



SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY OF BHUTAN: A LAND OF THUNDER DRAGON

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Introduction:

Bhutan, officially the Kingdom of Bhutan, is a landlocked country in South Asia, located at the eastern end of the Himalayas and bordered to the south, east and west by the Democratic Republic of India and to the north by the People's Republic of China. Bhutan is separated from the nearby country of Nepal to the west by the Indian state of Sikkim, and from Bangladesh to the south by the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. Bhutan existed as a patchwork of minor warring fiefdoms until the early 17th century, when the area was unified by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who fled religious persecution in Tibet and cultivated a separate Bhutanese identity. In the early 20th century, Bhutan came into contact with the British Empire, after which Bhutan continued strong bilateral relations with India upon its independence.

Bhutan's Tourism Industry began in 1974. It was introduced with the primary objective of generating revenue, especially foreign exchange through publicizing the country's unique culture and traditions to the outside world, and to contribute to the country's socio-economic development. Tourism in Bhutan was privatized by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 1991. Today it is a vibrant business with nearly 200 private operators at the helm of affairs. The Royal Government of Bhutan adheres strongly to a policy of low impact/volume, high value tourism. The tourism industry in Bhutan is founded on the principle of sustainability, meaning that tourism must be environmentally and ecologically friendly, socially and culturally acceptable, and economically viable. The number of tourist visiting Bhutan is regulated to a manageable level because of the lack of infrastructure.

The Royal Government of Bhutan recognizes that tourism is a world-wide phenomenon and an important means of achieving socio-economic development particularly for a developing country like Bhutan. It also recognizes that tourism, in affording the opportunity to travel, can

help in promoting understanding among people and building closer ties of friendship based on appreciation and respect for different cultures and lifestyles. Towards achieving this objective, the Royal Government, since commencement of tourism in the year 1974, has adopted a very cautious approach to growth and development of the tourism industry in Bhutan. In order to minimize the problems, the number of tourists has been maintained at a manageable level and this control on number is exercised through a policy of government regulated tourist tariff “high value low volume”.

There are, however, problems associated with tourism which, if not controlled, can have devastating and irreversible impact on the local environment, culture and identity of the people. Realizing these problems and the fact that the resources on which tourism is based are limited, the Royal government of Bhutan recognizes the need to develop the Bhutanese tourism industry based on the principles of sustainability, which means it must be environmentally and economically viable.

Places of Interest in Bhutan:

After the study, I have come up with why tourists are interested to visit Bhutan. Following are some of major reasons why tourists are interested to Bhutan.

Unique Culture, tradition pristine environment:

Bhutan's main tourism attractions are its traditional culture and way of life, its religious festivals, historic monuments and its pristine environment. Bhutan has received much international acclaim for its cautious approach to development that places a high priority on conserving the nation's natural and cultural heritage. Protecting nature and culture is part of the Bhutanese value system and is an important aspect of the traditional way of life in Bhutan, and the tourism policy reflects these concerns. The policy of imposing a high tariff has succeeded in making tourism in Bhutan an exclusive and distinctive experience.

However, with the increase in the number of tourists coming to Bhutan every year there is a need to monitor and evaluate the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism and offer measures to reduce any adverse impacts. It should be recognized that tourism in Bhutan has been sustainable so far due to the sound environmental and cultural policies of the Royal government which has considerable authority over setting policy direction.

Festivals(Tshechus):

Many visitors come to Bhutan to witness religious festivals held annually in Dzongs throughout the country. The most popular are those held in Thimphu, Paro and Bumthang. The Dzongs come to life with colour, music and dancing as valley dwellers and town's folk dressed in their best cloths and join together to exorcise evil spirits and rejoice in a new

harvest. Rare masked and sword dances and other rituals are performed in the Dzong's courtyards and temples. Most of the dances date back to the middle ages and are only performed once or twice each year. Each dance has its own significance and can be performed by monks or lay village leaders dressed in bright costumes. Certain festivals end with the unveiling and worship of huge religious appliqués or thongdrels. The moment of the unveiling is shrouded in secrecy and creates great excitement amongst all the participants.

Special interest tracking:

Bhutan offers great opportunities for trekking with its splendid scenic beauty, supercilious mountains and deep valleys unexpired by modernization. It provides scenic beauty which gradually unfolds in all its glory and charm. Lifestyles change from the colorful lively pace of Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, to the more traditional, simple remote mountain villages. Trekking in this Himalayan kingdom is one of the most wonderful experiences a visitor can have. It is quite different from other parts of the Himalayas. The country ranges from the dense forest of subtropical jungles to the alpine shrubs, endowed with a wide spectrum of Himalayan flora and fauna. The land is thinly populated with scattered settlements. A person may walk for several days before sighting a village. Bhutan is one of the most exclusive and rare destinations for any tourist. The beautiful landscape, unique architecture, snowcapped peaks, colorful dzongs, Lamaist Buddhist traditions, and friendly people leave an everlasting impression on the visitor.

