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The Monarchy and the Royal Government's Approach to Development

THE year 1907 marks the beginning of a new era in the history of Bhutan. On 17 December of that year, the whole body of the clergy, the state councilors, the Chhalls of all the districts, and the representatives of the people met at Punakha and unanimously elected Tongpa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary King of Bhutan. By uniting the country and establishing a central authority, he brought peace and stability to the country and laid the foundation for the emergence of modern Bhutan. His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck is the fourth and present King of Bhutan.

Apart from the obvious objective of development to increase GDP at the national level and incomes at the household level, development in Bhutan includes the achievement of less quantifiable objectives. These include ensuring the spiritual and emotional well-being of the population, the preservation of Bhutan's cultural heritage and its rich and varied natural resources. Although it is difficult to achieve progress for everybody at the same time, the Royal Government's development strategy is based on giving equal opportunities and equitable services to all members of society throughout the country.

Over the past twenty-six years of reign, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan has, above everything else, always put the interest and well-being of the country and people first. His Majesty has and continues to emphasize on the importance of happiness over economic growth because economic growth alone does not determine happiness. Therefore, His Majesty and the Royal Government's policies are geared towards fostering and achieving "Gross National Happiness over Gross National Product."

Towards achieving this goal, His Majesty and the Royal Government, in consultation with the people has developed an overall approach based on six principles: namely self-reliance, sustainability, efficiency and development of the private sector; people's participation and decentralization; human resource development; and regionally balanced development. Although Bhutan's development has been greatly assisted by development cooperation with the Government of

India and with other aid donors, the Royal Government is determined not to perpetuate dependence on external assistance. Effort is thus being made and will continue during the eighth Five Year Plan to increase Bhutan's own technical capacity, through human resource development and effective technology transfer.

Self-reliance does not mean that Bhutan will aim to produce all its requirements but that the Government will encourage the production of those goods and services that can compete in export markets. The sustainable utilization of natural resources is of major importance in a country where the majority of the population remains dependent on agriculture for incomes and employment, and where a wide range of valuable species remains largely intact. Where capital requirements exceed the resources available locally, Bhutan will welcome foreign investment, although collaboration with foreign investors will be decided on a case by case basis.

His Majesty's endeavours are also aimed to ensure that Bhutan has a system of government which enjoys the



His Majesty Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck

mandate of the people, provides clean and efficient governance, and also has an inbuilt mechanism of checks and balance, to safeguard its national interest and security. Bhutan can draw much satisfaction that during this period, it has achieved rapid socio-economic development, which has brought about a better quality of life for the Bhutanese people, and its status as a sovereign, independent country has also been greatly strengthened.

Very few countries or political systems have experienced the kind of changes Bhutan has, where every change in the country has been initiated by the throne. The process of change, i.e. decentralization and devolution of power, was initiated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the King soon after his coronation. It has always been His Majesty's desire that the people of Bhutan decide what is best for themselves and he has endeavoured to encourage and prepare the people to participate actively and fully in the decision making process of the country. One of the first steps to this end was the policy of decentralization introduced in 1979, followed by the establishment of District Development Committees in 1981 with

members elected by the people. This policy was given a further impetus in 1991 with the establishment of the Block Development Committees in all 202 blocks.

Today, Bhutan is progressing well on the path of socio-economic development with two Five-Year Plans having been initiated at the grassroots level. The people are playing an increasingly active role in the formulation and implementation of development programmes and in bringing forward issues of national concern for discussion in the National Assembly. Popular participation in the planning and implementation of development has been ensuring that plans take account of popular concerns, draw on local knowledge and mobilize local resources for development.

The process of decentralization and people's participation were further enhanced in the Royal Kasho (Decree) of His

Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck during the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan in June 1998. The Royal Decree proposed that the Lhengyel Shungtshog (Council of Ministers) be restructured to comprise of elected Ministers and the members of the Royal Advisory Council. The Council of Ministers has been vested with full executive powers. Through this Decree, His Majesty devolved powers of the legislature by handing over the reins of governance to the Cabinet. His Majesty the King has relinquished the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers which is not to be held on a one-year rotation among the Ministers. The Chairman of the Council of Ministers is the Head of Government. All decisions adopted by the Cabinet are based on consensus. His Majesty the King is informed on all matters that concern the security and sovereignty of the country.

Bhutan at a Glance

LOCATED in the heart of the high Himalayan mountain ranges, Bhutan is a land-locked country surrounded by mountains in the north and west. It shares borders with India on the east and south and with the Tibetan region of China in the north. Altitudes range from approximately 300 metres above sea level in the south to the towering Himalayas in the north of over 7000 metres. The altitude at Thimphu, the capital is 7,700 feet.

