figure is projected by G.P. Koirala, Nepal's prime minister, who has estimated that in the early 1990s Nepalese from Bhutan seeking to escape the sanctions imposed by *driglam namzha* arrived in Nepal at the rate of 200 persons daily.

Anti-nationals in Bhutan used the growing number of southern Bhutanese-Nepalese in the refugee camps within Nepal as a means to publicise and internationalise their plight. To this end, they encouraged Nepalese to leave Bhutan and also encouraged Nepalese from India to enter the camps.

For Bhutan, the departure of the Nepalese often meant the loss of skilled labourers; however, it also resulted in the exodus of unwanted agitators. For Nepal, the refugees were an added economic burden—more people needing housing, food, clothing, education, and other social services. Living conditions in the refugee camps within Nepal were reported to be poor. As of mid-1992, the camps were filled with people holding Nepalese citizenship cards, Bhutanese citizenship cards, and UNHCR certificates attesting they were "Bhutanese refugees."

However, because each party seeks to present its own case, all statistics and statements related to the Nepalese refugee situation must be viewed cautiously.

The refugee problem presented a challenge to India, which needed to balance its interests in maintaining Bhutan's stability with the necessity of not inflaming nationalist passions among its own ethnic Nepalese population and not upsetting its relations with either Nepal or Bhutan. India would not allow its territory to be used as a staging ground for protests by Bhutanese residents of Nepalese origin. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Indian labourers who entered Nepal in search of work displaced underemployed and unemployed Nepalese workers.

Since the introduction was written, the events of late 1992 and early 1993 in Nepal and Bhutan have been a continuum of the past few years. The refugee issue has continued to be problematic. The leaders of both Nepal and Bhutan met with India's leaders in late 1992 and early 1993; all the parties reaffirmed that the issue was an internal matter that should be resolved through bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan. In spite of the agitation and activities of anti-nationals in the south, Bhutan's National Assembly passed a National Security Act in late 1992 that abolished the death penalty for crimes of treason as stipulated in a 1957 law, providing instead for life imprisonment.

In December 1992, the Supreme Court of Nepal ruled against Prime Minister G.P. Koirala's signing of a December 1991 accord for hydroelectric power cooperation with India at Tanakpur. After their victory, Koirala's opponents in the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist) pressed him to step down—he refused. As a result of the court's decision, however, Kathmandu said the Koirala government would present the Tanakpur accord and its relevant documents to the next parliamentary session for ratification—a step that would have otherwise been bypassed. Nepal also passed laws in December 1992 to encourage foreign (and local) investment by

creating a more favourable investment environment. Foreigners will be allowed to repatriate earnings and hold total equity in new projects.

Although its early history is vague, Bhutan seems to have existed as a political entity for many centuries. At the beginning of the 16th century it was ruled by a dual monarchy consisting of a Dharma Raja, or spiritual ruler, and a Deb Raja, or temporal ruler.

For much of its early history the Deb Raja held little real power, as the provincial governors (*ponlops*) became quite strong. In 1720 the Chinese invaded Tibet and established suzerainty over Bhutan. Friction between Bhutan and Indian Bengal culminated in a Bhutanese invasion of Cooch Behar in 1772, followed by a British incursion into Bhutan, but the Tibetan lama's intercession with the governor-general of British India improved relations.

In 1774 a British mission arrived in Bhutan to promote trade with India. British occupation of Assam in 1826, however, led to renewed border raids from Bhutan. In 1864 the British occupied part of South Bhutan, which was formally annexed after a war in 1865; the Treaty of Sinchula provided for an annual subsidy to Bhutan as compensation. In 1907 the most powerful of Bhutan's provincial governors, Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, supported by the British, became the monarch of Bhutan, the first of a hereditary line. A treaty signed in 1910 doubled the annual British subsidy to Bhutan in return for an agreement to let Britain direct the country's foreign affairs.

After India won independence, a treaty (1949) returned the part of Bhutan annexed by the British and allowed India to assume the former British role of subsidising Bhutan and directing its defence and foreign relations; the Indians, like the British before them, promised not to interfere in Bhutan's internal affairs. When Chinese Communist forces occupied Tibet in 1950, Bhutan, because of its strategic location, became a point of contest between China and India.

