

# The rise of bhutan: independence movement, social, economic, and political

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The Rise of Bhutan: Independence Movement, Social, Economic, and Political Developments Post Independence and Conflicts Present Today Throughout the 1900s, colonized countries under European and Asian authority faced countless challenges in gaining their independence. After being dominated by China and Great Britain economically and politically, Bhutan was able to achieve its independence by allying with India's military (Russell 225).

When the control on Bhutan ended, it began the process of building and stabilizing its political, economic and social systems. Recently, Bhutan became a democracy with a bicameral parliament- nonpartisan national council and the national assembly. Prior to becoming a democracy, Bhutan was a monarchy, which consisted of hereditary leaders (" Bhutan" WorldMark 91). Economically, Bhutan remains in a strong trade relationship with India and is one of the leading exporters of hydroelectricity (Chophel 1). In Bhutan, Buddhism is an essential part of every day life and it is incorporated into Bhutan's main philosophy, " Gross National Happiness," (Wangmo, Volk 3). Although Bhutan is a happy and well-organized country, Bhutan continues to face obstacles with foreign nations, such as Nepal (" Bhutan" World History).

Before Bhutan's independence was officially declared in 1971, it struggled to gain assertiveness over Great Britain for centuries. Beginning in 1772, Great Britain invaded Bhutan in order to cease Bhutan from attacking British India's Bengal state. However, because Bhutan was poorly equipped, the Tibetan Dalai Lama interfered and approached the government general in hopes to stop the fighting. The attacks briefly stopped and since Bhutan and India were allies, Britain sent generals to Bhutan to establish a better trade <https://assignbuster.com/the-rise-of-bhutan-independence-movement-social-economic-and-political/>

network with India. While India's trade with Great Britain thrived, Bhutan and Britain still did have a strong foreign relationship. In 1826, India's Assam state was controlled by Britain, which bordered Bhutan.

Thus, Bhutan began purging Assam and the areas surrounding, such as Bengal (" Bhutan" World History). After relentless attacks on the British East Company, Bhutan was forced to sign the Treaty of 1865. This gave Britain dominance over southern Bhutan, but also forced Britain to recognize Bhutan's autonomy and grant a subsidy. No matter how much Britain gave to Bhutan in subsidies, it did not compensate for the damage they had already done to the small colony. In 1907, Sir Ugyen Wangchuck became king, being the first of multiple hereditary kings.

The Treaty of Punakha was signed in the early 20th century by both nations, which involved Bhutan granting British control over foreign and defense matters in exchange for Britain doubling its annual occupation subsidy. The Bhutanese, however reluctantly agreed to the Treaty because of territorial threats from China (Russell 225-226). The state of Bhutan was not only controlled by the imperial power of Great Britain, but also the world-dominating China in the mid-twentieth century. China invaded Tibet in 1959 and Bhutan was seemingly next because of its beneficial location near India. Also in the same year, Bhutan and India signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

This treaty meant that India would not interfere with Bhutan's internal affairs, but would assist in its foreign policy (" Bhutan" World History).

Additionally, Bhutan would receive an annual subsidy from India, which would

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boost its governmental income (Russell 226). In the 1950s, China did succeed in gaining substantial territory in Bhutan, but instead of getting defeated, India's army aided Bhutan against China. Bhutan's infrastructure grew and new policies were made. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, son of Sir Ugyen Wangchuck abolished slavery, implemented a secular education, increased rights for women and put an end to the caste system (" Bhutan" World History).

Soon, China's defense weakened and the Bhutanese government closed its border with China. Although, Bhutan shut down its border with China, this did not stop the Chinese from illegally entering Bhutan and building roads (Russell 226). Because China took control of Tibet, which was a widely economic trading ground for Bhutan, China's relationship with Bhutan was ruined (" Bhutan" World History). In 1969, an autocratic monarchy was formed along with a National Assembly, which was also known as Tsongdu. The National Assembly had power over the king to select and remove him. In 1971, Bhutan joined the United Nations, officially ending its colonial rule from Great Britain and China and becoming an independent state (Russell 226).