Flora and Fauna (Nature based products like Bird watching and Botanical tour):

While in many other parts of the Himalayas the destruction of forests and loss of habitats have severely reduced wildlife population, Bhutan harbors many scarce species mainly due to the intact forests and the fact that this small country stretches from the subtropics in the south to the perennially frozen regions of the Himalayas in the north. Bhutan has 770 species of birds (15 globally threatened), 165 mammals (among them 24 internationally protected wild animal species), and 5500 species of vascular plants (among them 152 medical plants).

Spiritual / Pilgrimage, sacred sites of monasteries and temples:

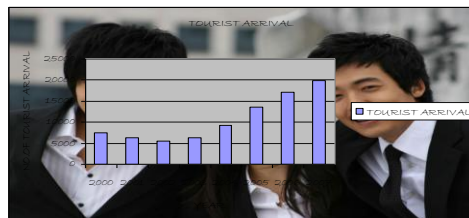
As a tiny landlocked Himalayan kingdom, Bhutan remained sovereign and self-sufficient but unknown to the world outside for most of its existence until the mid-20th century. The country's heritage of rich culture and environment has remained almost completely untainted. The daily life is influenced strongly by Buddhism and like nowhere else one can experience Living Buddhism in Bhutan. Therefore, Bhutan being the last *Shangri-La* has many spiritual and pilgrimage, scared sites pf monasteries and temples which are considered prime source as per the study.

Promotion of Gross National Happiness

The Bhutanese development philosophy, Gross national happiness, the brain child of fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk is now a debatable topic throughout the world. Therefore, many foreigners are interested to visit Bhutan to learn more about our development philosophy. Moreover, as per the study there are several other reasons why tourists are interested to visit Bhutan.

Tourist Arrival:

The inflow of tourist into Bhutan is increasing at an alarming rate. The previous year (2007) recorded a gross earning of about US\$ 24 million from the tourism industry with 21,094 tourists visiting Bhutan, which is 21.6% more than 2006, the highest ever. The number is expected to increase in 2008 with 8,559 tourists already having visited Bhutan by April 2008. According to records maintained by the Tourism Council of Bhutan, in 2007, the tourism industry earned the highest revenue in October, which brought in more than US\$ 7 million, and the least was recorded in January, where the amount dropped to US\$ 480,000. Of the 21,094 tourists last year, 903 were trekkers and 20,191 were cultural tourists. Reasons for the continuing growth include the growing profile of Bhutan (particularly through word-of-mouth), unprecedented media coverage, increased air capacity, and growing travel market trend globally. The arrival of tourist to Bhutan since 2000 was shown graphically below;



As per record maintained by Department of Tourism, USA has hit the Bhutan travel industry with the total of 27,337 since 2000, followed by Japanese, United Kingdom, and German with 10,223, 8,961, and 6161 respectively. The least was Kuwait from where only one tourist has visited since commencement of the industry in the year 1974. The information is presented diagrammatically as under;



Research Methodology:

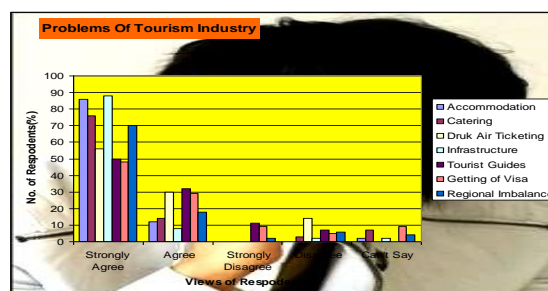
This research paper is basically supported by secondary data collected from Library, Royal University of Bhutan, sources of internet and quantitative analysis from collected questionnaires. Tourism trade is a complex trade, which involves various independent units such as, hotels, airlines, tour operators, travel agents, various governments, and other agencies. Therefore, the demand for customers (tourist) is affected by various factors, which in turn makes tourist to find difficulties in visiting.

Since, tourism includes so many products (i.e., sum total of intangible and tangible elements which consist of attractions, service and accessibility) it is quite difficult for researcher to formulate any specific methodology for the study purpose. However, primary data have been collected through questionnaire on sample survey and rest, on secondary sources of data such as information supplied by Department of Tourism, magazines, journals, and newspapers. We identified 150 people involved in tourism industry either directly or indirectly and collected necessary information through designed questionnaire. The purpose of selecting these three places is because, these places are tourist centers, and moreover, almost all the offices of tourism industry are located. However, the methodology that we have adopted is tabulation method.

Analysis of data:

Following are the information collected from 150 respondents through questionnaire for the study purpose.

