

# Overwhelming Sacred Spaces

## *Growing trends in tourism*

*Siok Sian Pek-Dorji*

It used to be that visitors to Bhutan would mention Taktshang (Bhutan's famed Tiger's Nest) with awe and consider it a privilege to be able to climb the steep trail on a spiritual journey. Today, tourists are asking: "Should we do Taktshang, is it worth it?"

With nearly 275,000 visitors in 2018, of which 202,290 are from the region,<sup>1</sup> Bhutan is feeling the tensions of heavy tourist traffic and unpleasant experiences as tourists and pilgrims jostle for space in small spiritual sites.

There are stories of tourists climbing on the monks' seats at monasteries to take selfies. Some walk around *chhortens* (stupas) in the wrong direction. All this frustrates Bhutanese pilgrims, and Buddhist practitioners. "Regional tourists like to talk loudly and blast their music and the Taktshang trail has become like a 'fish market', from the base camp right up to the top door step," said a tour operator, Kencho.

This article looks at the impact of increasing visitors on Bhutan's sacred sites, in particular, monasteries and *dzongs*. Reflecting the concerns of a cross-section of people -- guides, tourist companies, monks and lamas, and visitors -- this article concludes with some suggestions for policy-makers at a time when Bhutan's Tourism Council and stakeholders are drawing up a tourism policy and management plans for such sites.

### **At a Crossroads**

The increasing number of low-spending tourists today is contradicting Bhutan's High Value Low Impact (HVLI) exclusive travel destination policy. The onslaught of mass tourism, coupled with rapid urbanisation, is also challenging the country's carbon footprint. Bhutan is one of the most "rapidly urbanising countries in South Asia"<sup>2</sup> and is tackling growing demands for improved water, sewage, and waste facilities and plans.

<sup>1</sup>Tourism Council figures show that 2018 saw a total of 274,097 visitor arrivals to Bhutan with a growth rate of 7.61% over 2017. Of the total arrivals, there were 71,807 international arrivals and 202,290 regional arrivals. 94.8% of regional visitors are from India. 87.89% of visitors came for leisure or tourism

<sup>2</sup>World Bank, Bhutan Development Update , Harnessing urbanisation, July 2019

Together with increasing consumption and materialism, Bhutan is aware that it could very well lose its carbon negative claim by 2030. With the population in the capital Thimphu being about 120,000, it is easy to see how the numbers of tourist arrivals can easily tip the balance of the local population and burden daily facilities and services. Policy-makers and people who are calling for action on the ground are pressured to figure out better regulations to improve services and facilities and to protect the sanctity of sacred and scenic sites. The growing number of tourists -- at more than 275,000 visitors a year -- need to be better managed.

## Sacred Sites

Tourism is a double-edged sword. It will reap some revenue and resources, but it can also dilute the sanctity of Bhutan. The faith and devotion of generations of Bhutanese who have spent time contemplating precious teachings in the last independent Vajrayana country can be very quickly relegated to a mere theme park or monument of Himalayan extract. Sacred sites are not just monuments but powerful *nyes* (sacred places). Bhutanese believe that bodhisattavas<sup>3</sup> and accomplished teachers have, over the ages, blessed the sacred sites, the trails and retreat centres across Bhutan. There are more than 2,000 protected monasteries<sup>4</sup> throughout the country.

The *tshechus* (festivals), monasteries and rituals are not shows put on for tourists but real places and practices to enhance spiritual development. Thus a clash of culture occurs when tourism's "disneyland mentality"<sup>5</sup> collides with the aspirational pursuits of Bhutanese. Bhutan's sacred sites and monuments need special attention in an age of growing tourism. There are many examples the world over of how sacred sites are regulated to prevent crowding, and to offer a more meaningful experience for the traveller that responds to local sensitivities and concerns.

The Indian state of Kerala restricts entry to shrines to Hindus only. Certain temples in Tibet, China, offer entry to persons with a "refuge"<sup>6</sup> card showing

---

<sup>3</sup>Generally referring to people who have attained enlightenment but who continue to return to this life to help others attain enlightenment.

<sup>4</sup>The Culture Ministry's Conservation Department says this is a conservative number as the actual count is much more.

