

## HAPPIEST COUNTRY ON THE PLANET

The large blue board at Darrang informs us that the India-Bhutan Border is 0 km. This small sleepy hamlet is this side of the border. Looking up one sees, on that side of the border, densely forested hills. We cross the border, just a gate with some metal detectors, "manned" by a young Bhutanese boy and a girl who looks like she is still in school. 50 meters from the border is the Border Roads Organization Guest House which is my stop en route to Kanglung, about 7 hours away.

It does not feel as yet that I am in a different country. After depositing my luggage at the guest house, where I am given a cottage called Pella ( all the rooms here are named after various passes ( hence the la) in Bhutan), I venture out to look for a phone to call home. The town is Samdrup Jhongkar, a major commercial center for Eastern Bhutan. Downtown consists of all of about 25 shops! All shops have identical signboards, a sign of the homogeneity imposed in this country. And though Indians are not allowed to open business here, there are signs like "Chottumal Agarwal & sons" and "Sharma Sweets"!

Night comes early here- for one, Bhutan time is half an hour ahead of IST and also because we are at higher latitudes. The next morning, we head for the Immigration Office. This is a small office, next to a marvelous looking big building- the Dzong of Samdrup Jhongkar. This is a peculiar Bhutanese institution where the country is divided into Dzongs or districts and the district headquarters, all the administrative offices etc. are in a monastery called the Dzong.

The Immigration Officer turns out to be an old course mate of my escort. All the graduates in any given year in Bhutan (around 400-500) are given an orientation course for a month in Thimpu after graduation. At this course, they are made aware of the country, its problems etc. It is here that the ministries come and pick up the people they need for their offices. The government is the only employer in this country since there is almost no private sector.

The Immigration Officer's room is plainly furnished- simple desk, walls with his certificates and the ubiquitous photograph of the King. The King is everywhere- the only place I did not see his picture was at the monastery I visited in Kanglung. The Immigration Officer offers me a doma after coffee. This is a disgusting smelling chew which is basically a betel leaf with wet areca nut ( this is what stinks!) and a little lime. He tells me that this is a national custom to offer this to all visitors and I must eat it. With much delicacy I tell him that I am allergic to areca nut though I don't think he believed me since I was chewing tobacco at that time! Bhutan is possibly the only country in the world where tobacco is banned in all forms. No cigarettes, no chewing tobacco, no gutka.

We start our drive in a Toyota Hilux which is driven by another youngish looking Bhutanese. It turns out that the driver is a man of many talents- he dropped out of school (a school for Buddhist philosophy in Bangalore he tells me!) after class X is a great break-dancer and a passionate musician. We listen to Hindi songs, Nepalese songs, Bhutanese songs and also Country music! And all along he sings with the recorded music!

The road starts climbing almost immediately after leaving SJ (as Samdrup Jhongkar is usually called). The hills are low and full of forests- in fact, all the hills that I saw in Bhutan are forested- a great change from the denuded hills one sees in the Indian Himalayas. This, I believe is because the King is passionate about environmental issues and all commercial logging in Bhutan is strictly controlled.

The driver tells me about how these are the very hills where the Bodo and ULFA militants hid for many years. Since the border is fairly porous, they would carry out their activities in the plains of Assam and then hide in these dense forests. This was tolerated by the Bhutanese for some years till it started impacting the local population. Then sometime last year, the Royal Bhutan Army, in a swift fashion, flushed the militants out of the forests and made them flee to Assam. In fact, this action of Bhutan has caused a lot of resentment in the neighboring districts of Assam. So much so that no Bhutanese vehicle can travel into India except in well protected convoys.

The first stop is an immigration check post which is staffed by a couple of men who seem more interested in checking out some new magazines than in my permit. The road is very scenic- we go up and down many hills. The valleys are green and one does not notice any habitation. Bhutan must be one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world- the hamlets that one sees occasionally on a hillside are barely of a few houses and that too scattered and isolated. In fact, I was told that this creates a problem when the government wants to deliver electricity or water since the houses are so far away from each other!