The Chinese claim to Bhutan (as part of a greater Tibet) and the persecution of Tibetan Buddhists led India to close the Bhutanese-Tibetan border and to build roads in Bhutan capable of carrying Indian military vehicles.

In the 1960s, Bhutan also formed a small army, trained and equipped by India. The kingdom's admission to the United Nations in 1971 was seen as strengthening its sovereignty, and by the 1980s relations with China had improved significantly.

Bhutan's third hereditary ruler, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (reigned 1953-72), modernised Bhutanese society by abolishing slavery and the caste system, emancipating women, dividing large estates into small individual plots, and starting a secular educational system. Although Bhutan no longer has a Dharma Raja, Buddhist priests retain political influence. In 1969 the absolute monarchy gave way to a "democratic monarchy."

In 1972 the crown prince, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, became the fourth hereditary king of Bhutan upon his father's death; he was crowned in June, 1974. The new king gradually democratised the Bhutanese government.

By 1999 the king was no longer head of government; that position was held by head of the cabinet, which is responsible to the national assembly. Since then the country has moved slowly toward adopting a new constitution; in 2005 a draft of the proposed constitution was released.

An uprising by the Nepalese minority in 1989, a national policy of forcing non-ethnic Bhutanese to adopt Bhutanese Buddhist traditions, and the expulsion of thousand of ethnic Nepalese regarded by the government as illegal aliens were a source of tension within Bhutan, and with Nepal and India, in the 1990s. Also, Assamese and West Bengali separatist guerrillas have established bases in Bhutan, from which they make attacks into India. After attempts to negotiate the Assamese guerrillas' withdrawal failed, Bhutan mounted attacks (2003) on their bases. In 1998 the famous Taktsang Monastery in the mountains of Western Bhutan, containing

one of the finest collections of early Himalayan Buddhist art, was destroyed by fire.

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a landlocked South Asian nation situated between India and China. The landscape ranges from the subtropical plains to the Himalayan heights, an elevation gain of more than 7000 m.

Its economy is based on subsistence agriculture (emphasising corn and rice) and animal husbandry. Small, terraced farms predominate. Forestry, hydroelectricity, cash crops, tourism, and development aid (the latter mostly from India) are also significant. Population estimates range from 600,000, to 2.23 million. Thimphu is the capital and largest town.

Bhutan is one of the most isolated nations in the world; foreign influences and tourism are heavily regulated by the government to preserve the traditional culture of the dominant Ngalong group. Their traditional religion, the Drukpa Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, is the state religion. The official language is Dzongkha (lit. "the language of the dzong"). Tourist literature depicts Bhutan as the last surviving refuge of traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture, never mentioning the controversial human rights record with regards to the country's Lhotshampa population, who are primarily Hindu.

Bhutan has been a monarchy since 1907, when the current royal house was installed with British backing. The current king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, has made some moves toward constitutional government.

In 1999, Bhutan began allowing television (mostly Star TV, a cable channel). Many Bhutanese now blame TV for what they see as a swift rise in crime, materialism, and nontraditional values.

"In the thunder Dragon Kingdom, adorned with sandalwood, the protector who guards the teachings of the dual system; he, the precious and glorious ruler, causes dominion to spread while his unchanging person abides in

constancy, as the doctrine of the Buddha flourishes, may the sun of peace and happiness shine on the people." These few words—the text of the national anthem of Bhutan—sum up much about the spirit and culture of a society that sprang from an aboriginal people and was enriched by Tibetan, Mongol, and Indo-Burman migrants.

Buddhism has been a pervasive influence in Bhutan throughout most of its history and has long been the state religion and source of civil law. Unified Bhutan has had two forms of monarchy: from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century, a dual system of shared civil and spiritual rule; and since 1907 the hereditary monarchy of the Wangchuk family.

Once one of the many independent Himalayan kingdoms and principalities, Bhutan, like Nepal, is situated between two Asian powers, India and China, which, at best, have had an uneasy stand-off politically and militarily for nearly half a century. Bhutan's independence has long been an issue in the geopolitical maneuverings between Tibet (and later China) and India. In the late twentieth century, Bhutan has fended off this external threat with conscientiously planned economic development.

