



Cultural Imagination and the Representation of Bhutan in Contemporary Indian Travel Writing: A Study of *The Living Road*, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*

Vaishnavi Shinde¹

¹ Student, YCMOU, Nanded.

Article Info

Article History:

Published: 28 Sept 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 3, Issue 9
September-2026

Page Number:

572-576

Corresponding Author:

Vaishnavi Shinde

Abstract:

This paper examines how Bhutan is imagined and represented in contemporary Indian travel writing through Ajit Harisinghani's *The Living Road*, Jamie Zeppa's *Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan*, and V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. While the first two texts directly engage with Bhutanese landscapes and society, Naipaul's work provides a broader South Asian framework through which cultural identity, nationhood, and transformation can be understood. The study argues that Bhutan is constructed as a space of cultural purity, ecological balance, and spiritual depth, often contrasted with the complexities of modern India. At the same time, these travel narratives reveal the role of cultural imagination in shaping representations, blending observation with interpretation. Through a comparative analysis, the paper highlights how Bhutan functions both as a real place and as an imagined cultural ideal within contemporary travel writing.

Keywords: Cultural imagination, travel writing, Bhutan, representation, Indian identity, transnationalism

1. Introduction

Travel writing has long functioned as a powerful medium through which cultures are not only observed but also interpreted and reimagined. It operates at the intersection of experience and narration, where the act of travel becomes inseparable from the act of representation. In the context of contemporary Indian travel writing, the depiction of neighbouring regions like Bhutan carries particular significance, as it reflects a complex interplay of familiarity and difference. Bhutan, positioned both geographically close and culturally distinct, becomes an especially rich site for such exploration. Its unique development philosophy, emphasis on Gross National Happiness, and visible commitment to environmental and cultural preservation make it an attractive subject for travellers seeking alternatives to the pressures of modern life. As a result, Bhutan is often approached not merely as a destination but as a space through which broader questions about culture, identity, and ways of living are examined. This makes it an ideal context for understanding how cultural imagination operates within travel narratives, shaping both perception and representation.

Texts such as *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* by Jamie Zeppa offer detailed and layered accounts of Bhutanese landscapes, traditions, and everyday life, presenting the country as a space where nature, spirituality, and community are closely intertwined. These narratives emphasize sensory experience, cultural depth, and human connection, contributing to an image of Bhutan as both grounded and meaningful. In contrast, V.

S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, though not directly focused on Bhutan, provides an important regional framework by examining issues of identity, transformation, and modernity in South Asia. This broader perspective indirectly shapes how Bhutan is imagined as a relatively stable and cohesive cultural space within a region marked by rapid change and internal tensions. Taken together, these texts demonstrate that the representation of Bhutan is not simply the result of direct observation but is deeply influenced by the writers' cultural imagination, expectations, and ideological positions, highlighting the interpretive nature of travel writing itself.

2. Cultural Imagination in Travel Writing

Cultural imagination in travel writing refers to the way a writer mentally constructs and interprets a culture through personal experience, prior knowledge, and subjective perception. It is not simply about recording what is seen; rather, it involves shaping those observations into meaningful narratives. In this sense, the traveller becomes both an observer and an interpreter, filtering unfamiliar cultural realities through their own cultural lens. Every description, whether of people, rituals, landscapes, or everyday life, is influenced by the writer's internal framework of understanding. This process makes travel writing a deeply creative and interpretive act, where reality and imagination often blend. As a result, cultural imagination allows writers to make sense of difference, but it also raises questions about accuracy, bias, and representation.

Travel narratives, therefore, cannot be treated as entirely objective or neutral accounts. They are shaped by the writer's cultural background, ideological position, and personal expectations before and during the journey. The act of writing itself involves selection what to include, what to omit, and how to present it which further reinforces the role of imagination. When writers describe a place like Bhutan, they often combine direct observation with imaginative reconstruction, creating a version of the place that is both real and symbolic. This dual process results in narratives that may emphasize certain aspects such as spirituality, tradition, or natural beauty while overlooking others like modern challenges or social complexities. Consequently, travel writing becomes a site where cultural realities are mediated rather than simply mirrored.

