

## BHUTAN: AN OVERVIEW

### General Background

The mountain kingdom of Bhutan, perched between China and India, is located entirely within one of the world's ten global biodiversity 'hot spots', the Eastern Himalayas. The country's rich biological diversity is the result of its unique geographical location in the Eastern Himalayas that extend through both the Oriental and the Palearctic biogeographic regions, and its considerable altitudinal variation from 100 metres in the south to over 7,500 metres in the north. The country covers an area of 38,394 sq km and has a population of 734,340 [NSB 2004].

The Buddhist ethic of universal compassion, the far-sighted policies of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB), and low population density (13/sq.km) have been the most important factors in preserving the Bhutanese environment. With over 70 percent forest cover, Bhutan is known to harbour a wide range of floral and faunal species including over 7000 species of vascular plants, 770 species of birds, 165 mammal species, 46 species of rhododendrons, and over 300 species of medicinal plants that are used in traditional herbal medicine. The country's protected area system is one of the most comprehensive in the world, with more than a quarter of the country designated as protected area which includes four national parks, four wildlife sanctuaries, a strict nature reserve, and a network of biological corridors. Administratively, the country is divided into 20 dzongkhags. Each dzongkhag is further divided into geogs. There are currently 201 geogs in the country. The chief executive of a dzongkhag is the *dzongdag*, and the elected leader of a geog is the *gup*.



Map of South Asia and Bhutan

The geo-physical characteristics of the country fall into three distinct features: the foothills in the south with subtropical forest, the central belt with temperate forest, and the northern uplands with alpine forests and vast rangelands. The orientation and nature of the watershed have influenced the location of settlements and land use pattern. The major watershed that drains the rivers in the eastern region is Manas. The central region is drained by Mangdechhu. The river valleys in the western region are drained by Torsa and Puna Tshangchhu watersheds. People residing in the three different geo-physical regions have responded according to the resources available.

The majority of the population (79%) live in rural areas. The relative isolation of the various valley communities has produced a wealth of agricultural biodiversity and diverse local traditional knowledge. Before forest legislation came into effect in 1969, local communities managed the majority of

forest resource base themselves depending on their personal requirements and communal interest. With various kinds of pressure being placed on natural resources through their diversified use, and dependence of a vast section of the country's population, the RGOB has been introducing centrally controlled regulations for the management of natural resources. In the Forestry Policy of 1991 and the revised Social Forestry Rules of 2000, the RGOB recognises the importance of people's participation in management, use and expansion of forest resources and advocates multiple use to meet the basic needs of the people. In terms of biodiversity conservation, the Bhutan Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995 provides the basis for development of strategies for protected areas incorporating the needs of the local people and encourages community participation through establishment of community natural resource management groups.

The natural forest and the traditional integrated farming systems remain largely intact. Bhutan not only has a wide diversity of plant genetic resources but also has a large number of endemics of both cultivated and wild species. Thus Bhutan, though least developed in economic terms, plays an important role in maintaining the global biodiversity and the biodiversity of the Eastern Himalayas, in particular.

### **Evolution of the Governance System in Bhutan**

While no conclusive archaeological studies have been carried out, some stone implements found in Bhutan suggest that the country was inhabited as early as 2000-1500 B.C. Bhutan has existed as an independent nation throughout its history and was never colonized. Buddhism was introduced in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and is practised by the majority of the population. The other religion is Hinduism. Until the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century,

Bhutan followed a dual system of administration established by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1651. Before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bhutan was divided into different fractions with frequent wars. The Zhabdrung unified Bhutan and established a theocratic system of government including a distinctive administrative system and a code of law. In doing so, he created the office of the *Druk Desi* to look after the temporal administration of the country and the *Je Khenpo* to oversee religious matters. While his successors lacked his stature and vision, this system provided a workable form of government for more than two centuries. However, the elective nature of the post of *Druk Desi* and frequent disputes over the succession to the office of the Zhabdrung resulted in internal instability. The desire of the clergy, officials, and the people for political stability and internal peace led to the establishment of hereditary monarchy. Consequently, the theocracy established by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal came to an end in 1907 when Sir Ugyen Wangchuck was unanimously elected as the first king of Bhutan by popular consensus [NEC 2002].

### **The Beginning of Modern Development**

After centuries of self-imposed isolation, Bhutan opened its doors to the outside world in the early 1960s, during the reign of King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck also known as the “Father of Modern Bhutan”. Development in Bhutan began with the inception of the first Five Year Plan in 1961. Since then, the country has implemented eight Five Year Plans and is now midway into the implementation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. Over the past forty years, the country has made remarkable progress in most spheres of national development - “remarkable” especially because it has been achieved without

compromising the country's environmental capital and cultural integrity.