Problems	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Can't Say
Accommodation	86	12	0	0	2
Catering	76	14	0	3	7
Druk Air Ticketing	56	30	0	14	0
Infrastructure	88	8	0	2	2
Tourist Guides	50	32	11	7	0
Getting of Visa	48	29	9	5	9
Regional Imbalance	70	18	2	6	4



From the study, researchers are very confident to conclude that the major problems faced by tourism industry is with regard to lack of infrastructure facilities (includes transportation, ATM banking, internet services and other related services) followed by accommodation, catering, regional imbalance, Druk Air ticketing, tourist guides and visa problems.

Problems of Tourism Industry in Bhutan:

There are major problems associated with tourism in Bhutan that might affect the sustainability of the industry in the long run are as follows;

Lack of Infrastructure:

Improper infrastructure facilities are common problem faced in the industry. Being a developing country, infrastructures are not up to the level of satisfaction. Infrastructural facilities includes, banking facilities (ATM), transportation, and other related facilities. As per the study, almost 90% of the sample size has strongly agreed that Bhutan has poor infrastructural facilities. Moreover, one tourist wrote about poor transportation facilities in the internet. However, the government has a strategy to enhance ATM facilities, internet connectivity, and transport facilities. Problem regarding infrastructure is prioritized since it will lead to the poor performance of the industry.

Be short of in professionalism in tourist guides:

Availability of tourist guides is one of core problems faced by the industry. Though, the Department of Tourism has conducted several training courses for guides and has instituted a system of licensing cultural and trekking guides to ensures that all guides have basic training in trekking and mountaineering techniques and are briefed on all aspects of tourism in Bhutan with special emphasis on the environmental and cultural issues, still tour operators finds difficult in getting professional tour guide as per their requirement. Moreover, they show less interest in such courses and try to engage in some other jobs and so their availability at the time of requirement is also doubtful.

Accommodation and catering

Providing accommodation and good catering is the foremost function of tourism department, guesthouse, hotels, lodges etc., in order to attract more number of tourists. However, the present amenities are limited and not able to meet the demand. Even most of the places or tourist centers do not have proper catering facilities, but still they charge exorbitant prices for food. Moreover, at the time of large number of tourist arrival, the tour operators find it difficult to get accommodation as per their demand. Though some places like Thimphu and Paro have good number of hotels, but still they find it difficult to accommodate all tourists during peak season. As per the study, out of 150 different people interviewed, 130 of them

strongly agreed that accommodation is one of the major problems in the country. As far catering is concerned, 114 of them expressed that the dishes available in the country is unable in the country is unable to satisfy the tourist and rest they didn't agreed to this point. As far the discussion with some of official expressed that the hygienic conditions and services are very poor in some of hotels and not matching with the standard.

Tourism flow seasonality

Tourist arrivals in Bhutan are subject to pronounced seasonality. March/April and October/November are the top months as the weather is ideal for trekking and religious and cultural festivals are taking place all over the country. January/February and June/July are the months with the lowest activity as the weather is too cold or rainy for trekking and there are hardly any significant cultural events taking place. The seasonal nature of tourism leads to a highly inequitable distribution of visitors throughout the year adding pressure on the limited infrastructure during the peak seasons. As a result there is a severe shortage of facilities during the peak seasons and private operators resort to makeshift arrangements that may not meet the desired quality of service.

Visa and procedure needs to make for flexible and viable for the travel agents:

All visitors to Bhutan require visas. Prior visa approval/ clearance are required for all the tourists visiting Bhutan. For this passport details should be sent to travel agent in Bhutan 2 weeks in advance. There is a visa fee of US\$ 20/- per person which should be paid along with two passport size photographs at the time of arrival at the Paro airport/ Phuentsholing. Tourists who have not applied for a visa or who have not received the necessary clearances from Thimphu will not be allowed to board the Druk-Air flight to Paro. So, this centralization of visa procedure makes difficult for tour operators to conform their clients. As per the study, major chunk of people address the need to make visa procedure flexible and feasible for the ease of travel agent.

Regional imbalance:

Limited access to every part of the country to diversify exiting products, to offset the seasonality problems and spread tourism benefits to place which has lesser tourism developed places is not maintained. Therefore, another problem that might affect the sustainability of tourism is that it is mostly limited to a Himalayan zone for mountaineering and high altitude trekking and a central zone for cultural tours. As such tourism is mostly limited to the western valleys of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Wangdiphodrang, and the central valleys of Trongsa and Bumthang.

Getting of Druk Air tickets:

As per the study most of the respondent strongly agreed that they face problem in getting Druk Air tickets. At present there are only two air buses A-319 with a capacity of 114 sits and BAE with capacity of 80 sits, which is insufficient to meet the demand. So, to attract more tourists in the country the tourism industry need to work collaboratively with Druk Air Corporation the ease the services. Most of the tour operators complain that Branch office of Druk Air at Thimphu lacks man power. Besides, during festivals and peak season Druk Air couldn't anticipate more tourists.

