

Bhutan

Ethnicity in Bhutan

Group selection

Population: Bhutan is a member of the international state system since 1949 when it ended its affiliation with the United Kingdom as its external patron and signed a contract with the newly created Indian Union that foresaw the guidance of India in external relations. In the same year, Bhutan had a population of about 629,260 ⁽⁴⁴⁷⁾. 58 years later, in 2007, the contract with India was rewritten to explicitly recognize Bhutan's sovereignty although Bhutan still relies on Indian military assistance. Bhutan has been a member of the United Nations since 1971.

⁴⁴⁷ [Gleditsch, 2010]

Population numbers in Bhutan should be used with caution since official estimates vary drastically. In 2005, Bhutan conducted its first modern census and arrived at a population of just over 700,000 ⁽⁴⁴⁸⁾. Earlier estimates were put at over 2 million ⁽⁴⁴⁹⁾. The discrepancy has possibly two sources. First, Bhutan supposedly fabricated its population numbers when entering the UN in 1971 in order to get above 1 million inhabitants. Subsequent estimates build on this number and calculated later population estimates based on yearly population growth and the false base estimate. A second estimate goes to the heart of the problem of ethnicity in the country. Long-standing Nepalese immigrants that are supposed to make up over 35 % of the population claim that Bhutan has forged the 2005 census and under-counted people of Nepalese origin.

⁴⁴⁸ [CIA, 2011]

⁴⁴⁹ [Gleditsch, 2010]

Political system: Bhutan has been a hereditary monarchy since 1907. It became a constitutional monarchy in 1960 and made some moves towards democratization in 2008. However, Freedom House ⁽⁴⁵⁰⁾ notes that "Bhutan is not an electoral democracy," citing, inter alia, problems with freedom of expression and association during electoral campaigns. Executive power lies with the king and his family.

⁴⁵⁰ [Freedom House, 2011]

In its 2013 Report, Freedom House notes that "Bhutan IS an electoral democracy", with the Cabinet increasingly taking on a governing role, rather than simply deferring to the King for guidance. Similarly, in its 2013 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, the US State Department declares Bhutan a democratic, constitutional monarchy, which, following a gradual transition towards democracy, held its second - generally termed free and fair - general elections in July 2012 (similar observations by Freedom House,

2013). These elections were contested by 5 parties, up from 2 in the 2008 national elections, and resulted in the country's first democratic transfer of power to the opposition, from the Druk Phensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party) to the People's Democratic Party. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, the political system continues to be dominated by political parties with ties to the royal family, (and) it appears unlikely that the Assembly will resist many of the policies and proposals favored by the King. The monarch continues to wield substantial formal and informal powers (⁴⁵¹). The 2012 Freedom House report adds that the 2008 Constitution, which provided for parliamentary democracy, upholds the primacy of the Monarchy. At the same time, fractionalist participation in politics continues to be widespread, and freedom of assembly and association continue to be restricted (⁴⁵²). In view of the above, executive power clearly remains with the King (⁴⁵³; ⁴⁵⁴), fulfilling the expectations of observers of Bhutanese politics that the democratic reforms would only be cosmetic while real power stayed with the King (⁴⁵⁵).

⁴⁵¹ [Polity IV, 2010]

⁴⁵² [Polity IV, 2010]

⁴⁵³ [Polity IV, 2010]

⁴⁵⁴ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴⁵⁵ [Polity IV, 2010]

Ethnic groups: According to Parmanand (⁴⁵⁶, 102), Bhutan is inhabited by five ethnic groups. **Sharchops** (the largest group, speak Tsangla), **Ngalops** (Ngalung or Bhote - people of Bhote or Tibet - speak the national language Dzonkha), Bumthaps and Kurtops (two smaller tribal groups) belong to the **Drupka** cultural group. All four sub-groups practice Buddhism and live in the northern, central and eastern parts of the country. The fifth group are the **Lhotsampa** or Nepalese immigrants.

⁴⁵⁶ [Parmanand, 1998]

Indigenous Tribal People: "The indigenous tribal peoples live in villages scattered across Bhutan. They include the Kheng, Brokpa, Lepcha, Tibetan, Adhivasi and Toktop, all of which are on a much smaller scale than the three major ethnic groups. Some of these ethnic groups are culturally and linguistically of Tibetan or Indian Buddhist tradition, while some are influenced by the populations of West Bengal or Assam and embrace the Hindu social system" (⁴⁵⁷, 153). Tribals account for up to 15% of the Bhutanese population. Tribals are neither mobilized nor are they actively targeted by the government which is why they are coded as politically irrelevant.