The Bhutanese economy is predominantly agrarian, with 79 per cent of the population living in rural areas and subsisting largely on an integrated system of agriculture, livestock rearing, and use of forest products collectively known as renewable natural resources (RNR). Accordingly, rural development and RNR management are extremely crucial for the nation's progress. A key sector for economic development is hydropower, which is currently the largest contributor to the national revenue. Tourism is another significant sector of the national economy. The country's "high value, low impact" tourism policy and relatively well-preserved cultural and natural heritage lend to the "exclusivity" factor, allowing the country to reap the benefits of tourism sustainably. Preservation of its rich cultural heritage and natural environment has been consistently a pivotal feature in the country's development agenda. Strong conservation ethics, underpinned by the traditional reverence for nature, have influenced the country's approach to environment long before global concerns for environment were raised.

### **Bhutan's Development Philosophy**

Bhutan's development philosophy has been remarkably consistent and has always been marked by a quest for a balance between "the need to have, and the need to be", between preserving its rich cultural heritage and natural environment, and moving forward with economic development. While its basic goal is to improve the living standards and material prosperity of its people as in other developing countries, development in Bhutan is not judged merely in terms of income growth but is viewed in terms of

happiness, contentment, and the spiritual and emotional well being of its people. The outlook essentially is that modernization and progress should be evaluated more by “Gross National Happiness” than simply by Gross National Product or other economic indicators, and that development should take place at a pace consistent with the country's capacity and needs. The RGOB recognizes that a wide range of factors contribute to human well-being and happiness and that it may not be possible to fully and exhaustively define or list everything. For the purpose of its development planning, the country has identified four major areas as the main pillars of Gross National Happiness. These pillars are economic growth and development; preservation and promotion of cultural heritage; preservation and sustainable use of the environment; and good governance.

*Economic Growth and Development:* The progress towards economic growth and development is broadly indicated by an increase in domestic saving over investment, revenue over expenditure, and export over import. There has been steady progress with respect to all of these financial indicators. However, there is still a long way to go before total government expenditure can be completely financed by domestic revenue. In the near future, revenue from export of electricity from the upcoming hydro-power projects will contribute towards Bhutan’s economic self-reliance.

*Preservation and Promotion of Culture:* Despite the strong emphasis on cultural preservation, there are inherent obstacles in planning for it. Technocrat planners who are increasingly in charge of the course of the nation, usually have a poor grasp of the cultural setting, as well as a rather dim vision of the cultural shape of the future society. Less is known about local symbols, beliefs, values, ideology and ethno-histories than

about trends and statistics on income, nutrition, health, trade etc. The dynamic relationship between changes in the economic system and the cultural sphere is not easy either to understand or to predict. Unlike economic goals to be achieved, it is difficult to envisage a clear image of the future cultural state of affairs to be attained [Ura K. 2003]. The Bhutanese are also becoming oriented to global culture. Signs of homogenisation and blurred cultural identities are increasingly becoming visible with the rise of imports of both artifacts and ideas. On the other hand, there is also increasing erosion of indigenous culture and tradition through homogenization, as is being observed in many communities in Bhutan.

*Preservation and Sustainable Use of the Environment:* In Buddhist political theory, a state exists not only for the welfare of human beings, but also for the welfare of all sentient beings. It therefore has an intrinsic duty to preserve the environment. Bhutan is regarded as an environmental leader with its rich biodiversity and pristine environment. Bhutan's environmental legacy can be explained by the following four enabling factors: indigenous institutions for managing common resources like irrigation water, sacred groves and mountains of local deities, woodlots and grazing land; a strong culture of conservation and Buddhist ethics; small population; and enforcement of environmental legislations enacted after 1969. However, greater coherence between the enforcement of national legislations and local people's norms and values is required to continue the preservation of the country's natural resources. If this vital link of interdependence between the nature and the people is not maintained, the sustainability of our bountiful nature will be at stake.

*Good governance:* A systematic decentralization of authority began in 1981, initiated by the present King to devolve decision-making authority to the *dzongkhag* and *geog* levels. The most profound changes took place in 1998 when His Majesty the King dissolved his Cabinet and devolved all executive authority and power to an elected Council of Ministers who would serve for five-year terms. This was followed by the enactment of the *Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu* and *Geog Yargye Tshogchung Chathrims* in July 2002, laws which empower local communities with greater authority and responsibilities to decide, plan, and manage development work at the community level. In 2002, for the first time, the *gup* was elected by one-person one-vote secret ballots across the country. The latest development in Bhutan's political arena is the drafting of the Constitution.

### **Influence of religion on culture and environment**

The majority of the Bhutanese population practice the Vajrayana form of Mahayana Buddhism, which is a mix of the historical teachings of the Buddha and Bon animistic beliefs. Buddhism believes in universal respect for all forms of life and the importance of protecting nature in all its manifestations. This belief is deeply embedded in Bhutanese society and culture. While Buddhism teaches preservation and prohibits killing, Bon inculcates a deep respect for the environment and the belief that all natural phenomena - mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks, and the Earth itself - are imbued with powerful spirits that can influence the general well being of a village, community or society. According to traditional beliefs, to disturb and pollute these aspects of the natural world are to incur punishments from the deities ranging from disease to death. Consequently, the Bhutanese have always treasured the natural environment and looked



upon it as a source of life. This reverence for nature has enabled Bhutan's environment to remain largely intact. Chapters three and five elaborate upon some of these beliefs as seen in the Monpa community.



Chorten and prayer flags