A serious internal threat to Bhutan's traditional identity started peacefully in the 1950s and 1960s among the growing Nepalese minority, which represented 28 per cent or more of the population in the early 1990s and emerged as a violent "pro-democracy" movement in the late 1980s. The 1990s promised to be a crucial period for the monarchy as it continued to foster economic and administrative reform amid efforts to retain traditional culture and to assuage minority unrest.

Bhutan is the only place in the Himalayas where the Vajrayana Buddhist culture survives intact. However, the fall of other kingdoms that represent this vibrant culture, such as Tibet, Sikkim and Laddakh, and the encroachment of globalisation make the survival of this tiny Buddhist nation increasingly fragile and poignant.



In Bhutan, trekkers will find an alternative to the overcrowded trails of Nepal. Serious photographers will be impressed with the country's traditional architecture and abundant wildlife. (Herds of yaks graze in its high-country valleys, and rare snow leopards, blue sheep and black-necked cranes can sometimes be spotted in its farthest reaches.) Others can find pleasure in the elaborate *tsechus* (religious festivals) that are held throughout the year at various *dzongs* (fortress monasteries). Nearly everyone who visits Bhutan will be awed by the unsurpassed majesty of the Himalayas. But it's neither easy nor cheap to visit Bhutan, which is tucked in between India, China (Tibet) and Nepal. The government charges all travellers US\$200 a day, to which the Bhutanese company may or may not add its operating costs. You will usually get tour prices closer to the government standardised US\$200 a day if you are booking directly with a Bhutanese company.

If you travel with one of the high-end tour companies based in the West you will end up paying upwards of US\$300 to US\$400 a day, depending on the company and its reputation. (If you're travelling alone or in a group of four or fewer, an additional US\$40 per day is tacked on.) This makes Bhutan one of the most expensive destinations in the region.

On the brighter side, your trip is usually free of the hassles associated with travel in other countries in this region, as the fee covers lodging, food, tours and comfortable transportation in well-maintained buses, SUVs (sport-utility vehicles) or cars. The fee also includes a guide with whom you can plan your itinerary. The most magical of Himalayan kingdoms, Bhutan is a small country nestling in the eastern end of the Himalayas. Seeking to preserve its unique culture it has guarded itself against unchecked tourism and modernisation and even now remains a rare destination for most travellers. As well as its colourful religious and social traditions, Bhutan is the guardian of some of the world's most beautiful mountain scenery.

Although as large as Switzerland, Bhutan's population is well under a million people, and its sparsely inhabited hill and

mountain tracts are a natural paradise. In the central valleys, life goes on much as it has for centuries. The focus of communities, and the traditional seat of authority both spiritual and temporal, are the dzongs, fortress-like monasteries often clinging to impossibly steep mountain slopes, or ravines overlooking deep, clear rivers.

A Buddhist land, Bhutan's religious practices largely follow those of Tibet. Commemorative chortens dot the landscape while faded prayer flags are stretched around homes and monasteries. Red-robed lamas can be encountered on hill paths, turning prayer wheels as they journey across this rugged country. Stretching from foothills on the Indian border to snow-clad peaks, Bhutan offers an unspoiled habitat for a huge variety of flora and fauna. As mountain streams tumble down steep, thickly forested mountain valleys they pass through thick belts of pine and rhododendron, oak and alder and, lower down, groves of bamboo and oranges. Small-scale farmers cultivate rice in terraced paddies and millet and barley on the higher slopes.

You can fly into Paro from Kathmandu, a spectacular way to traverse half the length of the Himalayas, from one fertile hill valley to another. Paro, Bhutan's second town, is also home to the National Museum in the Ta Dzong. The majestic Paro Dzong fort commands the valley from above the town. The capital, Thimphu, is only two hours' drive from Paro and is the best place to encounter Bhutanese culture. You can visit the Tashicho Dzong, seat of the Bhutanese government, which was constructed without using a single metal nail or support. Wandering in the bazaar area you will have a chance to buy traditional handicrafts including of Bhutan's famous hand-woven cloth.