Bhutan has four distinct seasons. Weather can vary dramatically in different areas and in 24-hour periods. The southern plains are warmer and more tropical than the higher central valleys which have temperate climates.

Since earliest times, people have been struck by the strongly egalitarian nature of the Bhutanese society. Unlike its neighbours, Bhutan has never had a rigid class system. Neither is social and educational opportunities affected by rank or birth. Bhutanese women enjoy equal rights with men, including the right to vote, and take an active part in the affairs of the country, often holding major government posts. While the family system is patriarchal, family estates are divided equally between sons and daughters. Both men and women are free to choose whom to marry and both can

initiate divorce. Bhutan has a population of approximately 600,000 people. There are a variety of languages and number of different dialects spoken throughout the Kingdom. The national language is Dzongkha, which is taught in all schools. The medium of instruction is English. "Kuensel" is a weekly publication in Dzongkha, English and Nepali. The national radio service called the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) has a daily transmission in Dzongkha, English, Sharchopkha and Nepali.

The Buddhist faith has played and continues to play a profound role in the cultural, ethical and sociological development of Bhutan and its people. It permeates all strands of secular life, bringing with it a reverence and respect for the land and the environment. The clergy which plays an important social and cultural role is headed by the Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) who enjoys a status equivalent to the King. Although Buddhism is the state religion, there is complete religious freedom in Bhutan.

Few countries in the world offer the environmental tourist quite a feast of alternatives than Bhutan. From long treks in pristine air along paths hardly walked to crystal rivers, Bhutan is defying the rest of the world in its attempts to keep its environment intact and pollu-

tion free. The flora and fauna of Bhutan is exceptionally diverse because of a great range of altitude zones and varied climate conditions. An estimated 72% of the country is covered by forests and one quarter of the country has been declared as 12 protected reserves/sanctuaries/nature parks.

The kingdom attempts to learn from other countries on how to prevent ecological and environmental catastrophes and so far this policy is paying off. Forestry is strictly monitored by the Bhutanese government and the Kingdom's mountains are, therefore, intact in its natural state. The Royal Government has also set up an Environment Trust Fund towards conservation, and preservation of the environment.

National Assembly: Like all initiatives for changes, the decision to establish the National Assembly emanated from the throne. As one of the very first of many visionary initiatives taken by the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the National Assembly was established in 1953 as a forum to discuss issues of national interest, promote public welfare and develop

political consciousness among the people so that they could pay a greater role in the governance of the country.

The National Assembly is the highest decision making body in the country and it plays an increasingly crucial role in the enactment of national laws and public policies. Its main functions are to enact, amend or repeal laws, endorse appointments of senior government officials, approve the national budget and Five-Year Plans and advise on all matters of national importance. It consists of 150 members comprising of 105 elected representatives of the people, 35 representatives of the government and 10 members of the clergy. They all serve for a term of three years. The Cabinet Ministers are also elected by the National Assembly who will serve for a term of five years. The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are elected by the National Assembly from among its members.

Royal Advisory Council: The Royal Advisory Council, which was established in 1965, is the highest advisory body in the Kingdom comprising of nine members, six elected representatives of the people, two elected

representatives of the clergy and one nominee of the government, and hold office for a term of 3 years. The Royal Advisory Councilors are also members of the Lhengyel Shungtshog (Cabinet). The important functions of the Royal Advisory Council include rendering advice to the King and Lhengyel Shungtshog on all matters of national importance, promoting the welfare of the people, safeguarding the national interests of the Kingdom, developing friendly and harmonious relations between the government and the people, and ensuring the laws and resolutions passed by the National Assembly are faithfully implemented by the government and the people.

Judiciary: All the laws of the Kingdom are codified. The judicial system is composed of a three-level hierarchy. At the lowest level, the Village Headman (Gup or Mandal) consti-

