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People and Places

Himalayan Bhutan: The Pain of Joining the World

Story and Pictures by Peyton Johnson

A quarter century ago the mystic little Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon to the Bhutanese, awoke from its trance, shrugged off its hermithood, cautiously opened its doors, and joined the rest of the human race. The result was something of a shock to both sides. Bhutan found the world as strange as the world found Bhutan.

Throughout Bhutan that opening trauma has not completely worn off to this day. But such is the cost of "development." And it is development, the more and faster the better, that this poor and land-locked little mountain nation has decided, with some soul-searching, that it can no longer do without. Certainly there is much in Bhutan to develop.

Per capita income for Bhutan's estimated 1.3 million citizens, for instance, is still below $200 a year. That makes Bhutan one of the world's poorest countries.

Bhutan unhappily has the lowest life expectancy and primary school enrollment rates of all those recorded by the World Bank. It has one of the world's highest rates of illiteracy, 83 per cent. Disease is common and health services, where they exist, leave much to be desired.

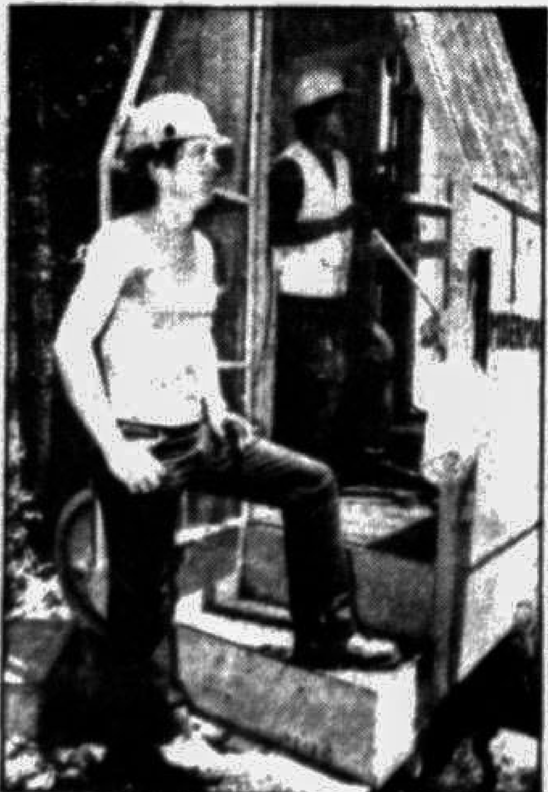
During the last of my two visits, late summer of 1991, and outbreak of cholera had already killed some 20 people along the border with India.

A week later three cholera deaths were registered in Thimphu, the capital 170 kilometres to the north. Later the killer disease showed up in the beautiful Paro Valley and, or so rumor had it, in other more remote parts of the country. I never read or heard the outcome of the '91 cholera epidemic. News from Bhutan is rare in big city dailies. But the very mention of the word "disease" and "epidemic" terrify the Bhutanese. It is easy to understand why.

In 1964-65, the Bhutanese tell you, a truly terrible cholera epidemic killed off half or so of the entire population, then estimated at about a million. Whole villages were wiped out. To this day as you drive about the country the burnt out frames of what were once typically two and three story farm houses, build solid enough to withstand an artillery barrage, stand out like blackened memorials from some half-forgotten war amid the green and gold of the up-and-down fields of ripening grain. In less advanced societies fire is the only, if inadequate, answer to cholera and plague.

A Bhutanese farmer uses a team of bullocks and a primitive plow to prepare his land.

Bhutanese women transplant rice seedlings in the rain in the beautiful Paro valley.



A Scots forester of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and his Bhutanese trainee use a "timber master" to remove harvested hardwood logs from a forest of central Bhutan.

Infant mortality in Bhutan is an appalling 118 per thousand. In Asia only unfortunate Afghanistan, with an astronomical 162, has a more tragic rate. There is just one doctor per 9,736 citizens. Only war-ravaged Cambodia, with one per 27,000, and destitute Nepal, with one per 20,234, have more miserable figures. Even perennially stricken Bangladesh has a better ratio — one doctor per 6,219.

