

Making the Most of Geographic Disadvantage: Modernizing Bhutan

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Abstract:

This article provides an introductory overview of Bhutan and its importance as a geographically disadvantaged “yam between two boulders,” living in a dangerous neighborhood of rapidly rising and potentially highly destabilizing powers. The following sections discuss the most important aspects of Bhutan’s situation as a landlocked but strategically located country: its similar physical geographic setting but sharply contrasting contemporary human geography to its neighbors; relations with mentors such as India, Switzerland, and non-governmental organizations; and lessons for other geographically disadvantaged developing countries seeking to preserve their unique culture while pursuing political-economic modernization.

Keywords: Geography | Bhutan | Modernization | Culture | Government | Development

Article:

Known to its inhabitants as the “Land of the Thunder Dragon” for the sound of its ferocious storms, Bhutan is probably best known to outsiders as the land of “Gross National Happiness” (GNH), an unusual development measure proposed by the king in 1972. The core value of “collective happiness” comes from the traditional emphasis on community wellbeing, extended into the process of modernization as development without harming the environment or relationships. Policy rests on the four pillar goals of a sustainable economy, good governance, and cultural and environmental preservation, as detailed later in this article. Striving for balance that preserves good traditional elements characterizes the general approach detailed in nine domains from ecology and psychology to education and living standards.¹

Bhutan’s landlocked location in the high Himalayas permitted preservation of its Buddhist monarchical culture, but the rise to global power positions of neighboring China and India mark the country as a strategic Himalayan hinge. Smaller countries near powerful nations—Afghanistan, ViệtNam, and Serbia are three historic examples—often become the center of geopolitical crises. Three of Bhutan’s immediate neighbors suffered fates that in the twentieth

century the little Thunder Dragon consciously seeks to avoid. On Bhutan's north, Tibet was swallowed up by China; on its west, the sister Buddhist monarchy of Sikkim was inundated by Nepali immigrants and absorbed by India, while Nepal's king was forced to abdicate, and an uneasy ceasefire with communist rebels remains unsettled.² Bhutan strives to steer a "middle way" (a frequently invoked phrase of Buddhist balance) and prove that geography is not destiny, learning from models such as Switzerland and Denmark how to prosper on the periphery of power

As former New York Times Bureau Chief Barbara Crossette writes in her book on the Himalayan countries,

*Bhutan has wandered without a map into that psychological territory where . . . there are no signposts to what lies ahead, . . . waiting to see if they will enter the next life as a nation selectively modernized for the common good but otherwise unaltered, or as another small third-world country rent with social and ethnic divisions and vulnerable to corruption, violence, and political opportunism.*³

This article provides an introductory overview of Bhutan and its importance as a geographically disadvantaged "yam between two boulders," living in a dangerous neighborhood of rapidly rising and potentially highly destabilizing powers.⁴ The following sections discuss the most important aspects of Bhutan's situation as a landlocked but strategically located country: its similar physical geographic setting but sharply contrasting contemporary human geography to its neighbors; relations with mentors such as India, Switzerland, and non-governmental organizations; and lessons for other geographically disadvantaged developing countries seeking to preserve their unique culture while pursuing political-economic modernization. The telephone was introduced in 1989, and the first Internet café debuted in the capital in the year 2000.

