



Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Bhutan

Population: 0.73 millions (#167 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 38,394 square km. Landlocked in the Himalayas, Bhutan borders India and China. The terrain is almost entirely mountainous with some fertile valleys and plains in the south. Tropical climate prevails near the Indian border whereas a temperate climate characterizes large valleys stretching into the Himalayas. Mountainous areas have cool summers and severe winters. Natural hazards include severe storms and landslides. Soil erosion and little access to clean water are environmental issues. Bhutan is divided into twenty administrative districts.

Peoples

Bhote: 50%

Nepalese: 35%

Indigenous/migrant tribes: 15%

Many ethnic Nepalese were forced from their homes in Bhutan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 2010, there were as many as 100,000 displaced Nepalese-Bhutanese living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, many of whom were in the process of relocation to other nations. By the late 2010s, only a few thousand refugees remained as most had expatriated and immigrated to the United States.[\[1\]](#)

Population: 758,288 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.07% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.9 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 69.6 male, 71.7 female (2017)

Languages: Nepali (38%), Dzongkha (23%), Tshangla (22%), other (17%). Dzongkha speakers mainly reside in the west,

whereas Nepali speakers populate southern foothills from east to west. Tshangla speakers are concentrated in the east and southeast. Dzongkha is the official language. Tibetan dialects are spoken by Bhotes, and Nepali dialects are spoken by Nepalese. Twenty-five native languages are spoken. Languages with over 100,000 speakers include Dzongkha, Nepali, and Tshangla.

Nepali belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family and is related to Northern Indian languages. Dzongkha is a South Tibetan language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family, which includes languages of Tibet and Burma; Chinese is more distantly related. Tshangla, also called Sharchopkha, is also a Tibeto-Burman language.

Literacy: 64.9% (2015)

History

Bhutan has been inhabited for thousands of years by aboriginal peoples who were typically not unified into a single entity. Strong ties to Buddhism have been maintained throughout Bhutan's recorded history. The Mongol invasions brought political and religious reform. A brief unification of the territory occurred in the seventeenth century in defense against Tibet. Civil wars and wars with Tibet and neighboring kingdoms occurred throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.^[2] The Treaty of Sinchulu in 1865 ceded some border land to British India in exchange for an annual subsidy. Independence occurred in 1907, after which Bhutan became a unified kingdom under a British-assisted monarchy. In 1910, a treaty was signed in which Britain controlled foreign policy but promised not to intervene in internal affairs. India has replaced Britain pertaining to foreign relations and defense since independence from the British. Increasing autonomy and democratic reforms have occurred over the past decade. International relations continue to be relayed through India. Bhutan maintained a policy of isolation from modernization until recently when the government consented to gradual introduction of modern technology. In 2008, Bhutan made the successful transition from a hereditary monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy.^[3] A peaceful turnover in power occurred in 2013 after parliamentary elections.

Culture

Bhutanese culture is deeply rooted in Buddhist practices and beliefs. Isolation from the outside world until the past century and bans on modern technology, which have been relaxed only recently, have perpetuated cultural traditions. Bhutanese value healthy living practices and environmentalism. Traditional cuisine includes red rice, buckwheat, dairy foods, and meat (e.g. pork, beef, and yak). The sale of tobacco has been banned since 2010.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$8,700 (2017) [14.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.607

Corruption Index: 67 (2017)

Bhutan suffers from a shortage of skilled labor, little economic development, and a landlocked location. Agriculture employs 58% of the labor force and produces 15.7% of the GDP, whereas services account for 22% of the labor force and generate 4041.7% of the GDP. Industry accounts for 42.6% of the GDP and primarily consists of cement, wood products, processed foods, and tourism. Primary crops include rice, corn, roots, and citrus fruits. India is the primary trade partner.

Bhutan benefits from low levels of corruption despite little economic development.