Once Bhutan became independent, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the next hereditary ruler looked towards modernizing politically. Bhutan's government consisted of an autocratic ruler, where political parties were outlawed. However, political parties still existed and the main perpetrators of this law were Nepalese ethnic peoples who were a part of Bhutan People's Party and the Bhutan Communist Party, which included Marxists, Leninists and Maoists. It was not until 2008, when Bhutan became a democracy, that

governmental power shifted to a bicameral parliament. This included the nonpartisan national council and the elected national assembly.

The legal system was based off of English common law as well as Indian (“Bhutan” WorldMark 90-91). The monarch kept his position as the symbol of Bhutan, but ultimately did not have as much power as he used to during the period of autocratic rule. He was required to step down from the government at age 65. The constitution maintained its spiritual culture and expressed the need of governmental responsibility to protect the environment and biodiversity (Russell 226). The Bhutanese government followed the main philosophy of their nation, which was Gross National Happiness. This idea was introduced by Jigme Singye Wangchuck and the goal was to produce a happy, peaceful society.

Pertaining to government and politics, in order to create that type of society, the government needed to be centralized and conserve the environment (Wangmo, Volk 3). The people of Bhutan were divided on their perspectives of the change in government to democracy. The political parties created a divide between the Bhutanese citizens with the People’s Democratic Party, which put the queen’s mother in charge, and the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party, which was led by a commoner, Jigmi Thinley. Although, Thinley represented the majority of the people of Bhutan, the People’s Democratic Party proved to win the election. Many reforms were implemented; Tshering Tobgay, the prime minister put an end to the civil service exams, gave benefits to the elderly, improved maternity leave,

increased wages for government employees and granted full employment to the younger generations of Bhutan (Russell 227).

Yet, with all this progress, Bhutanese people were still apprehensive of democracy. A housewife in Bhutan, Kuenzang Choden said, " I'm worried. It doesn't seem sensible to put our country in the hands of the people when we have such a good monarch." From a more progressive approach, Passang Wangdi, a retired civil servant said, " The monarchy system isn't bad; it's good. But as the country changes and develops, democracy makes sense." The difference in perspectives contributed to their respective occupations.

Women had recently been granted more freedoms and coming from a woman with little to no involvement in government, Choden is so used to how her life has been, the change is overwhelming. On the other side, Wangdi was involved in a governmental occupation where the change was bound to happen and it was not a huge shock (Ridge). Although, modernizing politically was a large step, it was not a difficult transition for most Bhutanese, unlike developing new social systems. Another goal from the Gross National Happiness ideology that concerned social aspects of the country was preserving Bhutan's culture (Wangmo, Volk 3). In order to protect and save the culture, Bhutan banned television, daily newspapers and the one state-run radio. When the Internet first came out, it was not allowed in Bhutan (" Bhutan" WorldMark 95).

It was not until 1999, when Bhutan allowed the use of the Internet and released its ban on television (Russell 227). Although it was legalized, television was still regulated by the government, movies were censored and

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almost all foreign entertainment was blocked (“ Bhutan” WorldMark 95). Bhutan’s television company, Sigma Cable 4S offered only a select few of channels. Many Bhutanese viewed television as a form of marketing and not as entertainment. One of the reasons why Bhutan’s television was being censored was because it promoted vulgar language, which was not used often.

Television also influenced young children to dress and act a certain way, especially smoking (Bloom). Bhutan made history by becoming the first smoke free country in the world. The religion of Buddhism was essential to every day life and in the religion, smoking was a sin. Once Bhutan officially illegalized tobacco, it became against the law to distribute, and if caught, Bhutanese people would be fined and even sent to prison. Bhutan’s Ministry of Health knew that it would be challenging for people who had an addiction, but they guaranteed that they would be able to provide the care and support services needed for those people.

Bhutan stopped the distribution of tobacco, but Bhutanese citizens still have found a way to obtain the drug through importation of India’s products (Montlake). After independence was declared, religion continues to be a large part of every day life. The majority of Bhutanese people practice Tibetan Buddhism and the most common types are Nyingma and Kargyu Buddhism. Of these, Drukpa, a subsect of Kargyu is the most practiced form of Buddhism in Bhutan. This sect of Buddhism is based on healing and prosperity rather than the spiritual self (Kowaleski, Chhoki).

