

*A Story of*  
**Bhutan's Spiritual Ecology**

*In all directions, [the country] shines with splendour and excellent beauty, as if in a contest with the heavenly realm of gods.*

- Longchenpa (1308-1364)

When Longchenpa, the great Tibetan scholar, visited Bhutan in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, he was inspired by its beauty to compose a high-flying praise. Like Longchenpa, many visitors to Bhutan today describe the country as beautiful and pristine land. Its majestic mountains, gushing rivers, lush valleys, rolling hills and thick forests bestrewn with prayer flags, stupas, water mills and farmhouses do not fail to instil a breathtaking experience in the nostalgic traveller. The recent constitutional policy of preserving 60% of the country under forest cover has crowned this effect, making Bhutan ecologically even more special and attractive. What, then, has helped Bhutan preserve its environment intact and can it sustain?

The search for an explanation for Bhutan's rich environment is nothing short of unravelling history. The history of the Bhutanese people is primarily a story of their relationship with nature. Bhutan's history may be usually told through accounts of political events and religious conversions but it is largely a story of people's interactions and negotiations with nature because these interactions have the most profound and far reaching impact on the Bhutanese cultural identity, historical consciousness and life as a whole. From age-old customs to today's hydroelectric projects, life is marked by people's intimate engagements with nature, which provides us a compelling explanation for the present environment.

The impact of nature on the Bhutanese people is most obvious in their material cultures. The traditional eating habits and dress cultures throughout Bhutan are outcomes of the immediate natural surroundings. From the buckwheat dumpling eaten in Haa to the corn polenta in Pemagatshel and from the cotton tunic of Lhops in Samtse to the woollen garment of Brokpas in Tashigang, the diverse customs and cultural habits are directly linked to their natural surrounding. Practices such as foodways and textile production also clearly show how close to nature Bhutanese lives are. One can also see the influence of the natural environment on Bhutan's language, music, architecture and crafts. Thus, the natural environment plays a fundamental role in the formation of the Bhutanese culture and society. The world of the Bhutanese people is inextricably fused with nature and their primary identity is defined in relation to nature.

The course of Bhutan's religious and political history has also been seriously shaped by the natural environment. The high Himalayan crest to north gave a clear geographic border between Bhutan and Tibet helping Bhutan retain its independence against Tibetan hegemony in the past. More recently, the lofty and largely impenetrable snowy mountains would have certainly deterred any Chinese interest of invasion and influence. To the south, the tropical foothills provided a shield against British expansion. While Bhutan lost much of its plain areas to the Raj, the mountainous terrain and vegetation helped Bhutanese wage guerrilla wars against the British to retain its present southern boundaries.

Anecdotes from medieval Bhutan also inform us how Bhutanese used their ecology as weapons against invaders. In one story, the Bhutanese soldiers carried a bee hive in a sack to be let out at the marching Tibetan and Mongolian army, who knew nothing about bees. "If even the bite with the bump (sting) of this horrible Bhutanese fly is so painful, what need to mention the bite with its teeth?", one ignoble Tibetan is said to have remarked. In another story, the invaders were tricked with a welcome feast laid amid strange flowers and herbs, which made the invaders ill with allergies.

The relationship of the Bhutanese people with their environment was however not a merely unilateral influence of nature on the people. Just as much as nature has shaped the people, people have changed nature, mainly through their religious, social and political ideas. The relationship between the Bhutanese people and their surrounding was a symbiotic one guided by the wisdom of its ancient belief systems.

The Bhutanese approach to nature perhaps can be explained in three modes or phases inspired by three different world views. The first world view may be associated with the animistic and shamanistic practices found in their numerous localised forms but generally classified as Bon, due to their pre-Buddhist origins. In this era and system, the inhabitants largely feared nature. Nature represented a powerful and indomitable force to be reckoned with. Mountains, lakes and cliffs were seen as formidable sites while forests and rivers were abodes of non-human spirits. These spirits came in many kinds such as *nedag*, *zhidag*, *pholha*, *yullha*, *dud*, *tsan*, *klu*, etc. and they sometimes communicated with the people through shamans and oracles. They possessed almost the entire surroundings and often preyed on the human population. The stories of the demonesses of Nyala and Dochula are good examples of such beliefs. Out of fear and awe, people respected nature and stayed away from much of it. They appeased nature by worshipping or pleasing the non-human denizens in it. The pre-Buddhist view of nature was thus one of submission and fear.

The second phase or layer of the Bhutanese perception of nature starts with the introduction of Buddhism. With its message of non-violence and transcendence, Buddhism brought about a great change in people's perception of nature. However, Buddhism did not annihilate the belief system of the pre-Buddhist period. Instead, it incorporated most of the beliefs and superimposed a new way of thinking on the existent cultural practices. Nature was not to be feared but a force to be subdued and

reined. With the focus on the internal mind, Buddhism argued the world is a creation of the mind. The power of the mind surpassed the power of external nature. Thus an individual is able not only to transcend the forces of nature but control it. This trope of subjugation of nature and landscape can be seen throughout the history of Bhutan in the stories of Songtsen Gampo building temples to subdue a demoness, whose body was laid under Tibet, of Guru Rinpoche's conversion of wrathful demons into peaceful dharma-protectors and of Drukpa Kunley's miracles to overcome malevolent spirits.

