

The Lama and the Laser

Two Years in Bhutan

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The tiny aeroplane began to twist and turn as it wound its way up the valley. A hamlet clung to the hillside and we banked so close to it that I felt I had only to reach out of the window to take a chilli from the rows that were drying on the roofs. A final bit of weaving and we landed at the little airstrip at Paro. I let out a sigh of relief. I had finally made it to Bhutan, my home for the next two years.

Bhutan is tucked away in the NE Himalaya. Chinese-occupied Tibet lies to the N and the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal to the S. It is roughly the same size as Switzerland and like that country has always sought to control its own destiny despite its large neighbours. Bhutanese history catalogues a seemingly endless succession of scuffles with Tibet and India, and no uninvited foreign cultures have been able to establish any influence within its borders. Bhutan, as recognizable today, was founded in the early 17th century as a theocratic state by a Tibetan monk called Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Since that time it has been bound together as a religious entity but it was not until the establishment of the hereditary monarchy in 1907 that the country became politically unified. Until then the different regions of the country were controlled by baronial figures known as Penlops, who cultivated a hearty dislike of one another and failed to agree on anything except when threatened from without. At such moments they would join forces, repel the invaders, then once more revert to squabbling amongst themselves. In due course the British Raj became irritated with some of the Penlops who were in the habit of marching down to the plains of British India and causing trouble for various beleaguered outposts on the North-East Frontier. A punitive expedition was contemplated, but discarded in favour of the idea of backing a single Penlop in an attempt to unify the country. The chosen Penlop might then be favourably disposed to the British and things could settle down peacefully.

In the event, one particular Penlop offered himself as a candidate for British sponsorship: Ugyen Wangchuk, the Tongsa Penlop, a shrewder politician than his rivals and an equally brave fighter. He gained favour with the British and accompanied Younghusband to Lhasa. The British perceived him to be reliable and clever, backed him, then sat back to see their man win through and defeat his rivals. In 1907 Ugyen Wangchuk was given a knighthood and, rather more importantly for him, became King of Bhutan. A treaty was concluded whereby Bhutan's internal policy should be her own affair, but foreign policy would be under the control of the British. In 1947, at Indian independence, the substance of this treaty was inherited by the new Indian government and it is still in operation today.

Following the establishment of the monarchy, Bhutan kept very much to itself. Cut off from the world by its mountains, it possessed sufficient spiritual

and physical resources to sustain life, and unlike most other new nations, it never felt the need to proclaim its existence. But in the reign of the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, two things happened to force Bhutan out of its self-imposed isolation: Tibet was invaded by the Chinese and Sikkim was annexed by India. The rest of the world failed to react and since these events took place on Bhutan's back door-step King Jirne Dorji Wangchuk was forced to realize that in the 20th century there is no room for a country that wants to be left alone. In the 1960s Bhutan became a member of the UN and later of the non-aligned movement. The King turned to India for help with a development programme. Roads and schools were built, health, agriculture and forestry projects were initiated and tentative links with the outside world were established. By the time of his death in 1972 Jigme Dorji Wangchuk had justifiably earned the title of Father of modern Bhutan.

His son Jigme Singye Wangchuk (the world's youngest reigning monarch) is continuing the process begun by his father. There are Bhutanese embassies in Delhi, Dacca, Kathmandu and New York, and a trade mission in Kuwait. Bhutanese students have been sent abroad to study in places as far apart as Auckland and London, New Brunswick and Nairobi. With tact and courtesy Bhutan has tried to lessen its dependence on India, and today a number of non-governmental organizations from various western countries are involved in development activity. It was in this context that Voluntary Service Overseas were approached and asked to send a number of teachers. That was how I came to be climbing out of the country's only aeroplane at Paro.

Bhutan is beautiful. In the north the barren yak pastures lie beneath a spectacular array of unclimbed mountains. The Bhutanese sides of the larger mountains are steep and looked hard when I got up close to them. Kula Kangri, the biggest prize, has a W ridge that looks relatively straightforward but its principal challenge, the exquisite S ridge, would involve some very hard climbing. The largest mountains form the border with Tibet and there are considerable access problems, but there exist a host of shapely but lesser peaks that could be attempted from a sensibly located base camp.

This northern region is politically sensitive. The Chinese have built a road right up to the disputed NW border and the Indian Army maintains a heavy presence at all places where a crossing could be contemplated. The majority of the population lives in the central belt of the country in little villages scattered between a height of 1000 and 3000m. They pursue a wholly subsistence way of life. The valleys are arranged in a higgledy-piggledy fashion in a spectacular array of steep-sided hills dense with trees or jungle. These hills slowly subside into thickly jungled foothills and finally into a narrow belt of plain running along the southern border of the country. Bhutan is so small that a week of hard walking could see you moving from tiger infested foothills to the bleak yak and yeti territory of the freezing north. There are few roads. Those that exist tend to be of the twisting variety that allow one to drive for a couple of hours and end up but a short distance from one's starting point. Not surprisingly the poor communications network has encouraged the preservation of distinct ethnic groups. There are many mutually incomprehensible languages among tribes loosely bound together by centuries of common religious practice and custom.