<sup>5</sup>DJKR in Book says: "No one is choreographing a 'holy site experience' (referring to India) and there's no serious exploitation, which means that, so far, they are free from any trace of a 'Disneyland' mentality." This is applicable largely still in Bhutan although more recent happenings tell a different story.

<sup>6</sup>In Vajrayana Buddhist practise, people take refuge to begin taking spiritual practise.

that they're Buddhist practitioners. In July this year, the Potala in Tibet announced an online booking system for entrance into the much sought-after monument.

Bhutan has always been clear about protecting its sacred heritage. Until the early 1990s, the Tiger's Nest was off-limits to tourists and visitors -- one could walk up to an observation point to view Taktshang but needed a permit<sup>7</sup> to go in. The National Assembly took a bold decision in 1994 to close mountaineering because local communities believe that the sanctity of mountains was more important than material gain.

### **Tourist Behaviour**

In the current scenario, regional tourists (99 percent of whom are from India) are now the focus as Bhutanese people find themselves pushed to the periphery of their small monasteries for their prayers and practice. "I work in tourism but even I'm getting frustrated and that's not good, because regional guests are our closest neighbours," said a hotel manager. "Just the other day, I made a prayer and threw the set of divination dice at Changangkha Monastery. Before I could read the dice, a pair of hands reached out for them. It was a tourist. I was really upset but couldn't say anything."

Regional tourists come with families and children, some are "back-packers" and many are simply looking for a cooler respite from the Indian summer. Bhutan, it seems, is even cheaper to visit than some neighbouring Indian states. "All of India's hill stations are overrun, so regional tourists are turning to Bhutan. They'll come until Bhutan is also 'done'. You can certainly introduce better management, up the fees and get regional tourists to come through local travel agents," said Sujoy Das, a photographer who leads treks and photo workshops to Bhutan.

The adventurous are motorcycling through the countryside and have revved their way up to monasteries, dispelling the sanctity of the environment, oblivious to the possibility of practitioners in retreat. Others walk past prostrating Bhutanese inside monasteries without lowering their voices, oblivious to the significance and sacredness of the place.

---

<sup>7</sup>Permits were issued by the royal Government's Culture Department.

Tourists need guides to enable them to understand local etiquette and appreciate the deeper experience that is Bhutan. “Non-Buddhists who don’t know what’s going on are not necessarily inspired by people bowing and making offerings in their religious piety,” says Professor Robert Thurman, a Buddhist scholar and long-time visitor to Bhutan. “Viewing monks and nuns studying and meditating as some sort of exhibition or museum is disrespectful.” There is also the opportunity to develop new experiences around sacred locations. Hikes and the journey to sacred sites can be improved, monks or nuns can be trained to offer classes or meditation guidance in special sites that don’t interfere with the education of the general monk body.

### **Pilgrims, Guests, and Tourists**

The tension arises from the fact that tourists and pilgrims are forced to share the same space with very different intentions: Pilgrims who visit sacred sites for contemplation and prayer and who are merely curious<sup>8</sup>.

Bhutan began with a HVLI policy tourism that is predicated on the belief that all visitors are “tourists” and each Bhutanese is an “ambassador” of the country when interacting with guests. This policy has been deeply ingrained in the Bhutanese psyche. Tourists who pay a tariff are outnumbered today by regional tourists coming on their own without paying a fee, without a guide or a “host” to show them the country.

Tour operators say that fee-paying tourists come in smaller numbers with personal guides so they are more mindful of local etiquette. The need, therefore, is to ensure that each visitor to the *dzong* or monasteries has a certified guide. Better management is also required so that young monks are not forced to clean up after tourists. The Guides Association of Bhutan handles the ticketing booth for *dzongs* in Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha and in selected sacred sites such as Taktshang and Kyichu monasteries and the National Memorial *Chhorten*. In 2018, Taktshang registered 34,632 tourists over nine months<sup>9</sup>. Punakha dzong received 61,392 regional

---

<sup>8</sup>Bhutan Vision for Bhutan’s vision for development, Bhutan Vision 2020 published by the Planning Commission Secretariat in 1999 says that those who visit religious sites must demonstrate the appropriate respect for these sites.

<sup>9</sup>Available tourism figures show a tourism visitor no of 34, 632 between Jan. till Sept. in 2018. May tourists going to Taktshang totalled 7,630 and 6,596 in June.

tourists<sup>10</sup>, and it has been found that tourists often stray into off-limit areas. A draft management plan states that “many visitors without guides disturb the monastic environment”.

