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I INTRODUCTION

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Bhutan, constitutional [monarchy](#) in South [Asia](#), in the eastern [Himalayas](#), on the Indian subcontinent. It is bounded on the north by the [Tibet](#) region of [China](#), and to the south, east, and west by [India](#). During most of its early history, Bhutan was divided into a number of independent principalities located in the major valleys. A unified Bhutan emerged with a dual system of civil and spiritual rule in the 16th century. Since 1907 it has been ruled by a hereditary monarch of the Wangchuck family. Bhutan remained a secluded country until the 1950s. In 1960 the government began to transform the country into a modern nation with economic aid from India. While the development process has gained considerable momentum in recent years, Bhutan is still grouped by the [United Nations](#) (UN) among

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the least developed countries of the world. Democratic reforms began to be introduced in 1998, launching Bhutan's transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The name *Bhutan* means "Land of the Thunder Dragon" in Dzongkha, the country's official language. The capital of Bhutan is Thimphu.

II LAND AND RESOURCES OF BHUTAN

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Bhutan has an area of 47,000 sq km (18,100 sq mi). Despite its small size, it is a land of great diversity, with dense, swampy jungles, valleys of rice fields, bleak alpine highlands, and towering peaks of the [Himalayas](#) in close proximity to one another.

Bhutan has three major land regions: the Great Himalayan region, in the north; the Middle Himalayan region, in central Bhutan; and the Duars, a plain along the southern border with India. The Great Himalayan region rises more than 4,300 m (14,000 ft) along the Tibetan border and contains Kula Kangri (7,554 m/24,783 ft), Bhutan's highest peak. Northern Bhutan is uninhabited except for a few scattered settlements in the high valleys, where hardy Bhutanese yaks graze in the high mountain pastures in the summer months.

The Great Himalayas radiate southward into central Bhutan, creating the Middle Himalayan zone. The Middle Himalayas enclose fertile valleys lying at elevations between about 1,500 and 2,800 m (about 4,900 and 9,200 ft). These are relatively broad and flat valleys, with moderate rainfall and a temperate climate; they are well populated and cultivated.

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South of the Middle Himalayan valleys and foothills lies the Duars, which is a plain 8 to 13 km (5 to 8 mi) wide. Here rivers flowing to the south have cut deep gorges into the mountains that rise sharply from the narrow plain. The rainfall is heavy and the hillsides

are covered with thick vegetation. The climate of the Duars tract is unhealthy; the valleys are hot and humid and the forested foothills are wet and misty. The southern section of the Duars, once covered with dense savanna and bamboo jungle, has been largely cleared for rice cultivation. The northern part of the Duars, including the foothills, is rugged, irregular land that is covered with dense vegetation; [deer](#), [tigers](#), and other wild animals roam this area.

Bhutan's main rivers, from west to east, are the Torsa, Raidak, Sankosh, and Manas. Rising in the Great Himalayas, these rivers flow south through Bhutan to India. Flooding is rare in the upper courses but can be a serious problem in the low-lying areas of the Duars. None of the rivers is navigable.

In Bhutan, differences in altitude, exposure to sunlight, and rain-bearing winds result in intricate variations in [climate](#). The northern interior has bitterly cold winters and cool, temperate summers; the southern foothills and the Duars, less than 160 km (100 mi) away, have a humid, tropical climate all year. In the capital, Thimphu, in west central Bhutan, average temperatures range from about -4°C (25°F) to about 16°C (61°F) in January and from about 15°C (59°F) to about 26°C (79°F) in July, during the monsoon season. The average annual precipitation is about 650 mm (about 25 in), with most of it falling between June and September.

Mineral resources in Bhutan include [limestone](#), [dolomite](#), and [coal](#). Limestone and dolomite are mined in southwestern Bhutan; coal is extracted in the southeast. Forests cover 68 percent of Bhutan's total land area. Most of the forests are located in the Middle Himalayan ranges and foothills of central and eastern Bhutan. Vegetation varies with altitude, slope, moisture, and drainage. Deciduous woodlands are found in the south, mixed [forests](#) in central Bhutan, and coniferous forests in the north.

Population growth is increasing the demand for fuelwood and causing pressure on the small amount of land that can be used for farming or pasture. The more accessible forests have been depleted through overcutting, poor management, and soil [erosion](#). Poor access to potable water and sanitation are also serious problems in Bhutan. Nevertheless, preservation of the environment is part of the country's tradition and government policy, and 26.4 percent (2007) of the land is protected.