In contemporary Indian travel writing, Bhutan is frequently imagined as an idealized cultural space marked by harmony, simplicity, and authenticity. This representation is closely linked to Bhutan's global identity as a nation that prioritizes Gross National Happiness and environmental sustainability over material development. Such a reputation strongly shapes the expectations of travellers even before they arrive, influencing how they perceive and narrate their experiences. Writers often approach Bhutan with admiration and curiosity, and this predisposition leads them to highlight its peaceful monasteries, pristine landscapes, and contented communities. While these portrayals capture important aspects of Bhutanese life, they also reflect a selective cultural imagination that tends to romanticize the country. Thus, Bhutan in travel writing emerges not only as a geographical location but also as an imagined cultural ideal shaped by both global discourse and individual perception.

Representation of Bhutan in *The Living Road*

In *The Living Road*, Ajit Harisinghani presents Bhutan as a landscape marked by continuity, where tradition, community life, and the natural environment exist in a quiet, sustained balance. His narrative is grounded in the immediacy of lived experience, paying close attention to sensory details the winding mountain roads, the stillness of monasteries, the cadence of daily routines, and the subtle interactions between people and their surroundings. This focus on texture and atmosphere allows the reader to engage with Bhutan not merely as a physical destination but as a lived cultural space. Harisinghani's writing reflects a deep sense of wonder and discovery, as he encounters a world that appears to resist the speed and fragmentation of contemporary urban life. In this context, Bhutan emerges as an alternative imaginative space, one that offers a slower, more reflective mode of being. The recurring image of the road becomes especially significant, functioning as a metaphor for connection linking not only geographical locations but also cultures, memories, and personal insights.

At the same time, this representation carries a degree of idealization shaped by the author's cultural imagination. The emphasis on harmony, simplicity, and continuity tends to foreground Bhutan as a place relatively untouched by modern disruptions, which can overshadow the more complex realities of social and economic change within the country. By highlighting moments of peace and cultural authenticity, the narrative constructs an image that aligns with broader expectations of Bhutan as a preserved and almost timeless society. However, this selective portrayal reveals how the desire to encounter an "authentic" culture influences what is observed and narrated. Harisinghani's Bhutan is thus both a real place and an imagined construct, shaped by admiration and interpretive framing. This duality underscores a key aspect of travel writing: while it seeks to represent reality, it inevitably transforms that reality through the writer's perspective, resulting in a narrative that is as much about the traveller's vision as it is about the place itself.

Representation of Bhutan in *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*

In *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, Jamie Zeppa offers a deeply immersive portrayal of Bhutan shaped by long-term engagement rather than brief observation. Living and working as a teacher, Zeppa becomes part of the everyday rhythms of Bhutanese life, which allows her narrative to move beyond surface impressions. She writes about classrooms, village interactions, friendships, and the subtle cultural codes that govern social behaviour, presenting Bhutan as a lived and evolving society rather than a distant, exotic landscape. Her account captures the challenges of communication, adaptation, and cultural learning, especially in the early stages of her stay, when unfamiliar customs and expectations create moments of confusion and self-reflection. Over time, however, this initial distance gradually diminishes, and her narrative reflects a process of learning that is both personal and cultural. This gradual deepening of understanding gives her work a layered quality, where Bhutan is revealed not in fixed images but through changing perspectives and experiences.

What makes Zeppa's representation particularly significant is its balance between admiration and critical awareness. While she acknowledges the richness of Bhutanese traditions, community values, and spiritual life, she does not present them as untouched or idealized. Instead, she engages with the realities of change, examining how modernization, education, and external influences are reshaping Bhutanese society. Her narrative recognizes tensions

between preservation and progress, tradition and transformation, without reducing them to simple binaries. This approach allows her to present Bhutan as a dynamic cultural space marked by both continuity and negotiation. By situating herself within the narrative as someone learning, questioning, and adapting Zeppa reduces the distance between observer and subject, creating a more grounded and reflexive account. In doing so, her work challenges the tendency of travel writing to romanticize cultural difference, offering instead a nuanced representation that acknowledges complexity while still retaining a sense of respect and engagement.

