

Today, Bhutan is the sole remaining monarchy of former seven kingdoms in the Himalayas. It was only last December that the parliament in Nepal abolished the monarchy and Sikkim situated in between Nepal and Bhutan was incorporated into India in 1975 after the king had abdicated. Since 1907 Bhutan has been a hereditary monarchy in the eastern part of the Himalayas and is called Druk Yul in the national language, which means Land of the Thunder dragon. It is embedded in between its huge neighbours, India in the South, East and West and the People's Republic of China in the North. The tantric form of the Mahayana-Buddhism is the omnipresent official national religion. About 650.000 inhabitants live in an area which has the size of Switzerland. One tenth live in the fast growing capital Thimphu. From the Lowlands of Bengal with about 150 meters the topography of the country quickly rises like a steep ladder to the sky and reaches more than 7000 meters in the borderland to Tibet with impressive mountains that have never been climbed. Deep valleys, winding, narrow roads, fierce monsoons during the rainy season in summer, icy winters and sparse accommodation are a challenge for the fast growing tourism. The adventurous journey across country, the linear distance of which is a mere 300 km, takes three days.

Interestingly, we owe the first informal relations between Austria and Bhutan to horses and woodworms. Dr. Wolfgang Schallenberg was Austria's Ambassador in New Delhi from 1974 until 1978 and was, therefore, also in charge of Bhutan, even though he was not formally accredited as there were no diplomatic relations to Bhutan. He remembers that it was very difficult for diplomats at that time to obtain a special written permit from the Ministry of the Exterior of India in order to be allowed to travel to Bhutan, as it was necessary to cross a prohibited military zone which had been set up around the Himalayan Kingdom. Robust and small horses were needed for Bhutan's agriculture in the mountain regions. Such horses had long been imported from Tibet. After the violent occupation of Tibet by Communist China, however, this was no longer possible. Without new horses from Tibet there was the danger of incest breeding and, therefore, loss of quality of the horses. Von Schulthess, a Swiss entrepreneur, who knew the 3rd King Jigme Dorje Wangchuck from their times as students, presented the king with two Austrian Haflinger horses. Subsequently, Bhutan asked Austria to make available Haflinger horses as development aid. First this request was declined. Schallenberg, however, managed eventually that 14 stallions and mares from a stud farm in the Tyrol were shipped to Kolkata, from where the development aid on four legs was transferred by truck to Bhutan.

The result of this cross-breeding of Haflinger horses and local horses proved to be an excellent breeding product and therefore, the government voiced the request to launch a breeding programme with Haflinger horses. Thoroughbred Haflinger horses were continued to be bred in breeding farms and suitable breeding stallions were given to certain breeding stations in the country. The reputation of the Haflinger horses quickly spread to other Asian countries and subsequently, the Indian Army also bought some Haflinger horses.

As for the woodworm, in the mid-1980s vast wooded areas were pest invested and after Switzerland had failed in controlling the pest, it was Austria which managed to destroy this disastrous plague.

Thus, Austria helped Bhutan twice in a very unconventional, but highly effective way.

The first personal contacts between politicians of both countries were established in 1989 during the official state funeral for the late Japanese emperor (Tenno) Hirohito. The 4th King of Bhutan Jigme Singy Wangchuck addressed then Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Alois Mock and extended his thanks for the efficient help of Austria in the pest control. At the same time the King officially invited Mock to a state visit, which the latter accepted in February 1990 being only the second foreign minister in the world ever to visit Bhutan. Official diplomatic relationships had been started on 26 April 1989.

*Bhutan then became the only country in which the Austrian development cooperation in Asia placed an emphasis in the fields of energy (hydropower), high mountain ecology, tourism and the preservation of the cultural heritage.*

*From 30 October to 1 November 1997 then permanent secretary of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner officially visited Bhutan. She represented the Republic on the occasion of the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the hydroelectric power plant Basochu built with the help of Austria and discussed in Thimphu the last details of the exhibition "Bhutan - Mountain Fortress of the Gods" which was to be opened soon after that at the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde. Some of the most valuable items of the National Museum of Paro, among which the "Raven Crown" were shown for the first time outside Bhutan. Due to this unique presentation the hidden kingdom became known to the broad public in Austria for the first time.*

*Among the numerous delegation members was also the president of PaN, the umbrella organisation of all friendship societies Professor DDr. Claus Walter, senior officer in the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture. As there had been neither a diplomatic representation nor a honorary consulate or some information office of Bhutan in Austria, he was asked during this visit by the then royal Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering (he was almost 30 years in office) as well as by Ferrero-Waldner to establish a bilateral society in Austria.*