III THE PEOPLE OF BHUTAN

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Foreign sources placed Bhutan's population at 682,321 in 2008. According to Bhutan's

2005 census, however, the country at that time had a population of about 670,000. The discrepancy is due to the fact that, beginning in 1990, the official census has excluded people of Nepalese origin. Using either estimate, Bhutan's population density is low. Based on the 2008 estimate, the country has 51 persons per sq km (131 per sq mi). The annual growth rate is estimated at 2.1 percent.

About 92 percent (2003) of the people live in rural areas. The population is dispersed widely. Large tracts are virtually empty; others are relatively crowded. The Middle Himalayan valleys contain nearly half of the nation's population, concentrated in the middle portion of the Wong, Sankosh, and Manas river valleys and in the valleys of their tributaries. The southern zone, close to the Indian border, contains approximately 40 percent of the kingdom's population. The Black Mountain Range and its associated highlands, which extend from east to west across south central Bhutan, are thinly populated. The Great Himalayan region in the north has vast areas that are nearly uninhabited.

Thimphu and Phuntsholing, in southwestern Bhutan near the Indian border, are the major urban centers. Other cities and towns include Paro, Punākha, Wangdü Phodrang, Tongsa, Tashi Gang, Mongar, and Chirang.

A Ethnic Groups





There are four major ethnic groups or groupings in Bhutan: Bhutia, Sharchops, a cluster of indigenous groups, and Nepalese. These groups are distinguished by language, religion, and socioeconomic characteristics. The most populous group is the Bhutia, who are descended from Tibetans. The Bhutia mostly live in northern and central Bhutan. They, like most Bhutanese, speak languages from the Tibeto-Burman language family (see [Sino-Tibetan Languages](#)). They practice a form of Buddhism closely related to [Tibetan Buddhism](#). The Bhutia dominate Bhutanese political life: Top government officials and lamas (monks) come from this group.

The Sharchops reside mainly in eastern and southeastern Bhutan and are thought to be the region's earliest inhabitants. They are ethnically related to hill tribes in the nearby Indian states of [Assam](#) and [Arunāchal Pradesh](#) and are Indo-Mongoloid in origin. The Sharchops speak both [Hindi](#), due to their proximity to India, and languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family. They follow indigenous religions that are influenced considerably by Tibetan Buddhism.

Clusters of smaller, indigenous ethnic groups, such as the Lepcha, are scattered throughout Bhutan. The strongest concentration inhabits the narrow fringe of the Duars in the southern foothills near the Indian border. These people are ethnically related to groups in the Indian states of Assam and [West Bengal](#). They speak Indo-Aryan languages (see [Indo-Iranian Languages](#)) and follow [Hinduism](#).

Nepalese people constitute a significant portion of Bhutan's population. They are the most recent settlers, occupying south central and southwestern Bhutan. The Nepalese are mainly Rai, Gurung, and Limbu ethnic groups from the eastern mountains of [Nepal](#). Nepalese immigration has been banned since 1959, when the Bhutanese government feared the minority would become too populous. Nepalese are not permitted to live in the central Middle Himalayan region because the Bhutanese government wants to maintain Bhutanese identity in this area; this ban has caused resentment and inner political turmoil for Bhutan. There has been little assimilation of the Nepalese people with the predominant Tibetan culture.

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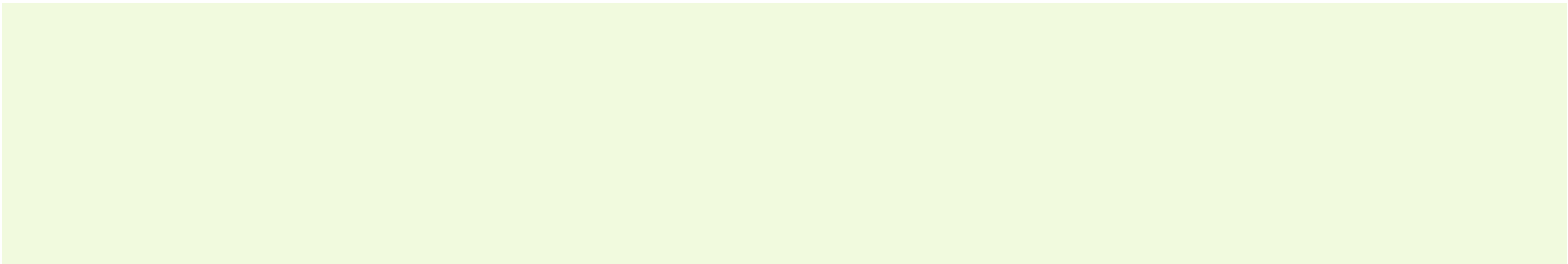
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