Bhutan and unexplored trails far from anywhere, where mountains enfold you in wildernesses seldom seen by outsiders. Unspoiled, ruled by a benevolent monarch and a body of monks and an enlightened parliament that ease the country gently into the future while preserving the past. At the beginning of Buddhist time, Guru Rinpoche a holy saint flew

across the Himalayas on a flying tiger. And in a place of valleys and mountains full of thunder and lightning, he paused and declared that this was Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon. And so began The Kingdom in The Clouds.

In 1961 the Himalayan authority Desmond Doig was the first journalist allowed into Bhutan and in an article for *The National Geographic* he spoke of a land filled with spirits and yetis and witch doctors, and archery contests and a King who wears a raven crown and is, the precious ruler of the dragon people. As he predicted in his article things have changed. But only a little. And what Desmond wrote forty years ago has relevance today and still entices the adventurous to Bhutan. Here's what he left.

Mountains meet the clouds in Bhutan, hermit Kingdom in the heart of the Himalayas: here the extraordinary is often common place and the unexpected happens. Bhutan is as outrageously different as it is beautiful. Small as fairytale kingdom, it plays the role with medieval pageantry, a Dragon King, subjects dressed like Renaissance pageboys, and castles thrust above indolent clouds.

High mountain ranges and closed doors to foreigners have helped to preserve the country's antique ways. Essentially, Bhutan is warm and hospitable; it clings to human values and an easy, uninhibited way of living. Though the people of Bhutan have spent centuries in isolation, they accept with solid unconcern the tales of the rare foreigner they meet. If I thought my accounts of sputniks and television were going to make me a celebrity, I was soon disillusioned. In a country that happily minds its own business, an oracle's prediction or the birth of a yak are miracles enough.

Dzongs command most Bhutan's valleys. In architectural style they resemble the great Potala, or palace of the Dalai Lamas, at Lhasa: high whitewashed walls of earth and stone; deep, richly-ornamented windows; and gold-plated pagoda-like roofs adorned at the corners with dragon heads. If there are resident Lamas, no woman may spend the night with a rule

that applies even to the Queen. Usually the Dzongs include several chapels, sometimes as many as thirty each magnificently painted and brooded over by a host of deities. I have stood enthralled in their perfumed gloom, trying to absorb the myriad detail of murals, images, and all the paraphernalia of worship.

In some Dzongs the images loom so large that their gilded heads are lost to sight in the upper shadows. Their hands could seat a man, and the murmured prayers of monks in the galleries overheard give the impression that the giants breathe and live. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Bon, the country's original cult of sorcery and spirit worship, all survive in Bhutan's religion. Fierce gods and protective deities are born of the strange alliance. A few merely represent some bandit or sorcerer deified more out of fear than respect.

...for sheer pageantry, Bhutan's archery meets are unbeatable. They are explosions of colour and excitement, beginning with the archers in vivid traditional costume; their processions like cascades of jewels down the emerald valleys.

...then there are the cheering sections, the dancing girls decked out in vivid homespun, brocade, and coral jewellery. Each team has its own troupe of girls, whose job is to praise the home team and insult competitors.

...travelled north to the Tibetan frontier to see Chomo Lhari, Bhutan's most famous peak, 23,997 feet high. Part of the mountains is actually in Tibet. We had seen it from a distance, from a pass between the Ha and Paro valleys, a magnificent fluted pile of snow.

...leaving the border, we visited Taktsang Monastery, Bhutan's most famous cloister, where Buddhist shrines cluster like a colony of swallows' nest. Taktsang actually means 'Tiger's Nest' but what a tiger! The settlement approached by the narrowest of ledges, perches on a sheer granite

cliff some 3,000 feet high. One day the King asked me if I would like to visit Bumthang, far to the east of Thimpu.

I jumped at the offer; for it meant seeing such fabled places as Punakha, the former capital, where the old rajas ruled and which boasts Bhutan's largest Dzong. It meant Tongsa Dzong, which the Queen's sister described as a fairy castle, perched so high on a mountain that the clouds float below, it meant Wangdi Phodrang, with its magnificent bridge, and Bhumtang itself in a valley with a reputation for ghosts and beautiful woman.

It took seven days to reach Bumthang, seven magic days for adventure along track filled with ever-changing scenery. On one side of a high pass might lie tropical forest and on other a world of alpine loveliness: a profusion of flowers and lush green grass that fattened the King's handsome cattle. Mountain streams gurgled through painted shrines that harnessed the power to turn huge prayer wheels. Legendary giants and their consorts occupied the mountain tops above us. Mortals below—the apple-cheeked village woman fed us fresh yak-milk cheese amid the fields of flowers.