## Infrastructure and Development

One visible impact of tourism is the commercialisation of the areas around sacred sites. The village near Chimi *lhakhang*, for example, has seen many farm houses converted into gift shops. The traditional village near Gangtoe monastery in Phobjikha is turning into a tourist centre. Immediate areas around *dzongs* and monasteries are overshadowed by hotels, snooker bars and neon night-life.

Many observers lament the trend of motor roads being built to the door step of monasteries. Bhutanese appreciated walking to spiritual places, contemplating, enjoying the pristine scenery, and the atmosphere of the sacred sites. The global gentrification with “international coffee shops and gift shops” can be delayed with the right incentives<sup>11</sup>. Bhutan can provide the Bhutanese experience near sacred monasteries by developing more Bhutanese crafts, serving local delicacies, creating Bhutanese gardens and ensuring that the local culture is not overwhelmed by souvenir and coffee shops. When spiritual places are reduced to being tourist stops there is a tendency to focus more on ticketing and the economic returns.

## Beyond Monuments

“When tourists outnumber pilgrims it affects the sacredness of the environment around our sacred sites,” said Khenpo<sup>12</sup> Phuntshok Tashi, former Director of the National Museum. Monuments refer to public buildings or previous spiritual sites that are no longer places for spiritual activities. In Bhutan, all our monuments come with a sanctum for spiritual practice. The *dzongs* are home to the monastic community. If all sacred sites simply become mere monuments, they will represent some historic significance but lose their spirituality in the minds of visitors. The risk is

<sup>10</sup>During a twelve-month period from August 2017 to July 2018, 112,747 non-national visitors entered the Punakha dzong according to records maintained by the National Monument Fund Committee and Royal Bhutan Police. Of this number nearly 50% were regional tourists.

<sup>11</sup>A conservator from the Home Ministry, Nagtsho Dorji talks about the tendency for land use around sacred sites to be changed into commercial tourism spots that run counter to the sanctity of places.

<sup>12</sup>Khenpo suggests that tourists entering monasteries can be asked to leave behind their negative thoughts and energies and learn to practice mindfulness.

that the spiritual core of something more profound and the mind-changing energy is lost. The delay in implementing good management plans for sacred sites can rob Bhutan of the very authenticity and spirituality it treasures.

## **Bhutanese Reactions**

“Bhutanese are nice to visitors. Since tourists are still considered guests, the average person does not openly criticise the rowdiness of regional visitors but are frustrated inside,” said a tour guide. “Even putting up a sign that says Silence! Will help,” says a trekker and guide on the Taktshang trail. “But it’s not just the tourists,” said former director of the National Museum, Mynak Trulku. “It’s us. We need better management. Our monks also need to learn how to handle the tourists.”

The good news is that the Culture Department’s Conservation Division has drafted the first management plan for the Punakha *dzong* with guidelines on escorting tourists and the creation of buffer zones around the *dzong*. This plan was drafted in collaboration with the local administration, the Tourism Council, the Home Ministry’s National Monument fund Supervision committee, and the Land Commission. A management plan is being developed for Taktshang monastery.

## **Respect Local Sentiments**

As tourism grows as a foreign exchange earner there is a tendency to think that equitable tourism means opening all corners of Bhutan and every sacred festival and site to tourists. The government and the private sector have been deliberating on the opening of areas to tourists. A tourism policy can provide coherent direction and ensure that tourism benefits the rural areas with basic infrastructure, services, and facilities without immediately opening all places to tourists. The policy needs to consider the special needs of smaller sacred sites. A lama in Bumthang says that his monastery is “not for sale” and has not opened his monastery to tourists. Others have come up with ticketing plans for *tshechus*, with visitors also enjoying a local meal for the price of a *tshechu* ticket. “My village *tshechu* in Bumthang is small. We can’t open it up, since we’re just about 40 households,” said Lama Nuedup Dorji. “But tour companies call us and complain that we have

not fixed dates for the *tshochu* as if it's their right to bring visitors to our community festival.”

As the government talks about drafting a 2045 development plan for Bhutan, the Tourism Council of Bhutan needs to seriously consider how to keep up the HVLI policy. The TCB recently lowered its half a million tourists by 2023 target to 350,000 - 400,000, and this gives stakeholders time to put in place better management and regulations. A long-term observer of Bhutan's tourism development says “Bhutan needs strong political will.” The challenge is for strong leadership to take some tough decisions so that the HVLI policy does not bend to market forces alone.