As stated above, Gross National Happiness is a philosophy that promotes happiness within the state. Bhutan's government believes that happiness for the greater good creates the most long-lasting happiness. Gross National Happiness is thought to be heavily intertwined with Buddhism. Happiness can be achieved by following the "middle path" or the Buddhist way by avoiding extremes and having a balanced perspective on life. The spiritual practice of dharma leads to long-term happiness and a greater inner strength within a person. Also, good karma contributes to being a happy state; in order to be happy, one must do the right thing.

The end goal of Buddhism or nirvana, is a state of eternal happiness and allows for Gross National Happiness to take control and encourage everyone to reach that state of mind. Although, Mahayana Buddhism is not widely practiced, the Six Perfections are incorporated into Bhutan's Gross National Happiness. For the purpose of achieving happiness, Bhutanese citizens follow these religious morals. These perfections include, generosity, virtue, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, meditative concentration and wisdom (Wangmo, Volk 4-10). After independence, the nation of Bhutan began to focus more internally on economic affairs than on the international level. Gross National Happiness was also incorporated in the Bhutanese economy.

Its economy expressed peace and satisfaction and was not based on material wealth. Bhutan developed a series of five year plans, which included building roads, more education, sustainable agriculture, increase in medical care and more exportation of hydroelectric power (Russell 228). Bhutan is a major exporter of hydroelectricity and India is its main importer ("Bhutan"



WorldMark 98). Recently, a statistic was calculated in 2013 that shows that Bhutan exported more (5, 586. 88 million units) hydroelectric power than they imported (112. 26 million units) decreasing the total revenue and lowering the stability of the economy (Chophel 1).

Because Bhutan wanted to primarily focus on raising the domestic income, the nation did not join the World Trade Organization (Russell 227). At this moment, China and Bhutan have had no economic relationship after 1960, but trade with Bangladesh is being sought out. Although the economy for Bhutan is strengthening, people are still fearful of future modernization because of their strong desire to keep traditional culture alive, and preserve the environment (" Bhutan" WorldMark 97). Currently, Bhutan is still dealing with conflict involving foreign influence. Around the 1980s, ethnic Bhutanese were scared that the Nepalese minority in the lowlands would become a majority (Russell 226). In 1998, the government issued a " Code of Conduct" suppressing Nepalese culture and beliefs (" Bhutan" World History).

The monarchy labeled them as aliens and even reduced the official estimate of the population to not include Nepalese (Russell 227). Bhutanese did not look fondly upon Hinduism, the Nepali language, or the illegal Nepali immigrants. In 1990, Bhutan's government relocated 100, 000 Nepalese peoples to refugee camps (" Bhutan" WorldMark 89-90). The United States accepted more than half of the refugees, whose camps were swarmed with Maoists and extremists. However, in 1998, Jigme Singye Wangchuck helped to limit tensions between the two groups by reopening schools and reappointing governmental positions to ethnic Nepalese. By this point, the

damage had already been done by forcefully removing hundreds of thousands of Nepalese from their homes.

Bhutan and Nepal's relationship can never be fully repaired after what happened in 1990 (Russell 227). By the mid-twentieth century, Bhutan was in a rough position with being first overpowered by Great Britain and then by China. However, those powers imperial powers did not stop Bhutan from gaining its independence (Russell 226). When the colonized state of Bhutan was able to achieve independence, it began to look towards modernizing its political, social, and economic spheres with the all-encompassing ideal of Gross National Happiness (" Bhutan" WorldMark 88). The country of Bhutan still struggles with international conflict, although it is attempting to repair its long-term dispute with the Hindu dominated region of Nepal (" Bhutan" World History). These contemporary ideals of happiness are rooted in Bhutanese society.

It is beliefs such as, " Happiness lies in us all" from the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism, that has given Bhutan the strength to persevere (Wangmo, Volk 10). Works Cited: " Bhutan." Map. World History: The Modern Era. ABC-CLIO, 2016. Web.

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