⁴⁵⁷ [Rizal, 2004]

Power relations

1949-1988

Bhutanese (Drupka): Ngalops & Sharchops: Historically, the Ngalops constituted the ruling elite and integrated the Sharchops through conversion to Buddhism into mainstream Buddhist society (cf. ⁴⁵⁸). Rizal provides a more detailed analysis of Drupka identity. According to him, Drupkas are a specific sect within Mahayana (Kargupa) Buddhism that is practiced by the Ngalops. The Sharchops, on the other hand, follow Nyingmapa Buddhism (⁴⁵⁹, 153).

⁴⁵⁸ [Worden, 1991]

⁴⁵⁹ [Rizal, 2004]

In 1979, the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck from the Ngalop background made a closer connection with families from the Drupka Buddhist tradition through marriage. Freedom House names the ruling ethnic group Drupka-Ngalop.

The Sharchops are the larger group and are racially and linguistically distinct from the Ngalops but culturally integrated. According to Rizal (⁴⁶⁰, 161), they do possess some government positions but since they are not part of the royal family their executive power remains constrained. Given the assimilation between the two groups, and no obvious political mobilization of the Sharchops, the Ngalops and Sharchops are coded as one group (**Bhutatense**) until 1988 (cf. ⁴⁶¹, 157).

⁴⁶⁰ [Rizal, 2004]

⁴⁶¹ [Rizal, 2004]

Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese): Large-scale immigration started in 1865 for economic reasons. Nepali migrants were supposed to make the hostile part of southern Bhutan hospitable and cultivate it. The Bhutanese state started collecting taxes from the Nepali settlers (⁴⁶²) soon after their arrival. The Bhutanese officially ended migration in 1958 and started naturalizing Nepalis who were by now called Lhotsampa (people from the South). Official policy had however little influence on Nepalis' continued migration into southern Bhutan where they found an almost homogenous community of their kin. The Lhotsampa founded the Bhutan State Congress, the first political party in the country, in 1952 and demanded official citizenship rights. These were granted in 1958 (⁴⁶³, 155).

⁴⁶² [Upreti, 1998]

⁴⁶³ [Rizal, 2004]

Nepali population numbers are heavily contested. Upreti (⁴⁶⁴, 81) puts them at around 20%. The government of Bhutan estimates 15% and a commission of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation even puts them at 50%. The CIA World Factbook (⁴⁶⁵) gives an estimate of 35%. Rizal (⁴⁶⁶) reports a number between 30% and 45%. It appears reasonable to opt for 30% as a compromise prior to 1988 and 20% afterwards. While the Nepali settlers constitute one ethnic group in Bhutan, they are actually a mixture of several different ethnicities from the hill parts of Nepal - "Brahmins and Thakuris, Newars, Kiratis, Rai, Gurung, Limbu etc." (⁴⁶⁷, 81). The Nepalis speak Nepali, are predominantly Hindu and follow cultural patterns that are distinct from the Buddhist Drupka traditions.

⁴⁶⁴ [Upreti, 1998]

⁴⁶⁵ [CIA, 2011]

⁴⁶⁶ [Rizal, 2004]

⁴⁶⁷ [Upreti, 1998]

Until the mid 1980s ethnicity was mostly accommodated in Bhutan by cultural and social prerogatives given to the different ethnic segments. While political power lay with the king, and the Lhotsampa could not attain executive power, they were granted citizenship and an overall inclusive policy was followed.

1989-2021

Bhutanese (Drupka): Ngalops & Sharchops: In 1988, the royal bond to Drupka identity was made explicit (through official marriage - the marriage in 1977 was private - and laws; cf. ⁴⁶⁸, 157). Thereafter, Ngalops and Sharchops are considered as separate groups. Although

⁴⁶⁸ [Rizal, 2004]

there is some inclusion of Sharchops in government, "the structure of the political system in Bhutan sustains domination of national policy mostly by Ngalung elites." (⁴⁶⁹, 161). The South Asian Terrorism Portal (⁴⁷⁰) succinctly adds: "The minority Ngalongs ... occupy almost every position of any consequence in the country." Since democratic reforms in 2007 only slightly altered the power balance, Sharchops are coded as powerless from 1989 onwards.

⁴⁶⁹ [Rizal, 2004]

⁴⁷⁰ [South Asian Terrorism Portal, 2001]

Together the two groups constitute between 50% and 72% of the population (see discussion of Lhotsampa population share below). Sharchops make up 30-40% of the population and Ngalops 10-25%.

In recent years, Bhutan showed further signs of democratic consolidation (⁴⁷¹). Freedom House ⁴⁷² notes that, "Bhutan has made a rapid transition from a system in which the monarch and his advisers had enormous influence over Parliament to one in which Parliament determines its own policies" and the cabinet is selected by the ruling party. Compared to his predecessor, the current Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, is said to show more signs of independence (*ibid*). Also, the 2013 election was contested by more parties and candidates compared to the previous one(⁴⁷³).