The population of Bhutan is either 800,000 or 2.3 million! This was truly intriguing till someone revealed the mystery. Apparently when Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1973, they were asked about the size of their population. Since there had never been any census, they had no clue! However, wanting to be seen as a "big" country, they arbitrarily came up with a figure of 1.3 million! The 2.3 million is an extrapolation from that with the birthrate prevalent in the country. Last year, a comprehensive census was carried out and the figure is closer to 800,000 now! (there are also some reports of how the census excluded people of Nepalese origin but I could not get any of my hosts to talk about that!)

The sparseness of population is evident everywhere. On the 170 odd kilometers of road between SJ and Kanglung, I came across no more than 50 vehicles! And only about 4 habitations. We stopped at one of these habitations for lunch- a place called WanPong. The marketplace was about 5 shops all of them with identical signs "so-and-so General, Bar, Scrap"! These all-in-one shops sell everything that the Bhutanese needs apparently. Daily provisions, Maggi Noodles, Soft drinks, Bangladeshi soap ( 100% Halal!) and alcohol- loads of it. Beer from all over the world is displayed prominently as are open bottles of local and foreign liquor.

We were ushered into a garishly decorated room for lunch. I had read about how the Bhutanese eat chili and little of anything else. My escort orders a huge meal. I settle for a bowl of Maggi noodles and an omelet, assuming that there is not much that can go wrong with this fare. The food is served and my magi noodles are red and green with chili! I eat it with great difficulty. Meanwhile, my escort is happily eating a wholesome meal of rice, watery daal, some potatoes with chilies, a chili chutney and fried beef. This, I later find out, is basically what constitutes food here. The fried beef smells bad but that does not deter my escort. In fact, he orders another plate and then tells me that Bhutan

is a Buddhist country where killing of animals is banned. All the meat ( and even with Bhutan's small population, it must be a lot since they seem to eat meat with every meal) is slaughtered in India and brought over! This business of not killing any animal has another interesting unintended effect- apparently, foreign tourists in Bhutan have lodged many complaints with the authorities about their inability to sleep at night because of the racket created by the stray dogs of whom there are literally hundreds everywhere!

Buddhism in Bhutan is big- about 75% of the people practice the Drukpa sect of Mahayana Buddhism. The others, like the Lepchas, the Sharchops and the Nepalese practice either Hinduism or some indigenous religion. Almost every habitation of any size has a monastery which is clearly the biggest building in the area. Buddhism was introduced in Bhutan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and the earliest history of Bhutan is provided by the Buddhist chronicles. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, monks of the Kargyupa sect began building dzongs or fortified monasteries in the valleys. In 1616, a Drukpa monk, Ngawang Namgyal founded the theocratic government in Bhutan. The present dynasty took charge in the early part of the last century.

At last we reach Kanglung- the "town" consists of a settlement, a few shops, the mandatory monastery and the undergraduate college which is where I am headed. The college, Sherubtse College is the only degree college in Bhutan. It was started as a school by a Jesuit priest and later became a college affiliated to the University of Delhi. It has about 1100 students and about 90 faculty. The college is residential. And the welfare state of Bhutan takes care of all the expenses, including a small amount as pocket money given to all students!

The college guest house smells like an ancient Buddhist monastery- the reeking smell of stale butter! I am the only person staying there and after giving me a cup of tea, the caretaker leaves, warning me that I should lock the door at night! I step out to the howling of a zillion dogs and a sky which is a most amazing sight- there are no street lights near the guest house and at this altitude, about 7000 ft, the number of stars in the sky are unbelievable. The only other place I have seen such a sight is in Leh when the power went off in the whole city!

I am at the college to inspect and write a report on their faculty and infrastructure for a new course in Computer Science that they are planning to start next year. The following morning I take a walk around the campus. The students are all smartly dressed- the boys in the traditional Goh and the women in the traditional Kira. The homogeneity of it all is actually quite unnerving. Imagine a whole country wearing the same dress in essentially the same colors!