Faiths

Buddhist: 75%

Hinduism: 22%

Other: 3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – ~1,000

Latter-day Saints – less than 10

Religion

Most Bhutanese are Buddhist. Hindus are concentrated in the south and openly practice their religion. Some convert to Christianity but worship in the privacy of their own homes. Numbering approximately 2,000-15,000, Bhutanese Christians generally live in southern areas and travel to India to attend worship services. Buddhists tend to pressure followers of other religions to observe aspects of Buddhism.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is typically upheld by the government. The king is appointed by the constitution as protector of all religions.^[4] The government identifies Buddhism as its “spiritual heritage,” leading to some favoritism of Buddhist practices and beliefs, such as providing subsidies to Buddhist monks and recognizing major Buddhist holidays as national holidays. Due to recent democratic change, greater religious freedom has occurred than in the past albeit this has resulted in little-to-no change for Christians. There have been no recent reported instances of abuse of religious freedom by individuals or government. The government has restricted non-Buddhists from building religious buildings and holding some non-Buddhist festivals. Religious teaching is not allowed in nonmonastic schools, and citizens are required to wear traditional attire in certain locations and facilities. Christians worship in the privacy in their own homes, as they are not permitted to pray openly and build churches. There continue to remain no registered Christian organizations in the country.^[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 41%

Thimphu, Phuntsholing, Gelaphu, Wangdue, Samdrup Jongkhar, Samtse, Gedu, Gomtu, Mongar, Chukha.

Cities and towns listed in **bold** have no nearby LDS congregation.

None of the ten largest cities or villages has congregations. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the national population lives in the five largest cities. Only Thimphu and Phuntsholing have over 10,000 inhabitants.

LDS History

Bhutan has been a part of the Asia Area for decades. In late 2007, Bhutan was assigned to the India New Delhi Mission.^[6] Missionaries serving in the India New Delhi Mission reported that the first convert baptisms occurred in Bhutan in 2008. However, it is unclear whether any members live in the country as of 2018. There have been no reports of convert baptisms or member groups operating in Bhutan in nearly a decade.

The Church in the United States has reported hundreds of Nepali-Bhutanese converts who have joined the Church in several locations, most notably in Utah, Minnesota, and Ohio, since the late 2000s. The Church has designed multiple missionary companionships as Nepali-speaking in several areas of the United States to teach Nepali-Bhutanese refugees resettled from camps in eastern Nepal. One Nepali-speaking branch functions in the entire United States in Salt Lake City, Utah (Crossroads Square Branch). This branch is primarily comprised of Nepali-Bhutanese converts.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 10 (2018)

In 2008, missionaries reported that four convert baptisms occurred in Bhutan. Total membership was likely less than ten as of 2018.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 0 (2018)

A group may have operated in the past to service a handful of LDS converts. However, no group appeared to function as of 2018. No branch has ever functioned in Bhutan.

Activity and Retention

Any Bhutanese members in Bhutan appear to be converts who joined the Church elsewhere and returned to Bhutan. It is unclear how well these converts have been retained due to their isolation from mission headquarters and limited leadership visits and training.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Nepali, English.

The Church has translated the Book of Mormon, the Living Christ Testimony, Gospel Fundamentals, The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, and several missionary resources and pamphlets into Nepali. No materials have been translated into Dzongkha or other native languages.

Meetinghouses

In accordance with local laws, any church activity occurs in the privacy of members' homes.

Humanitarian and Development Work

As of 2018, the Church has no reported history of humanitarian or development work in Bhutan.[\[7\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Significant strides in granting greater religious freedom in Bhutan for non-Buddhists have allowed greater potential for some limited missionary activity to occur. The conversion of a few Bhutanese in the late 2000s indicates that missionary work may operate on a member referral basis. However, heavy restrictions on constructing churches or holding Christian public meetings prevent missionary work from extending beyond the personal contacts of converts and investigators.

