



The History of Bhutan

Karma Phuntsho

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In recent years, the remote kingdom of Bhutan has increasingly attracted the attention of the world. In 2008, it emerged as the world's youngest democracy and in the same year crowned the world's youngest monarch. This was followed by the new King's colourful wedding in 2011. Today, it continues to enchant the rest of the world with its policy of Gross National Happiness and has become a very popular destination for travel. But, despite its growing popularity and the rising scholarly interest in the country, Bhutan remains one of the most poorly studied places on earth.

Karma Phuntsho's *The History of Bhutan* is the first-ever attempt to cover the entire history of Bhutan in some detail in English, combining both traditional perspectives and modern academic analysis. Written by a leading expert on the country, the book tells the story of Bhutan in a narrative style interspersed with some analytical and topical discussion, and numerous citations and translations from earlier writings. It is primarily a historical account, but it also includes substantive discussions of Bhutan's geography, culture and society to give the readers an incisive introduction to the country.

The History of Bhutan Details

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Author : Karma Phuntsho

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Michal Thoma says

Karma Phutnsho's History of Bhutan is probably most comprehensive history on the country written so far. It covers history from early beginning to nearly today and it's written both scholarly and in entertaining way. It's main strength lies in the medieval history of Bhutan, which is the author's main scholar focus. Trained as Buddhist monk in his early age, Karma Phutnsho can deliver very great understanding of country's religion oriented and propelled history. The book doesn't even lack a sense of subtle academic humour.

Anyway while reading you definitely should have in mind, that this is book about Bhutan written by Bhutanese who often feels need to cover up some less virtuous deed of Bhutan and its leader. This is especially true when the book reaches the beginnings of the monarchy. While writing about the father of the first king, Jigme Namgyel and Ashley Eden expedition, one even feels he is reading two books, in one part, blame for diplomatic disaster is put on Eden, in next paragraph the same blame is put on Jigme Namgyel. With the first and the second king, the book actually just follows the official history without much trying to give more complex insight. Reading in between the lines, I believe that author deliberately inhibited himself as criticism of the Monarchy is very sensitive in Bhutan. So the author is giving us glaring picture of the events while we can see some more dire backstage which is not commented openly.

With the third king and modernization, this book is no longer relevant history as it doesn't give detailed account of any event. While the author makes honest try to explain about the so called "southern problem" (eviction of Nepali population) it wrongly says, that southern Nepali people came as labourers while they were explicitly invited as settlers. It also make no notion of the changes to citizenship laws which later made it easy to deny citizenship to people, who were counted as citizens before.

The book is very great, but author would make a favour to his own academic credentials, if he didn't venture to history of monarchy, where the book has to be consulted with other sources to get complete picture. If the book consist of medieval history only, it would definitely be the best one.

AskHistorians says

This is an in depth look in Bhutanese society and history coming from one of the country's premier academics. It begins with all of the information on Bhutan's languages, people, and names for their country before going into the beginnings of recorded history in the 700s going to the present day. Most histories of Bhutan gloss over the period from 1705 (the reveal of the Zhabdrung's death) to 1907 (the establishment of the monarchy), with a brief detailed interlude in 1864 (the Duar War). Phuntsho's work goes into this long period of disunity and even covers some of the monarchy's failures in the 20th Century (though not quite as detailed as we would all like, this is probably a matter of self-preservation).

Shobhna says

As good a modern historiography currently existing on Bhutanese history. Not perfect, but reflective and careful. Greatly enriched my trip to Bhutan and the itch I get to learn everything there possibly is about a

country's history. I hope to finish it someday soon.

Daniel Simmons says

A comprehensive (and how!) but rather clunkily written history of this tiny Himalayan kingdom. Certainly it makes a terrific reference, but as a memorable narrative of Bhutan's foundations and historical figures, it falls rather short.

N says

Meget grundig gjennomgang av Bhutans historie over 600 sider. Velskrevet og balansert, men så detaljert at kun spesialister har mulighet til å skille de mange aktørene fra hverandre: skogen forsvinner av og til for alle trærne.

Namgay says

It's a very useful book, especially if you are seeking an accessible and comprehensive reading on Bhutan. I can see myself going back for references in the future.

Erwin says

The book is so big, I could only complete a third of it during my 2 weeks in Bhutan.

But what I did read was very fascinating.

What's unique about the "history" of Bhutan is that there is only a gradual blending from older mythological history into current modern history, since what we know about its past is only what we can decipher from its myths of gods and rebirths.

It certainly lends a very mystical aura to visits to its historical sites like Taktsang monastery.

Matt says

An extremely comprehensive book about Bhutan. Well-written and accessible. However, I probably wouldn't recommend this for the average reader unless you have an interest in Bhutan and/or history.

Christopher says

The fact that it is hard to find a detailed English language volume of Bhutanese history means this should be given an automatic 4 at least, but there are numerous past-romanticizing segments that undermine the soberness of the rest of the text—even when talking about the massive positive increases in living standards of

the past several decades.

Still, if you want to learn about Bhutan and its unexpectedly interesting history, this is your best bet.

John Eliade says

I've been reading a lot of dry history lately. "The History of Bhutan" is anything but. If you're interested in A) how to write history, or B) Bhutan, I highly recommend this book which will give you an incredible (incredible) understanding of this mountain kingdom.

Karma Phuntsho isn't without his biases, but he tells the story of Bhutan as is with the warts and all of Bhutan's monarchy and theocracy represented. The Zhabdrung's wars, the Wangchuk's politicking, the recent refugee crisis, and socio-economic damage done by modernization is all represented. While at the same time, giving an (accurate) analysis that Bhutan has navigated the modern world with surprising efficacy, avoiding the fates of neighboring Himalayan Buddhist states that have been absorbed into Nepal, India, or China.

For the full story of how Bhutan developed into a country and a modern state, read this book. It's big and thick and intense, but it's quite the page turner.
