

A BRIEF RELIGIOUS,
CULTURAL AND SECULAR
HISTORY OF BHUTAN

DASHO RIGZIN DORJI

SECRETARY, SPECIAL COMMISSION FOR CULTURAL AFFAIRS
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Ta-Dzong National Museum, Paro

Paro Dzong

Private Collection

Punakha Dzong

Tashichho Dzong

Tongsa Dzong

Wangdiphodrang Dzong

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BHUTAN

LEGEND

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PHYSICAL RELIEF (metres)



A BRIEF RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND SECULAR HISTORY OF BHUTAN

The Geographical Background

Situated along the southern slopes of the great Himalayan range between 26°5' and 28°5' north latitude and 88° and 92° east longitude, the kingdom of Bhutan, with an area of 18,000 square miles and a population of 1.2 million, lies like a picturesque fairyland between China to the north and India to the south, east, and west.

The British emissary Captain R. Boileau Pemberton, who visited the country a century and a half ago, dramatically described Bhutan's topography: "With the exception of the narrow strip of land at the foot of the mountains, the whole of Bootan (sic) territory presents a succession of the most lofty and rugged mountains on the surface of the globe . . . the consequence is that the traveller appears to be shut out on every side from the rest of the world."

The area now occupied by the Bhutan Himalayas is described as the site of the shallow Tethys Sea millions of years ago; during the Tertiary period, powerful forces of earth, water, and ice transformed it into a land of irregular mountain masses. Concurrent elevation and erosion during a period of millions of years formed the present mountain system.

Geographers divide Bhutan into three distinct zones: southern, central, and northern. Southern Bhutan consists of low foothills covered with dense tropical forests. The subtropical monsoon climate of this region is hot and humid, and the average temperature is 20° centigrade.

Central Bhutan, where the majority of the population lives and where the capital, Thimphu, is located, lies at the foot of the majestic northern mountains and consists mainly of fertile valleys at altitudes ranging from 3,500 to 10,000 feet. In these valleys are grown a wide variety of crops, including rice, wheat, and maize, while on the surrounding slopes thrive fruits such as apples, plums, and peaches. The central zone is rich in forests of oak, pine, and fir. With the exception of a few valleys like Punakha and Wangdiphodrang situated at comparatively low altitudes, valleys are extremely cold during winter, when the tem-

perature drops to -10° or lower. Strong winds sweeping through the valley increase the cold.

The valleys of the northern region, which are at heights of between 11,000 and 18,000 feet, are sparsely populated, mainly by nomadic yak herdsman. The zone forms part of the Great Himalayas, with high peaks along the Tibetan borders, the most prominent among which are the Jomo Lhari in the west (24,000 feet), and Masang Gang (23,700 feet) and Tshering Gang (21,400 feet) in the north. The tree line is generally at 13,000 feet, with coniferous forests of pine and fir.

Bhutan abounds in a rich variety of wildlife, including elephants, rhinos, tigers, musk deer, snow leopards, brown bears, red pandas, takins, and blue sheep, and there is a widespread belief in the existence of the elusive yeti.

The people of Bhutan are of three ethnic groups: the Sharchops, believed to be the earliest inhabitants, who live largely in eastern Bhutan; the Ngalops, who live mostly in western Bhutan; and the people of Nepalese origin who settled in southern Bhutan toward the end of the nineteenth century. While a number of dialects are spoken in different parts of the country, Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan.

Prehistory

Bhutan's prehistoric period, of which there is neither ethnic, paleobotanic, geographic, or physiographic record, fell roughly between 500 B.C. and A.D. 500. Fire, earthquake, flood, and internecine warfare unfortunately destroyed whatever records may once have existed. The accidental burning in 1832 of the *dzong* (monastery-fortress) in Punakha, at that time one of the capitals of Bhutan, and the widespread destruction caused at the same site by an earthquake in 1897 were especially responsible for the destruction of Bhutanese historical documents relating to the period. However, a number of stone tools and megaliths available suggest that Bhutan was populated from a relatively early date, probably around 2000-1500 B.C.

Little is known about the early history of