The spread of Buddhism was not merely about the conversion of the people. It involved the conversion of nature from a formidable malevolent force to a wholesome habitat. Nature was tamed and transformed into spiritually conducive dwelling while the malevolent denizens in it were subdued and converted into righteous guardian deities. Nature's power was harnessed to be used for the greater good of merit-making and enlightenment. This transformation in the understanding of nature resulted in dramatic physical affect on the environment. Temples were built at special locations. Mountain passes, forests and streams were adorned with prayer flags, prayer wheels and stupas. Buddhist monuments dotted Bhutan's landscape.

Furthermore, Buddhism imbued nature with sanctity and gave it a venerable place. Wide stretches of nature were earmarked as spiritual sanctuaries in the forms of holy mountains, hidden valleys, sacred lakes and power spots. Buddhism gave a new meaning to the landscape, river systems, water sources, flora, fauna and life in general. In addition, Buddhism also propagated enlightened outlooks such as the interdependence, causality and impermanence of all phenomena and moral values including non-harming, loving kindness, compassion, tolerance and harmony. The Buddhist worldview and moral values has since been the main driving force behind people's interaction with nature.

Given the spirituality of the people and the pro-ecological messages of the Bon and Buddhist religious traditions, it is not surprising that Bhutan has thus far managed to keep its ecology intact. The robust and pristine state of Bhutan's environment today is largely due to the two spiritual traditions. Their worldviews and values have certainly helped control people's greed and avoid the excessive exploitation of the environment seen elsewhere in the world.

However, the Bhutanese today faces a new challenge as they enter the third phase of their intercourse with nature. Modern education, which was introduced about fifty years ago, has brought with it a new worldview – a secular scientific understanding of nature. This worldview reduces nature to its material and chemical parts and processes and shuns the belief in supernatural force as superstitions. It removes the non-human players in nature and explains natural events as purely material or physical phenomena. With no non-human force to fear or respect, man is given the centre stage to deal with nature.

Today, modern education has reached even remote corners of Bhutan and with it the secular and scientific worldview has spread replacing traditional beliefs and values. And yet, it may not be in killing of an old belief that it will do its main harm but by engendering the insidious growth of materialism, which was further exacerbated by the onslaught of globalisation. Modern life and globalisation has brought with it a consumerist lifestyle, leading people away from nature.

If western secular worldview is to be seen as the cause of the spiritual decline and thus of ecological downturn, it is also in the western concept of environmentalism that the Bhutanese today seek the solution. While on the one hand, Bhutanese scientists are trained in environmental science in western universities and researches are conducted to understand the rich flora and fauna, on the other, strict regulations are being put in place prohibiting unsanctioned felling of trees or killing of animals. Farmers are allowed to own only upto 25 acres of land while 51.44% of the country was protected as wild reserves. The implementation of these regulations is made possible by the development in communication technology. However, these measures have also proved in some areas to be self defeating. The farmers did not like the imposition of the modern environmentalist values on them by the state and its western educated officers. This resulted in the loss of trust. Though old values are dying fast, new environmentalist education and values have not taken roots. The enforcement of the regulations, which involves a centralized control of nature by the state, left people with the perception that they have lost ownership of their own surroundings. Thus, they are more bent on exploiting nature when they get the opportunity. The level of consumption of natural products such as firewood and timber has risen in the last few decades as have the number of roaring power chainsaws. In spite of such failures, the state policies have generally proved effective.

Bhutan's relationship with its nature is once again in a transition. While spirituality is diminishing, legislations are increasing in number and the political force of the state is filling the vacuum left by the supernatural force. But will people fear the human state as much as the non-human spirits? With materialism sweeping across the country and democracy just introduced giving people room to manoeuvre freely, will legislations last or be applied strictly? And yet, it is both imprudent and unrealistic to expect people to hold onto the traditional worldview and values in the face of growing scientific rationalism. Most of these beliefs and values are bound to go but can some of them be effectively integrated into the modern worldview? Perhaps, Bhutan's last hope for a smooth transition of worldviews and sustained ecological integrity is not be in a complete overhaul but in a synergetic approach combining the old and the new, as it was when Buddhism was introduced.

Whatever the future may hold, Bhutan is relentlessly protecting its nature today. It is not only a sustainable economic asset but, as in the past, a political tool to gain its presence on the global stage. Environmental conservation is one of the primary components of Gross National Happiness, the alluring face of Bhutan to the world.

(Lhendup: 72.5 of forest cover, 51.44% as protected areas including 8% of corridors)