Cultural Issues

Strong cultural ties to Buddhism that have endured for millennia are the primary cultural issue challenging church growth. Christian converts likely face significant family and societal oppositions if they make their conversions known. Low literacy rates limit the value of literature distribution and may present barriers for the development of gospel understanding and self-reliance among members. Literacy rates for women are significantly lower than those for men (55% versus 73%).

National Outreach

The entire population of Bhutan remains unreached by the Church. Those with personal contact with the few recent converts have the only opportunity to receive mission outreach. Bhutan's remote location and tiny population of less than one million in the midst of the India New Delhi Mission—which serves three nations with each over one hundred million people (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh)—has made Bhutan a lesser priority for mission outreach. Reaching the rural population following an official establishment of the Church will be challenging due to rough terrain and remote, sparsely populated countryside.

Nepali-Bhutanese refugees who were relocated to the United States have sought out the Church in multiple locations. Several dozen refugees in the San Francisco area were meeting with missionaries, and some were baptized in early 2010. In Salt Lake City, the Church provided humanitarian assistance in 2009 and 2010 to many primarily ethnic Nepali-Bhutanese refugees who have also shown interest in the Church. In 2009, twenty to thirty attended worship services in the Salt Lake Valley View Stake

not because they desired financial assistance but because they enjoyed Church services.[\[8\]](#) In 2009, missionaries serving in Adelaide, Australia reported some success working among Nepali-Bhutanese immigrants. However, only one branch has ever been organized to specifically service Bhutanese converts in the Nepali language.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Infrequent visits by Church leadership and a lack of gospel materials in native languages may present difficulties for member retention.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Some challenges may occur between the Nepalese and Bhote due to cultural and historical differences.

Language Issues

Low literacy rates present obstacles, although opportunities exist for literacy programs as a form of service and passive mission outreach. LDS translations of several materials, including the Book of Mormon, in the Nepali language present opportunities for testimony development and proselytism one day.

Leadership

No local Bhutanese LDS leadership has yet been developed within Bhutan. Several leadership positions in the Crossroads Square Branch are staffed by Nepali-Bhutanese members.

Temple

Bhutan is assigned to the Hong Kong China Temple district. No organized trips occur. Travel to the temple is unfeasible for most.

Comparative Growth

Bhutan is one of the only nations in South Asia or East Asia without an independent congregation. Countries that have had their first congregations recently established in this region have experienced strong initial membership growth. Most Christian denominations do not publish membership statistics for Bhutan and have gained few converts due to government restrictions. Seventh-Day Adventists report slow growth.

Future Prospects

The start of initial mission outreach in Bhutan is was encouraging development in the late 2000s. However, the small population, remote location, hostile attitudes towards missionary-oriented Christian groups, and prohibitions on the construction of chapels prevent a more prominent church presence. Greater democratization and tolerance of non-Buddhist and non-Hindu religious groups may generate the needed circumstances for the Church to be established; the last several years have brought considerable progress in making a future church presence possible. LDS outreach in Bhutan is unlikely to expand beyond low-key member referral efforts in the capital of Thimphu for many years because most of the limited mission resources are allocated to the enormous needs of more populous nations in the region. Nepali-Bhutanese Latter-day Saints in the United States and other countries present valuable opportunities for future mission outreach among relatives.

- [1] Shrestha, Deepesh Das. "Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees surpasses 100,000 mark," UNHCR, 19 November 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2015/11/564dded46/resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html>
- [2] "Bhutan," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 17 April 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhutan>
- [3] "Bhutan," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127364.htm>
- [4] "Bhutan," International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 14 July 2018 <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2015/11/564dded46/resettlement-bhutanese-refugees-surpasses-100000-mark.html>
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- [6] "New mission in New Delhi, India," LDS Church News, 6 October 2007. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/51131/New-mission-in-New-Delhi-India.html>
- [7] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 16 July 2018. <https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work>
- [8] Loftus, Hikari. "Service to Bhutanese immigrants unifies Utah stakes," Mormon Times, 7 June 2010. <http://www.mormontimes.com/article/15008/>