The southern part of the country is inhabited by Nepalis who are not linked to the other Bhutanese by race or religion. The southern Bhutanese, as they are called, settled within the last 100 years and now comprise about 40% of the population. A trip to the south is like a journey to another country; suddenly climate, food, houses, people, language, religion, custom and dress are all different. One of the major preoccupations of the government is its national integration policy, and the outcome of this fledgling initiative might very well determine Bhutan's political stability over the coming years.

Shemgang Dzongkhag district, where I taught for two years, is situated more or less in the middle of the central zone and is reputed to be the most backward district of the 18 that comprise Bhutan. The Dzongkhag is mostly mountainous jungle, situated in the shadow of the Black Mountain range that divides western from eastern Bhutan. Shemgang village itself is a remote, small and very traditional dot on the landscape, situated on the shoulder of a 2400m mountain. The people were delightful and friendly with an impish sense of humour. At the slightest provocation they broke off from work for strenuous and exhausting celebrations. Many a late-night session drinking the local *ara* and dancing merrily in circles has taught me that there is a lot to be said for the Bhutanese approach to life. The people are handsome and the women especially beautiful in their colourfully patterned cloth. I remember particularly our *Tsechu*, a week-long religious festival when the lamas came out from the *dzong* or monastery-cum-fortress, and performed a series of religious dances for the enjoyment and education of the people. What a sight! Horns blowing and drums beating; lamas in saffron robes or colourful costumes; intricate and horrifying masks; amazing statues of Guru Rimpoche and Lord Buddha; much leaping and clashing of cymbals; the villagers dressed up in their best clothes, eating, drinking, watching and merry-making; perfect weather and beautiful views, and not a tourist in sight! This was by the people for the people.

The Bhutanese are deeply religious. Their faith is the cornerstone of their life in the villages. In particular they are guided by 'the law of *Dharma*' which at its simplest might be described as a creed that tells us 'to do as we would be done by'. Another guiding principle is *karma* or fate; it implies a very positive acceptance of whatever life happens to thrust in your direction. A short story illustrates this. Recently in E Bhutan the government opened a school for blind children, but it has had great difficulty in attracting pupils. This is not because of a shortage of blind people but rather that the parents of the children firmly believe that God has given them a special gift and responsibility and thus are loth to part with their handicapped children.

After two years, when I climbed back into the aeroplane at Paro (it was by this time one of two), my friend Tshering gripped me by the arm: 'Now you know a little about my country,' he said. 'If you are asked to write anything make sure you don't get carried away. We are a real people with real problems.'

For Bhutan, the Shangri-La image is a mixed blessing. On the one hand it enables the Bhutanese to charge tourists and climbers very highly for the privilege of entering the country. The former are herded around in buses and shown only a small part of the country, and only that part which the Bhutanese want them to see. Few manage to escape the tourist beat and then only at a

price. Climbers are similarly constrained, and need very considerable finances; only well-funded expeditions need apply. The Director of Tourism was quoted to me as saying, 'for centuries our mountains have proved to be our safeguard and now they shall prove to be worth their weight in gold.' It looks as if it is going to be mainly Japanese gold.

The rationale of this policy seems to be to expose only a few Bhutanese to outside influences in order to obtain foreign exchange that can be used to improve the quality of life for the rest of the population. It is a policy which has left its mark on those people who have been so exposed. On a visit to the northern yak-herding settlement of Lunana I encountered more mercenary activity and sheer greed than I have ever experienced in Nepal or India.

But the Shangri-La image has created a phenomenal interest in the country which will not go away. Development agencies and the well-heeled from all over the world are tripping over themselves in the rush to be permitted entry to a country which is still remote, spectacularly beautiful, and where the people can be so charming. In the face of this interest the Royal Government has stood remarkably firm, but foreign influences are permeating through none-the-less. A short stay in the capital Thimphu would convince all but the least perceptive that many Bhutanese heads have already been turned. So many developing countries, when exposed to the West, tend to latch on to the worst aspects of our culture; so easily packaged and marketed, so corrosive of other cultures. His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk has said that he wants his kingdom to be a place where gross national product is equal to gross national happiness, where his subjects can enjoy an improved standard of living but at the same time maintain their ancient customs and traditions; where they can develop, but not lose their souls. A country where a lama and a laser can co-exist in perfect harmony.

This is what makes Bhutan such a fascinating country. It has come late to the development process and has set itself the goal of picking out only the good from modern western society to blend with its own heritage in an attempt to produce the perfect society. In theory at least it should be possible to learn from the mistakes of others. And certainly, blessed with an obedient and respectful population the government is not under any internal pressure to speed the process along in a way that might result in irretrievable errors. That somewhere in the world a country is in a position to take our good and reject our bad is very exciting. That they should succeed would be wonderful. That they should fail might indicate something about the essential greed and corruptibility of mankind. It is impossible for the west to help without in some way destroying more than it creates.

When I left Bhutan I had the feeling that were I to return in ten years I would find either a country that was even more delightful than the one in which I had spent the last two years; or a people whose lives had been desolated. The balance is a fine one.