Naipaul's Perspective and the South Asian Context

In *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, V. S. Naipaul presents a wide-ranging exploration of India as a society undergoing continuous transformation, shaped by numerous “mutinies” or assertions of identity across caste, class, religion, and region. Although the work does not directly engage with Bhutan, it offers a valuable conceptual framework for understanding cultural identity within South Asia as a whole. Naipaul's India is marked by movement, aspiration, and tension, where individuals and communities negotiate new forms of selfhood in response to historical and socio-economic change. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the relative stability and harmony often attributed to Bhutan in travel narratives. Such a contrast is not merely incidental; it plays a subtle but important role in shaping Bhutan's image as a space of cohesion, continuity, and cultural preservation within a region frequently associated with dynamism and fragmentation. In this way, Naipaul's depiction of India indirectly reinforces the imaginative construction of Bhutan as its cultural counterpoint.

At the same time, Naipaul's critical perspective serves as a reminder that cultural representation is never neutral or uncomplicated. His writing foregrounds the tensions between tradition and modernity, exposing the complexities that underlie seemingly stable cultural identities. These tensions are equally relevant to Bhutan, even if they are less prominently emphasized in many travel accounts that tend to privilege images of harmony and balance. By bringing Naipaul's insights into conversation with representations of Bhutan, it becomes clear that the idea of cultural continuity is often shaped by selective perception and narrative framing. Placing Bhutan within this broader South Asian context highlights how regional comparisons influence cultural imagination, encouraging writers and readers alike to see Bhutan not as an isolated ideal but as part of a larger, interconnected cultural landscape. This comparative perspective ultimately deepens the analysis by revealing how representations of one place are often constructed in relation to others, rather than in isolation.

Bhutan as Cultural Ideal and Lived Reality

Across these texts, Bhutan emerges not only as a geographical location but also as a powerful cultural idea shaped through narrative imagination. In *The Living Road*, Ajit Harisinghani presents a Bhutan defined by aesthetic harmony and continuity, where nature and tradition appear seamlessly intertwined. In contrast, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* by Jamie Zeppa offers a more grounded and immersive perspective, revealing the textures of everyday life along with its subtle tensions and adaptations. Meanwhile, V. S. Naipaul, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, provides a broader regional lens that indirectly shapes how Bhutan is imagined as a space of cohesion set against the complexity and

fragmentation of neighbouring societies. Together, these works contribute to a composite image of Bhutan as a model of sustainable living, cultural preservation, and spiritual depth. This image is influenced not only by Bhutan's global reputation but also by each writer's personal search for meaning, authenticity, and alternative ways of living in a rapidly changing world.

At the same time, this construction of Bhutan as an idealized cultural space invites critical reflection. The emphasis on harmony, simplicity, and spiritual richness can sometimes lead to a selective portrayal that downplays social, economic, and cultural complexities. Harisinghani's narrative, with its focus on sensory beauty and admiration, tends toward romanticization, while Zeppa's account introduces a more balanced engagement that acknowledges both strengths and challenges within Bhutanese society. Naipaul's critical exploration of South Asian identities further complicates this picture by reminding readers that no culture is free from internal tensions or processes of change. When these perspectives are read together, they reveal that cultural imagination in travel writing is both enabling and limiting: it allows writers to interpret and connect with unfamiliar worlds, yet it also risks simplifying those worlds into coherent, and sometimes idealized, narratives. Ultimately, Bhutan in these texts exists in a dual form as a lived reality and as an imagined ideal shaped by the interplay between observation, interpretation, and the broader cultural frameworks within which these narratives are produced.

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of Bhutan in contemporary travel writing is not merely descriptive but deeply shaped by cultural imagination and interpretive framing. Through texts such as *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* by Jamie Zeppa, and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* by V. S. Naipaul, Bhutan is constructed as a space marked by cultural richness, ecological harmony, and spiritual depth, often standing as an alternative to the pressures of modern, consumer-driven societies. However, these portrayals are inseparable from the writers' own perspectives, expectations, and the broader South Asian context within which they write, shaping what is emphasized and what remains less visible. Bhutan thus operates not only as a physical location but also as a symbolic landscape through which larger questions of identity, modernity, and belonging are negotiated and explored. In this sense, travel writing reveals itself as an inherently interpretive act, where observation is intertwined with imagination. By critically engaging with these narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of how cultures are constructed and communicated in literary discourse, while also recognizing the need to approach such representations with awareness acknowledging both their capacity to illuminate and their tendency to simplify complex realities.

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