"This is a beautiful country with fine friendly people," and development expert with five years in Bhutan told me. "But is tragically poor and under-developed."

I saw this side of Bhutan for myself. In the towns big spenders are as rare as folding money. In the villages the poverty would break the heart of a stone. Yet during a total of four weeks, during two trips six years apart, except on the border with India, I saw not one beggar.

The entire country, uniformly gorgeous, covers just 47,000 square kilometres, making Bhutan less than a tenth the size of Thailand with a 40th of its population. Only three pre cent of the country's terrain is under crops with another 15 per cent or so devoted to pasture. There are no railways in Bhutan and precious few roads, none at all in the northern reaches. All road links are toward the south through the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal.

The first narrow, up-and-down, forever twisting and winding all-weather road from Thimphu to Phuntsholing was built by the Indian Army in 1962. A trip along this road takes the breath away, partly through sheer fear and partly through the overpowering beauty of the mountains. In places it is difficult for two vehicles to pass abreast. Here and there you can look down, sometimes straight down, for what seems five or 10 miles.

Driving back north from the low country, the Himalayas rise up like a wall to both frighten and awe with wonder. To do ten kilometres, as the crow flies, you must do 20 or 30 laterally trough a thousand unnerving curves and spirals. You no sooner make the summit of one mountain that the fear of straining up gives way to the terror of breaking down. Visitors seldom make this journey twice. For whole stretches the narrow road, blocked regularly by landslides, seems to run on nothing more solid than blue Himalayan air. Coming back from the southern lowlands, some visitors crawl wild-eyed, hair on end, from the car or bus to embrace the sweet, finally-firm earth on hands and knees at Thimphu.

In recent years, the Public Works Department of Bhutan has constructed roads at an annual average of 100 kilometres and today there are some 2,000 kilometres or roads throughout the kingdom. This network is woefully inadequate for exploitation of the little nation's immense forestry and mineral resources, for marketing agricultural produce, or for socioeconomic development generally.

About 95 per cent of the population still lives on the land, the vast majority at subsistence level. Most internal trade is carried on by barter and only the scant "city" populations, plus the farmers of the neighboring hills and valleys, belong to the modest money market.

The capital city of Thimphu, a lovely if dreamy and unhurried town perched 2,335 metres (7,700 feet) up in a long and rambling Himalayan valley, boasts just 20,000 inhabitants. The next largest town, Phuntsholing, in the narrow strip of southern lowlands that border onto India, has 12,000. No other Bhutanese "city" comes close to 10,000 residents.

Lack of labour, in fact, in one of Bhutan's major problems. Every year many thousands of Indians and Nepalese are brought to Bhutan or fixed-period contracts at government expense to supply the manpower needed for construction work, road building, work in the handful of factories and sawmills and just about every type of job that the Bhutanese, nailed to the land, cannot do themselves. Such imported labour makes many Bhutanese uneasy, though they know full well that the development they are determined to achieve is impossible without a large pool of imported labour for a long time to come. Still, it sometimes causes problems.

"We didn't even have a word for strike in our native Dzongkha language until these foreigners started showing up," a Thimphu resident told me. "Strike" What's that? Most of us didn't even know what a strike was. We know now."

In the last three years this unfortunately growing ethnic strife has now and again burst out in violence, especially in the lowlands where the majority of the Nepalese and Indian immigrants, legal and otherwise, live. It is an open question whether Bhutan will be able to contain this problem and come up with solutions acceptable to all concerned. But resentful mutterings and long unhappy faces, among a people whose natural expression was once a habitual smile, increasingly sour the local colour. Nor is it a good idea for the outlander to "discuss the matter frankly" with the natives. Do so and you will inevitably be accused by one group or the other, or both, of "taking sides."

