

# Bhutan develops with an eye to spiritual heritage

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On many mountainsides in the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, Buddhist prayer wheels powered by streams tumbling through birch and pine trees spin in endless movement.

The wheels turn on present-day gear shafts that speak of modern Bhutan, moving slowly towards development and yet rooted in cultural values that date from centuries of isolation.

"We believe in 'chosi-nayiden,' the concept that temporal and spiritual values intertwine like a tree and a creeper," said Rigzin Dorji, secretary of Bhutan's Central Monastic Order.

"The Bhutanese survive on this balance. They need the shade of religion to retreat to from the sunshine of materialism," he said.

The merging of modern and medieval is evident in the equal status conferred on Bhutan's young King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and the je khempo or head monk, Thinley Lhundup.

King Jigme Singye is the fourth in a line of monarchs established in 1907, but he exists amicably alongside the 6000 monks in the powerful monastic order, protecting them and financing their task of spreading Buddha's teachings.

One of the most successful ways of keeping young Bhutanese in touch with their past has been an organisation called the National Council for Social and Cultural Promotion, set up in 1980 to "orient" graduates returning from overseas universities.

The council's director, Meghraj Gurung, said that every graduate on his re-

turn to the east Himalayan kingdom was sent to a remote village for six months.

They build roads or drinking water systems, explain development plans and analyse their own reactions.

"We are not trying to indoctrinate our young," Mr Gurung said. "We have found graduates emerge stronger emotionally from the experience."

Only two of hundreds of Bhutanese who have studied overseas have stayed abroad, leading to an average age of only 37 among the country's 11,300 Government employees. The population of the country is 1.4 million.

Life in Bhutan's towns has changed dramatically since the first roads to the outside world were built in the early 1960s.

Young Bhutanese slip easily from their traditional robes into T-shirts and jeans and Mr Gurung complains that the old practice of dropping in uninvited on friends is vanishing as the "appointment culture" takes hold.

The traditional joint family system has also been threatened by the growing numbers of Bhutanese who are moving to the towns, giving up subsistence farming to enlist as white-collar workers.

"My children are like those in any urban family elsewhere in the world," Mr Gurung said. "They have missed out on the wisdom we picked up at our grandparents' knees back in the villages."

Those values persist, however, and violent crime is still unheard of in the kingdom. The Chief Justice, Paljor Dorji, says he cannot remember when the last murder was committed.

There is concern, however, that modernisation

may be eroding the spiritualism that underlines Bhutan's quest for development.

"Consumerism is creeping in, and with it a very narrow rationalisation," Mr Gurung said. "We feel the tempo is accelerating and we are caught up willy-nilly in this system. We are desperately trying to slow down."

The contrast is illustrated by the large number of video sets in Thimphu, capital of a country with no daily newspaper and a national radio station that has only three broadcasts a week.

Bhutan's head monk, Thinley Lhundup, is more optimistic.

"Just as the mind needs the body's support systems, spiritual growth needs science and technology to sustain it," he said in his 348-year-old Punakha Dzong (monastery) in western Bhutan.