The chapels interested me most, and I attended more than one banquet in them, the gilded deities almost brought to life by the flickering lights of candles. Murals of heaven and of hell glowed on more than one wall. During the meal, we would put aside a few grains of rice and some drops of millet wine for the gods. Tongsa was all that we hoped for. Its handsome Dzong, visible for miles, rode like a splendid ship on the waves of distant mountains. Passing through the Dzongs, massive gate illuminated with religious texts, we abruptly entered another world. Here were banks of painted galleries, with latticed windows and casements rising in multi-coloured tiers. Wooden roofs and gilded spires of the dzong towered above all and seemed to challenge the mountains themselves. The endless murmur of monks at prayer, punctuated by the tinkle of bells, vied with the flutter and swish of pigeons' wings.

Magenta-robed Lamas leaned over the carved railings to watch us as we passed. We might have been walking through the Middle Ages, and in a way we were, for Tongsa has changed little since its founding centuries ago. Time has slept in the secluded courtyards and countryside of Bhutan.

## **General Information**

It is advised to plan your trip well in advance in order to take care of all details. Confirmation of travel during the popular festival seasons must be made at least three months in advance in order to ensure seats on Druk Air as well as hotel accommodation. In addition, it is advisable to keep extra days to allow for acclimatisation and unpredictable weather conditions.

## **Travel Formalities**

All visitors to Bhutan are required to obtain visa approval prior to arrival, which will be processed by us. Visitors are required to fill in the visa application form and send it to us at least one month in advance. Once visa clearance is obtained, the visa will be stamped upon arrival at the port of entry for a fee of US \$20 for a stay of two weeks. The visa can be extended, should the visitor wish to remain for a longer period. An airport tax of US \$10 is levied on departure.

Bhutan is well connected to the outside world through Druk Air (Royal Bhutanese Airlines), the national carrier which is the only airline operating flights in and out of the kingdom. The country's only airport is situated at Paro. Druk Air operates three flights a week from Bangkok (Thailand), Kolkata (India) and Dhaka (Bangladesh) and two flights a week from Kathmandu (Nepal) and New Delhi (India). There are different flight schedules for the summer and the winter seasons. Confirmation of travel especially during the popular festival seasons in spring and autumn must be made at least three months in advance to ensure seats on Druk Air as well as hotel accommodation. Bagdogra Airport, Siliguri (WB), India is the nearest airport outside Bhutan. It has regular flights from

Delhi (twice daily). It is about 4 hrs. drive from Phuentsholing, Bhutan's border town. Phuentsholing is one of the main and convenient points of entry to Bhutan by road. It is 4 hours drive from Siliguri, one of the major Indian towns in West Bengal. From Phuentsholing to the capital Thimphu is 176 km (6 hrs). The nearest train station in India is at New Jalpaiguri, West Bengal which is about 3 hrs from Phuentsholing.

### **Custom Regulations**

The Bhutanese authorities strictly prohibit the export of any religious antiquity or antiques of any type. Cameras, video cameras, computers and personal electronic equipment may be brought into the country but they must be listed on the customs form provided on arrival at Paro and will be checked at departure. Two litres of alcohol, 400 cigarettes and 150 grams of pipe tobacco may be brought into the country without any duty.

### **Currency**

Bhutan's unit of currency is the Ngultrum (Nu), which is at par to the Indian Rupee (100 Chetrams = 1 Ngultrum). One US dollar is equivalent to approximately 48.50 Ngultrums\*. Most major foreign currencies are accepted. Travellers cheques, American Express cards and Visa cards are also accepted in certain establishments.

\* Exchange rate pertains to September, 2002

### ***Photography and Filming***

Photography is permitted nearly everywhere in Bhutan. However it is not permitted in the Dzongs (Fortresses) and monasteries. Any commercial filming in Bhutan requires prior permission to be sought from the Royal Government and the payment of a royalty. We will assist you with all the formalities.

**Time:** Bhutanese time is 6 hours ahead of GMT and half an hour ahead of the Indian Standard Time.