Bhutan does not go out of its way to encourage tourism. Only 2,500 tourists are allowed per year. The majority come in by air aboard the single BAE jet that constitutes the national airline, "Drukair." The only airport is at Paro, an ancient town some 80 kilometres south of Thimphu. Bhutan has decided that while *some* visitors are welcome, the promotion of tourism is not.

That is just as well because Bhutan normally gets less than 2,000 tourists a year, well below the puny legally allowed figure. These tourists come mainly from West Germany, the United States, and Japan in that order, with a sprinkling of other nations. Tourists are only allowed into the country in group tours. If you are planning a trip to Thimphu, forget it — unless you can talk at least five other people into going with you. Even than you must ask for visas at least three months in advance.

And you should bring some money, preferably at least $200 a day. In Bhutan you are never cheated, but for the tour-group visitor the country is surprisingly expensive.

What makes the Bhutanese jittery about "too many foreigners," from wherever, is not just the previously unknown ethnic problem. It is also the fear of losing their own sense of identity, culture and way of life, all of which they are ferociously determined to protect.

"You must see this historically," a shop owner in Thimphu said. "We are a very small nation with just two bordering neighbours, China and India, the world's two most populous countries. We have nothing against either nation, but— well, we just look at the map and it makes us nervous. I think you can call that a perfectly human reaction."

So attracting the great gangs of gawking tourists who are a familiar feature of so many Asian cities, for several reasons, lack of accommodation being one, does not stand high on the Bhutanese development agenda. At present tourism accounts for only about one percent of Bhutan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

But any other sort of development is a different matter. The Bhutanese, having "snored," as one local with put it, through most of their long history are now almost fanatically determind to "wake up and catch up." Considering that Bhutan did not even join the United Nations until 1971, plus a number of UN's specialized agencies over the next 10 years, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1981, Bhutan has already come far under its first six five-year plans.

During the fifths plan, 1981-86, Bhutan achieved a yearly economic growth rate of 6.4 percent and an increase in governmental tax revenues of 28 per cent per annum. In March, 1986 the first of the four mammoth turbine of the huge Chukha hydroelectric project was successfully synchronised to the Indian grid, thereby supplying Thimphu and Phuntsholing with power and allowing the highly profitable export of surplus energy to power-hungry India.

The second turbine at Chukha went into operation in October, 1986 and the remaining two came on stream in 1988. Hydroelectric potential, just now beginning to be tapped, is or course one of the great natural resources of this little Himalayan Kingdom. Experts say Bhutan has tapped less than two per cent of its hydroelectric potential.

It is impossible to talk about Bhutan without stressing its special relationship with India, its principal benefactor and main trading partner. During the first years of its development drive, when Bhutan "woke up," India generously provided Bhutan with above 95 percent of its development funds. This proportion has steadily fallen over the years as the Bhutanese, a proud tough mountain people, have become better able to provide more of their own development money.

India still contributes about half of all Bhutanes development resources, buys 95 per cent of all Bhutanese exports and paid above 60 per cent of all costs of the immense Chukha enterprise.

Aside from India, a consortium of 12 other nations provides Bhutan with development aid. For its sixth five-year plan, 1987-92, Bhutan itself provides 38 per cent of all development funds, compared to 24 per cent for the fifth plan. Expenditure for the sixth plan comes to 8,811.2 million Bhutanese Ngultrum, or about $700 million, an impressive jump from the 6,015.2 m, or some $477 million, of the fifth plan. The Ngultrum is at par with the Indian rupee and both currencies are used interchangeably throughout Bhutan.

The number one development priority of the sixth plan is education, understandably enough, given the shortage of skills in practically all fields. Investment is both industry, which contributes but four per cent of GDP, and agriculture are to be maintained with special emphasis on improving living conditions, schooling, health and rural welfare generally through a network of local rural training and services centres in each of Bhutan's 18 *Dzongkhags* or administrative districts.