Suggestions:

After making a study I have brought down some proposal for further development of industry. Possible ways to improve the industry are listed below;

Further developing the tourism infrastructure:

Promoting ecotourism in Bhutan will require the development of appropriate infrastructure. Although this type of tourism traditionally requires fewer infrastructures than other forms of tourism, many countries have built elaborate facilities within protected areas in the name of ecotourism. Such developments have given ecotourism a bad name with protestors calling it "eco-terrorism" instead. The development of ecotourism in Bhutan should be limited to development of trails and access routes, and basic interpretative facilities like visitor centers. It is recommended that the development of infrastructure for ecotourism in protected areas undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment to ensure the suitability of the project and to prevent costly environmental degradation.

Diversifying the tourism products that has a potential to attract tourism to visit:

Tourism in Bhutan is so far mostly limited to cultural tourists, sightseers and trekkers. In 2007, out of a total of 21,094 tourists there were 20,191 cultural tourists and 903 trekkers. Although Bhutan has vast potential for other forms of tourism and special interests such as sports tourism, adventure tourism, and nature tourism, the process of product diversification is just beginning. Therefore, diversification of tourism products that has a potential to attract tourism has to be given importance.

Opening up new routes within the country to spread out tourism benefits

When we contrast the ratio between cultural and trekkers tourists, cultural tourist is far more comparing to trekkers. So, to increase the number of trekker tourists the industry needs to look forward to develop new routes within the country to spread out tourism benefits to country. Not only to open new track routes but also improving the existing track routes is very important to sustain the trekkers group of tourists.

Human Resource development:

The development of human resources, not only within the Department of Tourism, but also within individual private operators and other bodies is a must for the success of future programs. With careful planning and management of the industry and the appropriate inputs, the tourism industry in Bhutan could well surpass its economic expectations without eroding the cultural and environment of the country. Therefore, the industry needs to look forward to provide training in business development skills and the integration of the principles of social, environmental, corporate responsibility and raise efficiency of the tour operators.

Provide adequate training for guides to impart uniform information to the clients:

A weakness in Bhutan's present tourism is the lack of well-trained and knowledgeable guides, especially for specialist tours like bird watching, photography, and flora tourism. A formal system of training and accreditation will help the country provide the high standards expected by specialist tourists. So, the Department of Tourism needs to conduct several training courses for guides and need to introduce a system of licensing cultural and trekking guides. All guides employed by any tour operator in Bhutan have to be licensed. This ensures that all guides have basic training in trekking and mountaineering techniques and are briefed on all aspects of tourism in Bhutan with special emphasis on the environmental and cultural issues to communicate uniform information to the clients.

Training for Hoteliers to improve the hospitably services:

There are no formal hotel and tourism training institutes in the country. Most companies have problems in attracting and keeping adequately trained employees at all levels. As of now there is only few people who are specialize in tourism and hospitality management which leads to lack of manpower at all level. Therefore, the government has to think about establishing the hotel and tourism training institute or sending people to other third countries to get training in tourism and hospitality to improve the hospitality services.

Less dissemination of information of country to other third countries:

Although much has been written about Bhutan's rich biodiversity and pristine environment, there is a genuine lack of interpretive materials that can be used by interested visitors to Bhutan and school children, particularly field guides and biodiversity tour guides. For ecotourism to be a success the royal government and the tourism industry needs to invest in the development of basic scientific information on the country's biodiversity.

Conclusion

Bhutan is in a very fortunate position in terms of tourism. The tourism industry has created a wide range of opportunities for Bhutanese who have begun to grasp economic opportunities

offered by the industry. Tourism has also been a self-financing mechanism for promoting the country's environment and facilitating an awareness and understanding of the uniqueness of this country. Tourism has resulted in some adverse impacts but the government has recognized the need to address them. Tourism has also promoted Bhutanese culture by creating employment opportunities for traditional musicians and dancers and encouraged the revival of local festivals in different parts of the country. The private sector is being more involved in not only monitoring itself but also in developing future tourism policies. Tourism bodies like the Tourism Development Committee and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators have been established to foster partnership between relevant sectors involved in the industry and within the industry itself. So far the government's policy of "high value-low volume" tourism has been successful in regulating the growth of the industry and maintaining the number of visitors at an acceptable level.

Only the government can provide the strategic planning base for tourism and ensure that valuable and fragile habitats are identified, that baseline monitoring is carried out, and that the overall needs and implications of tourism are assessed. Tourism will be sustainable only if tourism planners and operators give due consideration to the carrying capacity of our natural resources, recognize that people and communities, customs and lifestyles contribute to the tourism experience and, therefore, accept that these people should also get some of the benefits from tourism.

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