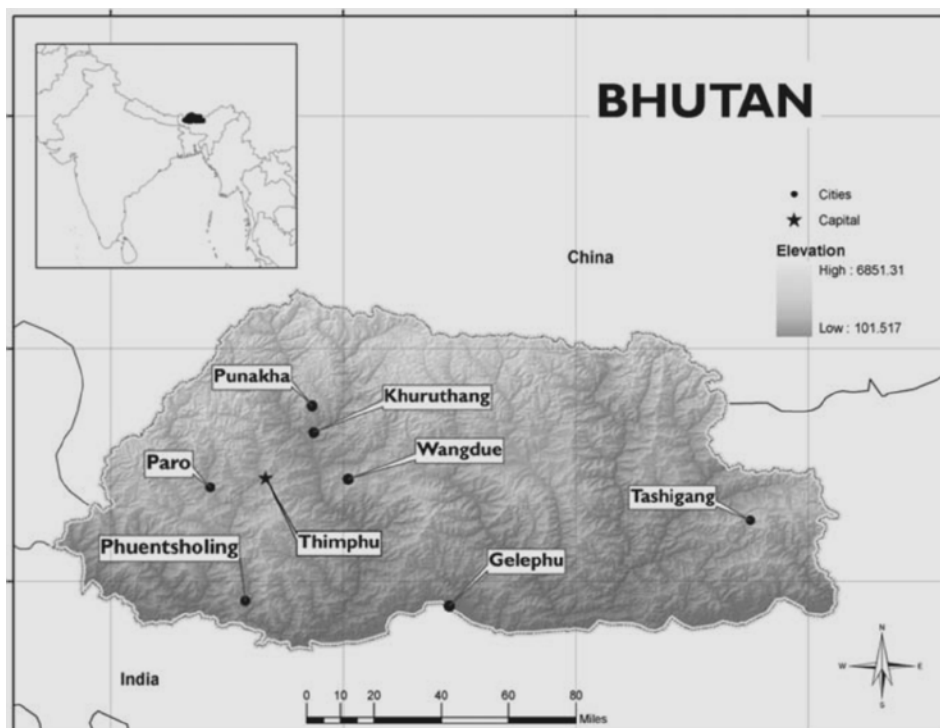


Figure 1. Bhutan is wedged between China (Tibet) and India, a “yam between two boulders.” Source: Cartography by Mayur Gosai, UNCG , electronic file from Department of Geography, Sherubtse College, Bhutan.

PHYSICAL CHALLENGES, CULTURAL HERITAGE

Bhutan is small, with an area of 23,857 square miles, roughly half the size of the state of Indiana and slightly larger than Switzerland. Elevations range from 6/10 of a mile above sea level in the southern plains, to nearly six miles at the top of Kula Kangri, the highest mountain. Topographic variation creates a range of three climate types (see Figure 1). In the lowland duar (doors of river deltas of semitropical southern plains, called the “terai” in Nepal) and valley microclimates, bananas and oranges flourish and are exported to neighbors, such as Bangladesh. The foothills of the inner Himalaya, where most of the population lives, support cold weather crops such as potatoes, rice, and barley. Bhutanese food features variations on the main dish of ema datsi: hot chilies and cheese, with combinations including potatoes or mushrooms, and the standard cold climate red rice. Finally, the Great Himalaya regions of nomads support seasonal pastoral migration.⁵

Typical for a strategically located transit zone, isolated but punctuated by accessible passes, Bhutan’s demographic makeup consists of three major groups.⁶ The eastern region contains the oldest settled population of Tibeto-Burman, or Southeast Asian, origin. Their dialect is Sharchop, and the people tend to be somewhat darker and shorter than subsequent migrants. The majority group, the Ngalop, is principally descended from Tibetan migrants and occupies most of the country. Their dialect is the national language of Dzongka. Both groups practice Vajrayana Buddhism, a form of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism. The major sect is a Bhutanese variant, coexisting, as in Tibet, with pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs, though Geluk (Yellow Hat, headed by the Dalai Lama) and Nyingma (Red Hat) followers are also numerous. The third major group is the Lhotshampa, Nepali migrants or their descendants, who are concentrated in the southern lowlands. In Nepal, they are mostly Hindus. Members of this group objected most strongly to the “One Country, One People” decrees of the late 1980s and were the majority of those who were expelled following citizenship restrictions.

The most recent and only reliable census taken as a total count in 2005 revealed that Bhutan’s population is slightly less than 700,000. Males slightly outnumber females in each of the major age categories, though not to the extent recorded in China or India, and population increase is slow, which is typical for cold climates.⁷ Females officially receive equal legal protection and hold employment in many fields. Only 35 percent of the population lives in urban areas.

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Migration to larger cities, such as the capital of Thimphu, is increasing, as people seek and obtain primarily government jobs. However, migration is officially discouraged in order to avoid overpopulation in urban areas that is a common blight of developing countries. Rather, the Bhutanese government is attempting improvement of rural livelihood and income opportunities.

With the advent of the Internet and television in the last decade, this policy has proved harder to enforce. Viewers with access to such communication technology aspire to enjoy the higher standard of living apparent in the images they see, available only in an urban setting. Although substandard dwellings are torn down, many migrants rely on the tight social network to find at least temporary housing with city-dwelling relatives.

Highly terraced and steeply pitched arable land comprises only 2.3 percent of the country's total landmass. Exploitation of natural resources forms the basis of the economy. Timber is now for domestic consumption in order to preserve the environment and retard erosion, though some burning occurs to clear ground for growing cash crops. The government has established model plots to encourage cultivation of niche crops for export, such as nut trees. It is less expensive, for example, to import white rice from India than to grow the locally preferred Bhutanese red rice, which largely lacks an export market, so conversion of paddy land to other crops is encouraged (but not for conversion to nonagriculture uses). Hydropower is the major income earner, with mini-dams providing minimal environmental intrusion, generating electricity that is sold—mostly to neighboring India. Other main exports are minerals, such as gypsum and calcium carbonate.