Forestry and agriculture are two of Bhutan's major preoccupations. Forestry because Bhutan is one of the world's most densely forested countries and the potential of forestry and wood-based products, for both domestic use and export, are enormous, though, as one FAO forester in the country put it: "the surface has barely been scratched."

There are two dozen FAO projects in Bhutan, major and minor, a half dozen in forestry alone, while several others have forestry, or forest protection, components. There are FAO projects in various phases of agricultural development, embracing everything from improvement of seed varieties, to marketing of agricultural produce, pasture improvement, establishment of a veterinary diagnostic laboratory, horticulture, mushroom production, increasing low crop yields through use of improved varieties, fertilizers and pesticides and related modern agricultural inputs, crop forecasting and agricultural data collection— practically the whole mix of disciplines that go into bringing a very poor developing nation's agriculture into the 20th century.

There are even two FAO-assisted projects in aquaculture and the establishment of a fish seed production centre, the first two projects ever designed to develop land-locked and mountainous Bhutan's all but nonexistent inland fisheries.

Because of the heavily forested little nation's overwhelmingly rural make-up, FAO is in fact probably the UN specialized agency Bhutan most depends on. FAO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok also assists Bhutan in its development planning. Dr YS "Sudaka" Rao, FAO Senior Regional Forestry Officer, has traveled to Bhutan several times and helped the government draw up the forestry sector of its sixth five-year plan.

Says Dr. Rao: "Bhutan's forestry potential is enormous, but like everything else in the country it suffers from lock of development money and an acute shortage of trained manpower.

"And even with so many relatively untouched virgin forests of highquality hardwoods, the Bhutanese know they still must be careful. Many of their officials, often of FAO study tours, have visited neighbouring Asian countries. When they have seen how many of these nations have so criminally neglected and abused their forests, the Bhutanese, who think of their own forests and mountains with almost religious awe, have been horrified.

"They don't want any such man-made disasters to overtake Bhutan. I believe they have the foresight and the dedication to prevent it, though in the long run this may not be so easy as they think. The main threat to the world's forests everywhere is, you see, short-sighted human greed.The Bhutanese in coming years many find they are as greedy and short-sighted as the rest of us. I hope not, but it cannot be ruled out entirely."

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Bhutan's Monarch, who is both Head of State and Head of Government, is determined to never let Bhutan's immensely beautiful and as yet unpolluted environment go the way of so many others, in both rich and developing countries alike. King Jigme is much loved by his people and travels constantly to even the meanest villages of the remotest areas of the Kingdom.

Women at work in the rice fields of the Thimphu Valley. A lone male "oversees" the work. The solidly constructed building in the right background is a typical Bhutanese farm house.

Bhutanese children before an ancient Buddhist monastery on the outskirts of the capital, Thimphu, 2,700 meters up in the foothills of the High Himalaya.

For centuries Bhutan was self-sufficient in food production. That has changed rather drastically since serious development began, a period that many Bhutanese refer to as "the end of slumber," or when the Thunder Dragon, at first only half convinced of the wisdom of such a dramatic and Dragon, "joined the world." Now there is a food shortage, largely due to the influx of foreign workmen— approximately 77 per cent of the entire work force in the "modern" sector— who also have to be fed. Now Bhutan is forced to import cereals and other food-stuffs, mostly for India.

This does not sit well with all Bhutanese, but there is nothing whatever they can do about it until and "if" they greatly upgrade their own agricultural production. Moreover, crops yields in Bhutan have stagnated or actually declined over the past dozen years. Yields per hectare in killograms, for example, of the principal Bhutanese staples between 1980 and 1990 were low, unimpressive and, worse yet, dropping.

In 1980, for instance, Bhutan produced 57,000 tons of rice, not enough for self-sufficiency, but far closer to it than in 1990 when rice production totaled only 43,000 tons, a drastic drop of minus three percent in just 10 years. Total grain production, including the stables wheat and buckwheat, dropped from 158,000 tons in 1980 to 105,000 tons in 1990, an even greater slide of minus 5.7 per cent. Only in roots and tubers, mostly potatoes, a relatively late comer crop in Bhutan, showed a healthy increase of 3.1 per cent in production, from 40,000 tons in 1980 to 52,000 tons in 1990.