“The tourism sector works to market sites, we work on conserving the sites, and other ministries and local governments tackle waste management and infrastructure. We've all been working in silos,” said Nagtsho Dorji, a conservator who worked with stakeholders on preparing a management plan to regulate and manage tourism as well as land and monument development. The Punakha *Dzong* Management plan<sup>13</sup> is the first such comprehensive plan and its implementation can provide tourism guidelines to be replicated in other areas. This collaboration is a critical move and the royal government has acknowledged this weakness of working in isolation, and called for stronger coordination, collaboration, and consolidation in its development planning that gives impetus to collaborative management plans.

---

<sup>13</sup>The heritage site management plan completed in May 2019 aims to promote a value-based protection of cultural heritage, which expects a good balance between cultural heritage value and other values such as use and function, safety and security, or as a tourism resource. There are provisions for annual meetings amongst stakeholders to monitor implementation.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations to improve the management of sacred sites summarises views from a cross-section of stakeholders:

- Adopt one approach for all tourists (international and regional) guided by the HVLI policy;
- Encourage continued collaboration amongst stakeholders to implement and monitor management plans -- the culture department, heritage sites, local trustees, urban authorities, the land commission and others, including civil society;
- Maintain caution in opening up untrodden , remote sacred *nyes*. Prioritise such sites for pilgrims and practitioners. Require permits and manage tourism numbers only after required services are put in place;
- Use evidence-based research to develop a masterplan for the opening up of selected sacred sites to “tourism”;
- Regulate and manage visitor numbers to sacred sites, respecting local customs and etiquette;
- Encourage Bhutanese to travel and visit the country.
- Assess the “carrying capacity” of all sacred sites, and develop guidelines before they are opened up to tourism;
- Close sites to tourism when silent retreats and ceremonies take place;
- Tickets and fees can be increased during peak season, including green taxes and SDFs;
- Require all visitors to come through local travel agents.

General etiquette, apart from a dress code and no photography in and around the vicinity, can be more specific:

- No sitting on sacred seats. No touching altars;
- No entry into a temple without a monk inside or a guide;
- Observe body language, like not sitting with your feet pointing at a monk and not pointing to the altar or members of the clergy;
- Control use of mobile phones, loud music in the vicinity of the monastery or retreat areas;
- All explanations to tourists to be done before entering monasteries. Keep explanations to a minimum once inside, so visitors can observe and feel the sacred ambience;
- Train not just guides, but also monks/nuns and local caretakers

- to manage tourists. Hire professionals to plan and implement site management;
- Tour companies need to go beyond the “cut and paste”<sup>14</sup> itinerary and be more creative when leading groups (e.g. opportunities for other sights outside the monasteries) so that they are not crowding into the inner temples and altar spaces;
- Put in place monitoring systems.

## Where Next?

Strong and effective leadership will ensure that Bhutan is not turned into an entertainment ground for tourists and that a balance is found between developing tourism as a foreign exchange earner and ensuring we do not lose the sanctity of sites.

Visits to sacred sites should not be a “must-do” item on the itinerary. Can the tourism policy find ways to make visitors more aware of the true value and historical significance of Buddhist teachings and not just the aesthetic beauty of sacred sites?

Tourism planning and regulations can enable Bhutan to be carbon neutral, to be a profound spiritual experience and a genuine exclusive high end low impact destination. If anyone can do it, Bhutan can.

## Reference

- Tourism Council of Bhutan, Monitors 2015,1016,2017, 2018
- The World Bank, Bhutan Development update, Harnessing urbanisation, July 2019
- Division for Conservation of Heritage site, Culture Dept., Home Ministry, Punakha dzong heritage site management plan, 2019
- Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, Advice on pilgrimage, Root Institute 2017
- Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, What to do at India’s Holy Sites, Siddhartha’s Intent 2010
- Planning Commission Secretariat, Bhutan 2020, A Vision for Peace, prosperity and happiness, Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999.

---

<sup>14</sup>Observers say tour companies tend to follow a “cut and paste “ itinerary which leads to tourists going to sacred sites at the same time each day and this adds to the crowding.