With an annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of only \$5,400, Bhutan's GDP derives 40 percent from services, 38 percent from industry, and 22 percent from (largely subsistence) agriculture, which employs 63 percent of the populace. Between manufacturing powerhouse China and global-service outsourcing power India, Bhutan struggles to find a compatible niche for its own development acceleration. The second-largest contributor to GDP after hydropower is tourism, promoted by government policy for several important strategic reasons connected to the four pillars of GNH.⁸

As envisioned by the modernizing third King of Bhutan Jigme Dorje Wangchuk, and implemented by his son, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, GNH rests on the following, largely interconnected, four pillars:

Sustainable development: Bhutan has moved cautiously into the modern, globally connected world due in part to its concern with maintaining itself as a recognizable entity. An example linked with the third pillar is the prohibition against exporting lumber and the widespread adoption of cast-iron stoves that are also used to heat rooms and vent outside houses. This innovation, pushed by government-directed monk advocates due to their popular respect, reduced both the use of wood and negative health impacts. Dams are better than mining because they do not diminish natural resources. Tourism serves multiple purposes since people will come to Bhutan to see evidence of the next two principles, contributing money and jobs to the economy without diminishing resources. Tourism, however, is tightly controlled with almost unprecedented strictures: tourists must spend a minimum of \$250 per day (including room, board, guide, and transportation), bookings are made solely through Bhutanese travel agents, hotels and restaurants are almost all Bhutanese owned, and air travel is only by one of the two Druk airplanes.

Preservation of cultural values: Bhutan strongly feels that it has a mission to preserve its Buddhist Himalayan cultural heritage, following the absorption of neighbors Tibet into China

and Sikkim into India. Regulations requiring wearing traditional Bhutanese clothes—the kira for women and the gho for men—maintaining traditional architecture for buildings, teaching the Dzongka language at all levels in schools, and restricting citizenship to post-1958 migrants, are all part of the “One Nation, One Culture” movement mandating common appearances and practices in several areas. Himalayan heritage is preserved and commercialized by tourism’s support for crafts, such as making masks used in dance performances and weaving textiles dyed in traditional patterns but used for making modern purses, pouches, and table runners.

Conservation of the natural environment: As the Dominican Republic looks askance at neighbor Haiti’s despoliation of its environment through widespread deforestation, so Bhutan seeks to distinguish itself from Nepal’s deforestation and the resulting soil erosion that also plagues downriver, flood-prone neighbor Bangladesh. Bhutanese tourism attraction rests on environmental features such as its rare black-necked cranes, Himalayan bison, and blue poppies, among other endangered species.

Good governance: In stark contrast to most other developing countries, Bhutan vigorously prosecutes corruption. A widespread push for e-governance requires the Internet posting of much government information. The 2008 election of a new parliament represented a rare (and widely protested) instance of a popular king choosing to abdicate in favor of his son. The king further advised the electorate to dethrone his successor if they did not like his performance. The election turnout, even in remote areas, was quite large, and the young new king remains popular. The plebiscite was followed in 2009 with the unprecedented installation of an independent judiciary. Although rooted in Buddhist beliefs, GNH has inspired much international interest and discussion concerning its qualitative and quantitative measurability and subcategories such as physical, mental, and spiritual health; time balance attainment, sociocultural and ecological vitality, education, and living standard satisfaction are related categories. Assessment of GNH levels might be theoretically possible with data provided through international development agencies for such “quality of life” categories as infant and maternal mortality, longevity, and school completion rates for both genders. Joining international organizations such as the United Nations and receiving grants from agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) are vital to Bhutan’s development plans to lessen reliance on India without diminishing the importance of those ties.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

In the late seventeenth century, Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal, a Tibetan religious figure who fled south with purloined treasures as insurance for his welcome in the dzong (fort-monasteries) outside Tibetan control, became the first unifier of Bhutan. His clever ruses to repel the unhappy pursuing Tibetans are reenacted annually at a festival in Punaka where he set up the traditional capital and founded a Druk Kagyu Buddhist theocracy. Over subsequent centuries, Bhutan intermittently joined with neighboring Tibet and Nepal to invade its western neighbor and fellow Buddhist monarchy of Sikkim, but Bhutan did not itself lose land until 1865, when the British raj in India pushed north to include much of the rich plains as a buffer for its colonial possession. The Wangchuk dynasty was founded with Britain’s blessing in 1907 as a reward for assisting them in a dispute with Tibet, uniting the formerly fractured territory under one king. In 1914,

Britain tacked onto India a section on Bhutan's eastern border that became the Northeastern Frontier Area, now the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The end of World War II brought a turbulent sorting out of regional national boundaries. China invaded Tibet in 1949, pushing an alarmed India and Bhutan into a "protectorate" treaty. By 1958, India's Prime Minister Nehru and his daughter, future Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, trekked on mule-back to Bhutan, pledging support for improved infrastructure and political economic relations. The following year, the embattled Dalai Lama fled to India through Bhutan, which closed its border with Chinese-occupied Tibet. Only the narrow strip of the Chumbi Valley, now controlled by China, separated Bhutan from Sikkim. India absorbed the latter in 1974 after rioting by Nepalis whose emigration out of their impoverished Hindu homeland swamped Sikkim. United under the Rana dynasty from 1846 to 1953, then reverting to the Shah monarchy, Nepal maintained its independence under an Indian policy that considered the Himalayan states its strategic northern border. Unlike Bhutan, Nepal's royalty reserved most wealth for the elite, leaving their population the unhappy choices of poverty, emigration, and/or rebellion.