⁴⁷¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴⁷² [Freedom House, 2016]

⁴⁷³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

Nevertheless, the King retains substantial influence. Although he has shown continued support for the democratic reform of the country (⁴⁷⁴), executive power, officially vested in the cabinet (⁴⁷⁵), remains overwhelmingly in his hands. In this regard, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2016) mentions him as an important, and perhaps the only, potential domestic veto player, who is a part of the parliament and has the power of assent for bills. The King also continues to wield substantial informal power, bolstered by the wide support and status Bhutan's monarchy still enjoys (*ibid*). Reflecting this, the country's small political elite shows consistent loyalty to the state and the King (*ibid*), together with whom they largely control access to political office (⁴⁷⁶): electoral rules remain largely determined from above, and it seems the delimitation of districts and the whole election exercise was premeditated and orchestrated regarding who should win, how many candidates would be fielded from the Lhotsampa and Sharchop community, and who among the Lhotsampas and Sharchops would get tickets for contesting the election.

⁴⁷⁴ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴⁷⁵ [US State Department, 2016]

⁴⁷⁶ [Rizal, 2015]

The 2013 cabinet comprises of three Ministers as well as the Prime Minister and Deputy Speaker from the West, a primarily Ngalop region, three Ministers and the Speaker from the East, which is predominantly inhabited by the Sharchops, one from the Centre, and three from the South, the region of the Lhotsampa (⁴⁷⁷). Yet, according to Rizal ⁴⁷⁸ only one is intended for the latter group. Moreover, judging by surnames, Ministers affiliated with the Dorji and Wangchuk families, both which are powerful political families with links to the Monarchy, are in clear majority. Considered the most assertive group (⁴⁷⁹: 82), Ngalops thus undoubtedly continue to dominate national politics in Bhutan.

⁴⁷⁷ [Rizal, 2015]

⁴⁷⁸ [Rizal, 2015]

⁴⁷⁹ [Monaco, 2017]

The third democratic elections in Bhutan were held in 2018, further consolidating Bhutan's democracy. Voter turnout increased

remarkably, from 45 percent in the primary round of the 2013 elections to 54 percent in 2018, and from 66 percent to 71 percent in the general round. The elections were surprisingly won by a newly established third party, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), securing 60 percent of the votes and 30 out of the 47 seats in parliament. The DNT was followed by the opposition party of the last parliament, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), winning 17 seats. The incumbent party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), did not even advance from the primary round to the general round. The DNT's leader, Dr. Lotay Shering, got mandated to head the next government⁽⁴⁸⁰⁾. As the parties have to follow certain guidelines to participate in the elections, such as promoting national unity and pursue the national development philosophy of the Gross National Happiness, the political platforms of the parties only have small differences⁽⁴⁸¹⁾. The new cabinet consists of three ministers each from the West, South, and East, and one representative from central Bhutan⁽⁴⁸²⁾. The elections did not change the power relations between the ethnic groups.

⁴⁸⁰ [BTI, 2020]

⁴⁸¹ [BTI, 2020]

⁴⁸² [Daily Bhutan, 2018]

Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese): Following the alliance between the king and members of the Buddhist Drupka sect in the late 1970s, the policy toward the Lhotsampa changed. In 1988, a law was introduced that severely restricted citizenship rights for the Lhotsampa^(483, 158-9), and even resulted in the withdrawal of citizenship from 1000s of Nepali speakers^(484; Freedom House 2012/2013). Subsequent protests by the Lhotsampa were met with violent repression and led to the forceful expulsion of over 100,000 Lhotsampa to India and Nepal.

⁴⁸³ [Rizal, 2004]

⁴⁸⁴ [Polity IV, 2010]

In recent year, numerous obstacles prevented the Lhotsampa from participating effectively in Bhutanese politics: many were barred from voting after they were counted as non-nationals in the 2005 census, while the requirement of a security clearance certificate for candidates made it difficult for them to run in the elections (Freedom House, 2012). Also, the Druk National Congress, which was established by Bhutanese refugees in exile in 1994, was prohibited from carrying out activities inside Bhutan⁽⁴⁸⁵⁾. The Bhutan People's United Party, which represents the interests of the Lhotsampa, was denied registration^(486; Freedom House, 2012). There are also some indications that Hindu Nepalese were subjected to discrimination in employment, especially in the civil service and in government jobs⁽⁴⁸⁷⁾. Similarly, the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit is banned and permits for Hindu temples are difficult to obtain^(488; 489). Finally, regarding the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees, their identification and repatriation continues to be delayed, even though the majority has proof of citizenship^(490; 491; 492). As such, 54,000 remain in camps in Nepal, while thousands have been re-settled in third countries. Bhutanese refugees who were demonstrating for their right to return home faced arrest⁽⁴⁹³⁾. Given this situation, the current coding of discriminated can be extended through 2013.

