

International Partnership Programme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage  
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## **COUNTRY REPORT: Bhutan**

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### **Introduction**

Bhutan is a small landlocked Buddhist Kingdom located in the eastern Himalayan Mountains between India and China. Despite being a small country, it is blessed with a rich assortment of varied culture, traditions, life styles, and beliefs, which are all finely based on Buddhism. Diverse as it may seem, the Bhutanese socio-cultural fabric is well interlaced and harmonised mainly due to the common threads of simple social, communal and spiritual values that the people share. For a small, landlocked nation like Bhutan, the preservation and promotion of its unique culture and tradition play a crucial role in laying the foundation upon which the identity of the Bhutanese people and the Kingdom of Bhutan as a sovereign and independent nation is built.

Bhutan follows a unique development policy guided by the philosophy of ‘Gross National Happiness’. Preservation and promotion of culture has been accorded high priority along with the other three goals of economic self-reliance, environmental preservation and good governance. It is a unique paradigm of chastening possibility in which the main motivating force behind human effort is not only economic growth, but the cultivation of a humane society; the one ultimate goal being the happiness of all the people.

Section 1 Article 4 (Culture) of the Constitution of Bhutan states that “The state shall endeavour to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country, including monuments, places and objects of artistic or historic interest. Dzongs, Lhakhangs, Goendeys, Ten-sum, Nyes, language, literature, music, visual arts and religion to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens”. There are four sections under Article 4 and all the sections protect the culture of Bhutan. It includes the skills of craft, knowledge and ideas about the arts and crafts, which if not protected and promoted, will disappear.

The following are some of the initiatives taken by the Royal Government of Bhutan to safeguard the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bhutan:

- 1, The Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs was established in 1985 to spearhead preservation, promotion and protection of Cultural Heritage. The Department of Culture is a broad-based organisation. Under it, there are many divisions working in close collaboration to cover every aspect of the tangible and intangible heritage of Bhutan. Under the present establishment there are eight divisions including Museums.
2. GNH policy encompasses all other developmental policies in the country and a policy that contradicts GNH principles is not considered a development policy.
3. Approval for constructing houses and buildings is given by the Division for Conservation of Architectural Heritage after assessing their design to ensure that the buildings are constructed in Bhutanese architectural style.

4. There is also a policy coming up with the eco-tourism in the rural villages so that the rural folks benefit from the tourism industry. This is mainly to benefit the local population by developing new ideas to promote their indigenous knowledge on the arts and crafts.
5. Non-formal Education has been started in villages throughout the country to educate people deprived of education in their youth and people are being taught local songs and dances. With the education they receive, they can recite the ballads and poems which help keep the intangible heritage alive.
6. To conserve, protect and promote local festivals as well as retain the local festivals of each region, districts or villages have their own festivals and Tshechus where the community of that particular region come together once or twice a year. This helps to preserve the cultural heritage of that locality.
7. Annually, the Government organises cultural orientation for the fresh graduates who have studied in and outside the country.
8. It is clearly articulated in the Vision's (Bhutan 2020) statement that development strategies should have clear cultural imperatives. Culture and tradition bequeathed to us by our ancestors can protect us from some of the negative and indiscriminate forces of modernisation, and enable us to retain our identity and dignity in a world in which culture is increasingly defined as a global commodity.

The Folk Heritage Museum was formally established in July 2001 based on the concept initiated by Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck. It attempts to give a real picture of what a typical Bhutanese farmhouse looked like in the early seventies, which is rarely seen now in urban areas. The other function of the Museum is to gather and demonstrate traditional knowledge; for example, pottery, a disappearing profession, is given emphasis, and training is imparted to interested youth. It is also a hub for village artisans to demonstrate their skills in craftsmanship and sell their products. This programme not only provides opportunities to the artisans to use their skills, but also instills enthusiasm in the minds of the younger generation to learn extant trades.

The third King, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, established the Royal Dance Troupe in 1967 as an institution to preserve and promote intangible heritage such as mask dances, folk dances, and other oral traditions. Later on, after the establishment of the National Commission for Cultural Affairs, it was renamed as the Royal Academy of Performing Arts. The Division for Ethics and Etiquette, now a separate division, is born out of this organisation to ensure specialisation under the present organisation restructuring. This division organises the orientation course on history and culture of Bhutan for the young graduates before they take up their careers in government services and private organisations.

The History of Bhutan is gleaned from a few precious literary sources, mostly in the form of religious manuscripts, which serve as an important reference. It is thus crucial to preserve these books and make them available to intellectuals and students equally. To manifest the vision into reality the National Library of Bhutan was established in Thimphu in 1967.

The Textile Museum was established in recognition of the impermanence of preservation and promotion of the Art of Weaving (*Thagzo*), which is one of the components of Thirteen Arts of Bhutan (*Zorig Chusum*). It is noticeable that the numbers of weavers are continually decreasing because of the threat from manufactured textiles, which are cheaper as well as finer. This organisation has many programmes providing incentives to encourage weavers to continue with their professions and for youth to take up this opportunity.

## **Challenges ahead in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage**

As the country enters into the mainstream of development with other nations, people's way of thinking is gradually changing. Foreign cultures are seeping into the country and having a negative impact on the already existing traditions. This is an inevitable problem faced by every developing nation for which a common solution has to be found to slow down its effects. The Royal Government of Bhutan has thus laid a higher priority on the preservation and promotion of culture. Protection of heritage sites, through proper research and education, are prerequisite to sensitise the public on these critical issues. Every Ministry is sharing the responsibilities for preserving these heritage properties, within their capacity. Many hidden sites are being recovered and new sites are being discovered. Their locations and importance are being documented to the public through all possible media in Bhutan. In addition, these sites are made easily accessible to visitors. Developing these sites, the regions are also benefitting economically and helping people to rise above the poverty line.

## **Conclusion**

In Bhutan, preservation of most natural heritage sites is left to Mother Nature. In general, human inaccessibility to the sites due to thick undergrowth has protected these sites from littering, vandalism, and other atrocities. Some heritage sites located within the vicinity of human settlements are taken care of by village communities in collaboration with the law enforcement officials.

Bhutan being a traditional society, traditional knowledge is not completely lost; it has remained with local people. Plans and policies are being implemented under the directives of the Department of Culture for preservation of traditional knowledge through activities such as conducting seminars, capacity-building workshops, colloquiums and other educational tools. The Ministry of Education has also incorporated traditional knowledge in to the school curriculum as a tool for sustainability and to promote the age-old precious skills.