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Bhutan's contemporary external conflicts included groups agitating for independence from India that took refuge over Bhutan's southeastern border. Facing an ultimatum from India, Bhutan's king led a military force that rapidly expelled the invaders in 2003. Although the Chinese dispute the Indians' control of the Tawang salient, they also seek to shrink Bhutan's northwestern border with Tibet in remote areas populated by nomads and along the far western border edge with the strategic Chumbi Valley. Bhutan's military trains and patrols with Indian forces.⁹

With India's consent, Bhutan looks to small independent countries, such as Denmark and Switzerland, for advice, success models, and economic and technical assistance. Switzerland's landlocked Alpine geographic setting, surrounded by frequently contentious large countries, is much like Bhutan.¹⁰ Culturally, Switzerland can be divided into four regions and languages that coalesce around a national perspective that is gradually becoming less isolationist but that still favors avoiding policies that might result in international entanglements. Although the Swiss infrastructure solution of railroads is impractical for Bhutan, the notion of an international highway linking China and India through Nepal's Nathula Pass has been considered. Geography presents options; humans make decisions.

CONCLUSION: CONQUERING GEOGRAPHY

The widely divergent, contemporary political situation of the Himalayan countries of Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, and Tibet reflects a culturally and historically produced set of outcomes not dissimilar to the European Alpine nations of Austria, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. Ranging from continued independence and self-imposed semi-isolation (Switzerland is not a member of the European Union) to absorption in whole or in part by bigger neighbors, political leadership

choices led to momentous twenty-first century consequences. Nepal remains tilted toward its cultural cousin India but roiled by civil disturbances and the effects of the Sino-Indian war over the Aksai Chin glacier in 1962. Its demographic outflow overtook Sikkim and influenced the expulsion of Bhutanese Lhotshampas who only since 2009 have been granted refugee status under UN arrangements in the US and British Commonwealth countries. Sikkim was absorbed outright by India, consolidating its northern border buffer with China's Tibet. Only Bhutan maintains its "middle way" balance, however precarious, preferring a Buddhist influenced GNH over the economic GNP measurement of wellbeing (in which it lags).

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Bhutan seeks Switzerland's development success, profiting from its stability and neutrality, but reaches out to international organizations, such as the UN, and financiers, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, for advice and loans. Like Switzerland, Bhutan wants to develop at a pace and distinctive manner of its choosing with a popular mandate from its people. Unlike Switzerland, Bhutan exists in a dangerous neighborhood without the luxury of time, perched on a Himalayan tightrope. The consequences of local outcomes in remote, small places can have global consequences when such places tilt the balance of power between large, rising, ambitious rivals.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com> for numerous writings and speeches by Karma Ura, the head of the Gross National Happiness Commission, the Centre for Bhutan Studies, and a noted author of books set in Bhutan.
2. A good discussion of Bhutan's history and development is provided in Michael Rutland, "Bhutan: From the Mediaeval to the Millennium," *Asian Affairs* 30, no. 3 (1999): 284–295.
3. See Barbara Crossette, *So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 10, for an interesting contemporary discussion of the countries considered in this article.
4. Dorji Penjore, "Security of Bhutan: Walking between the Giants," *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 10, (2004): 108.
5. See Pradyumna P. Karan, *Bhutan: Environment, Culture and Development Strategy* (New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1990), 13. Dr. Karan was commissioned by both the King of Bhutan and his brother-in-law the King of Sikkim to provide an accurate map of both countries, published subsequently in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. A standard, thorough geographic picture of Bhutan is also presented in Neil Fraser, Anima Bhattacharya, and Bimalendu Bhattacharya, *Geography of a Himalayan Kingdom: Bhutan* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2001).
6. Susan M. Walcott, "Bordering the Eastern Himalaya: Boundaries, Passes, Power Contestations," *Geopolitics* 15 (2010): 62–81.

7. See the Central Intelligence Agency entry on Bhutan “Population,” World Factbook, accessed July 3, 2010.

8. Ibid.

9. For an extensive discussion of regional geopolitics, see both John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the 20th Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) and, for an Indian point of view, Rajesh Kharat, “Indo-Bhutan Relations: Strategic Perspectives,” ed. K. Warikoo, *Himalayan Frontiers of India: Historical, Geo-Political and Strategic Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009), 137–166.

10. See John Berthold, *Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 2, for a lovely collection of colorful pictures to accompany the thematically organized text.

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