⁴⁸⁵ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴⁸⁶ [Polity IV, 2010]

⁴⁸⁷ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴⁸⁸ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴⁸⁹ [Freedom House, 2011]

⁴⁹⁰ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴⁹¹ [Freedom House, 2011]

⁴⁹² [Polity IV, 2010]

⁴⁹³ [Freedom House, 2011]

The US State Department⁴⁹⁴ emphasizes that Nepali-speaking political prisoners remain incarcerated for their alleged role in anti-government protests during the 1990s (although according to ⁴⁹⁵, 14 prisoners have been released since 2010 but it is unclear whether they belong to the Lhotsampa group). Whether at the local or national level, to date, no candidates have been willing to address the Lhotsampa issue, and the topic remains a taboo in the public domain (⁴⁹⁶). Parties established by ethnic-Nepalis are considered illegal and operate only outside Bhutan, and although requirements for citizenship have been clarified, many Lhotsampas still only have resident status (⁴⁹⁷). The government also continues to refuse readmission of Lhotsampa refugees (⁴⁹⁸; ⁴⁹⁹), with 18,000-30,000 still in Nepal as of 2015 and many now resettled in third countries (⁵⁰⁰; ⁵⁰¹).

With the resettlement of many of the Lhotsampa refugees, the issue has lost salience. However, at the beginning of 2019, around 7500-8500 Lhotsampa refugees still remained in Nepalese camps. Since the resettlement program in Nepal has ended in 2018, it is unclear what will happen to them. Further, Bhutan's policies regarding the thousands of Lhotsampas that are still in the country remain discriminatory. Many Lhotsampa have no citizenship and formal rights. Parties that demand rights for the Lhotsampa are illegal, with the constitution stating that "all parties have to promote national unity and are barred from using ethnicity or religion to attract voters". Further, many Lhotsampas are not able to participate in the election process, being turned away from voting as they are considered "non-nationals" (⁵⁰²; ⁵⁰³; ⁵⁰⁴). Many Southern voters allegedly supported the DNT, because Dr. Lotay Tshering held a speech in Nepali and because the party's election manifesto emphasized to build infrastructure in the South (⁵⁰⁵).

⁴⁹⁴ [US State Department, 2016]

⁴⁹⁵ [Freedom House, 2016]

⁴⁹⁶ [Banki, 2014]

⁴⁹⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴⁹⁸ [US State Department, 2016]

⁴⁹⁹ [Freedom House, 2016]

⁵⁰⁰ [Freedom House, 2016]

⁵⁰¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁵⁰² [BTI, 2020]

⁵⁰³ [Minority Rights Group International, 2020]

⁵⁰⁴ [Civicus, 2019]

⁵⁰⁵ [Eyben, 2018]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan

From 1949 until 1988

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Bhutanese	0.5	MONOPOLY
Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	0.35	POWERLESS

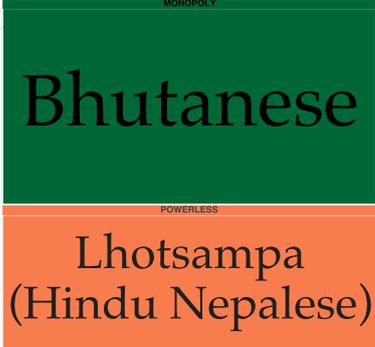


Figure 82: Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.

From 1989 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sharchops	0.4	POWERLESS
Ngalops (Drupka)	0.2	MONOPOLY
Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	0.2	DISCRIMINATED



Figure 83: Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Bhutan

From 1949 until 1988

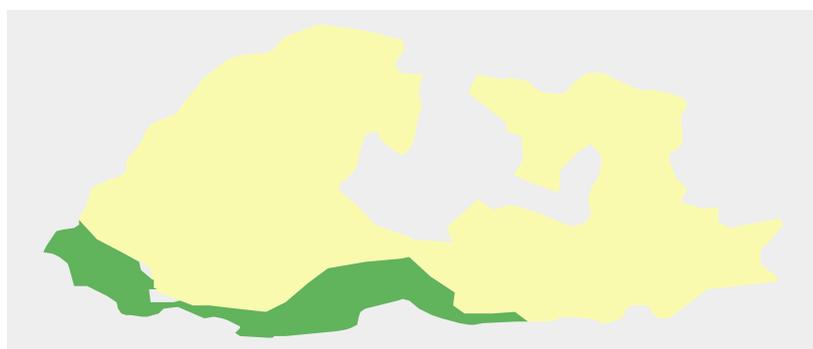


Figure 84: Map of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Bhutanese	28 904	Aggregate
■ Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	4127	Regionally based

Table 31: List of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.

From 1989 until 2021



Figure 85: Map of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2021.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Ngalops (Drupka)	15 845	Regionally based
■	Sharchops	13 059	Regionally based
■	Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	4127	Regionally based

Table 32: List of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2021.