All of this at a time when the population was estimated to be increasing at the rate of 2.3 per cent a year.

The Bhutanese Ministry of Agriculture is well aware of this depressing picture, of course, hence the continuing requests for FAO and other international assistance in all phases of agriculture.

One Ministry official told me: "This is a rather pitiful performance. If we don't soon do better than this, a lot better, we are going to find ourselves in a terrible mess and a very dangerous situation."

As for "Eating out" in Bhutan, all the hotels and handful of restaurants specialize in good, legitimate Indian, Chinese and spicy Bhutanese dishes. Now and again in the three bearable hotels of Thimphu the menu offers what the Bhutanese, in their innocence, refer to as "Western food." But whatever the style of cooking, *haute cuisine* is it not.

Before, during and after meals, all day long in fact, the Bhutanese drink what they call "tea," a scalding hot buttery brew usually served in heavy stone or earthenware mugs. It is thrust at you whenever you get out of the car or stand in one spot for more than a few minutes. After the first dozen or so mugs you actually come to like the stuff. If tea this be, the Bhutanese drink enough of it to make an English spinster cry quits.

No article on Bhutan can be complete without a mention of the almost magical effect the enchanting beauty of its mountainous countryside has on the senses of the visitor. Wandering its lovely forests and hillsides induces a feeling close to trance. You find yourself half expecting to meet some red-robed holy man, come down perhaps from Lhasa to the north to spread light, peace, tolerance and understanding.

In every direction the green and red valleys are ringed in by taller and taller purple hills that lift ever upward as though steps towards Paradise. Look north toward Tibet and the higher reaches of the Himalaya and you see, fleetingly through the changing cloud cover, snow-covered peaks strain mightily up, altar-like, out of the rumpled earth to cut great white gaps from the Polaroid blue of the central sky.

The local people say that these mountains work magic, that their silvered summits are the gateways to Heaven, but that it is best not to climb to high until you are prepared, until you are called. In one highperched mountain village they tell the tale of a local youth who climbed too high and never returned to his village.

This lad, the villagers say, was much loved for his beauty, sweetness and virtue. Yet for all his good-heartedness, he was a strange boy whose eyes were ever filled with sadness, or perhaps pity for the poverty of his fellows, with a sort of fever and restless yearning that no one, least of all the lad himself, could quite define.

He was last seen, distant dot against snow and sky, near the summit of the tallest peak of the district. Some of the villagers say the lad now sits with Lord Buddha. Others, more hard-headed, say he was simply a foolish boy who climbed beyond his limits and froze to death in mountains too high for his reach. And some say that on certain days, if you are still old look hard enough, you can see the outline of his face, radiant with pace, in the high fields of multicoloured wildflowers that blow forever in the mountain wind.

Whatever the final outcome, development and development fever has come to Bhutan to stay. Aside from the Indians and Nepalese of the modern work force, the majority of the foreigners you see in Thimphu are aid officials of one kind or another, mostly UN people. Thimphu even now houses, perhaps ominously, its won small clan of "coordinators and liaison officers." Exactly with whom and about what these officers, a ubiquitous and worldwide tribe, "liaise" has never been clear to me, nor perhaps to anyone.

That development is indeed needed in Bhutan cannot realistically be argued. Where it can be avoided, no people can be allowed to live in acute poverty, squalor and misery. Let us pray that development in Bhutan progresses with all reasonable speed and that it improves the health, happiness and living standards of the Bhutanese people with a minimum of discomfort.

But let us also pray that in introducing alien concepts and theories less than indisputable to a basically simple, innocent and decent people, that it work no hurt, leave no stain on the purity of Bhutan's soul.

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