The college is actually quite well equipped. One of the things that surprise you in Bhutan is the availability of the Net. The labs, the classrooms and faculty rooms are quite good by any standards- the loos though, suffer from what I always thought was an Indian malaise but now I believe must be a sub continental disorder! After my inspection, there is a dinner at a restaurant in town! The restaurant is actually a house with its living room converted into an eating place. The menu is the same as what I had at lunch and will continue to have for all my meals all through my stay in Bhutan!

Conversations with the faculty members reveal interesting facts about this Shangri-La. The largest revenue source of the country is selling hydropower to India. My questions about relationship with China, the other neighboring country are not entertained. I ask as

to why almost all the students who go overseas to study actually return to Bhutan to work in sharp contrast to India. To this, the pat answer is that family ties are very strong in Bhutan and hence the students would rather live and work in Bhutan than the West. I express a desire to shop for some local handicrafts and am told that my best bet is Tashigang, the district town about 20 kilometers away in the valley.

Next day I am taken to Tashigang- except the Dzong which is visible from afar, there is hardly any town! The main square, downtown so to say, has a huge prayer wheel, a bank and about 15 shops- all selling the same stuff- "bar, general, scrap"!! And all of them are closed. Apparently there is an election to the District Council and everybody has gone there! It is clear that the Bhutanese take their democracy, whatever little there is, seriously. On the way back to Samdrup Jhongkar, I listen to the English News on the BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service). The top news is the Queen inaugurating some UN sponsored project but the next lead is how a particular incumbent in the elections in a remote district has been disqualified because he is charged with "taking 7 logs of wood without authorization"! The news is full of results from the various dzongs and I am struck by the figures- So-and-so won by 50 votes- he polled 375 votes against the 325 polled by the guy who lost. These are the results for the district! The other big news is the building of 2 new classrooms in a primary school in a village somewhere. This is the national news bulletin!

Our driver helpfully gets hold of a shopkeeper who reluctantly opens his shop and sits there! He is, as with all the shopkeepers I saw in Bhutan, just not interested in selling you anything! Commerce is obviously unBuddhist! I buy some curios and decide that it is just not worth trying to force the shopkeeper to show me the wares displayed on the shelves.

My driver has to pick up medicine for his mother and so we take a detour to a hospital. The hospital is a brand new one, built by DANIDA and is absolutely first rate. The floors shining, the rooms well marked and even the loos are clean! I ask my driver how long he thinks it will stay in this excellent condition. He shrugs his shoulders and looks at the sky!

The drive back to Samdrup Jhangkar is uneventful- once again, very little traffic on the way down. The driver tells me about how he wants to buy a mobile phone now that mobiles are going to come to Bhutan in December. He asks me about how much a phone with a camera would cost and I shrug my shoulders and look to the sky!

Night spent at the BRO guest house and then off to Gauhati in the morning. Driving back from Darrang to Gauhati I am struck by how sparsely populated Bhutan is. All along the 100 kilometers from the border to Gauhati, there is continuous habitation, while the number of settlements I met in the 170 km drive in Bhutan were no more than a handful! The driver of the cab this time is a Bihari Muslim who was born and brought up here. When I ask him about the walls plastered with Bodoland and ABSU slogans, he says that most of the cadre were actually lumpen youth who made an easy buck by taking to arms.

We enter civilization i.e., mobile phone coverage at Rangia and soon we cross the mighty Brahmaputra and reach Gauhati. The flight back to Delhi is full. I point out the Everest and Kanchenjunga to the American sitting next to me. It turns out he is a therapist who does alternate therapies in Oregon. We get into a conversation about spirituality and consciousness and the objective world. Apparently he has had several

out-of-body experiences with and without chemicals! I look towards the distant Himalayas and think that this is truly a befitting end to my journey to the Dragon Kingdom!