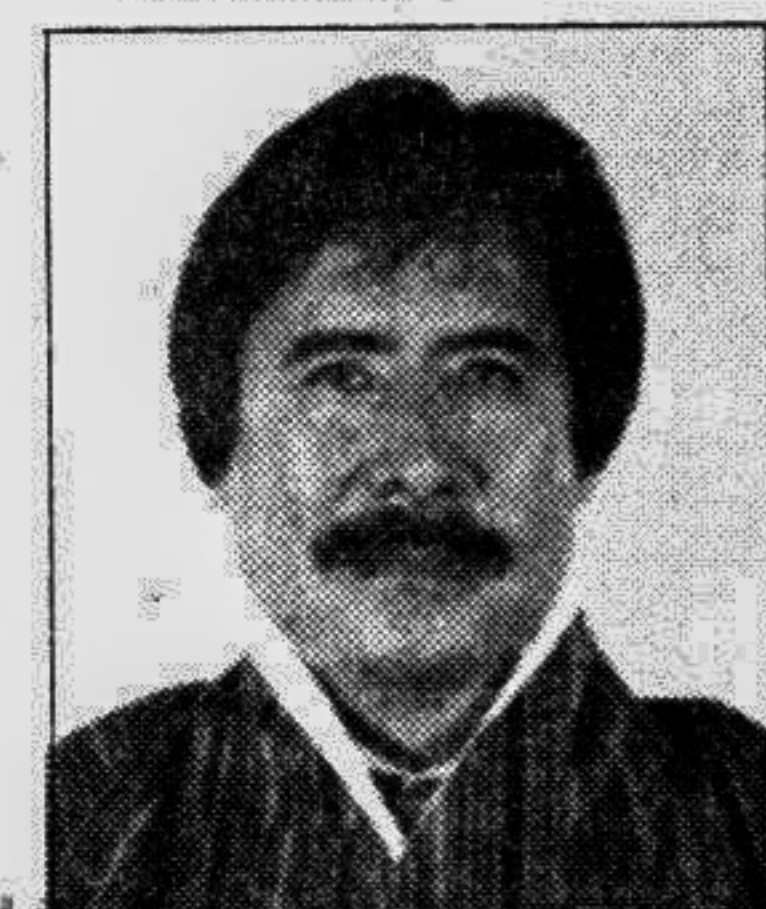
tutes the basic court. The second level is the District Court which have both original and appellate jurisdiction. Here appeals can be made against decisions of the village headman and of the sub-district courts. Each of the 20 districts has a District Court which is presided over by a Magistrate (Thrimpon) and aided by a junior assistant (Ramjam). The next higher court is the High Court, which was established in 1968 in the capital, Thimphu and consists of eight judges. The High Court is headed by the Chief Justice and serves as a court of appeal of district court decisions. It also serves as a special court for matters involving state security and has original jurisdiction on matters related to international treaties. The final appeal is made to the King, who then delegates the Royal Advisory Council to investigate and ensure that the courts have dispensed justice in keeping with the laws of the country.

MESSAGE

On 17 December in the year 1907, a historic assembly of the clergy, the official administration, and the people unanimously elected Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary king of Bhutan. In commemoration of this most auspicious occasion, the entire nation is in celebration today. On this special occasion, I would like to take this opportunity to extend our good wishes to the government and the people of Bangladesh.

experienced a spirit of trust, friendship and goodwill since my arrival in Bangladesh. I have every confidence that the existing co-operation and mutual friendship between Bangladesh and Bhutan will grow in the years ahead.

Tashi Delek!



Lhatu Wangchuk
Ambassador of Bhutan to Bangladesh

Bhutan-Bangladesh Relations

THE friendly relations between Bhutan and Bangladesh date back to the dawn of Bangladesh's independence. Bhutan was the

second country to recognize Bangladesh and ever since, the two countries enjoy relations that is based on mutual trust and friendship.

In 1980, Bhutan and Bangladesh exchanged resident Ambassadors and have since strengthened their relations and fostered close cooperation. A Trade Agreement was signed in 1980s, whereby both the countries aspire to promote bilateral trade. However, due to time involved in identifying viable transit routes actual trade did not commence until 1988. Despite a late start, trade between the two countries has developed significantly since then.

Bhutan's major exports to Bangladesh consist of fruits, fruit products, wood products, dolomite, cement, limestone, stones and boulders, calcium carbide and coal. On the other hand, Bangladesh's major exports to Bhutan consist of jute products, condensed milk, garments, edible oils, leather products, ceramic and melamine products, and pharmaceutical products. Trade between two countries over the past years has been in favour of Bhutan.

This imbalance could however be less if one takes into account the unrecorded imports by small traders and tourists who frequently visit Dhaka. It has been estimated that garments and other items, worth more than US\$ 1.5 million are imported annually into Bhutan by small traders and tourists from Bhutan. The Royal Government has made significant efforts to increase imports from Bangladesh. Ten import houses have been identified with a specific mandate for imports exclusively from Bangladesh. Several single country trade fairs are organized by the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bhutan, solely to promote products from Bangladesh in the Bhutanese market. The Royal Government has also initiated proposals to open additional trade routes to increase trade activities between Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Although the smallest of Bhutan's population and her economy have not favoured any large-scale imports, Bhutan still remains a potential market for Bangladesh products given the near proximity of the two countries and the fact that Bhutan is highly dependent on imports of manufactured and consumer goods. Consistent efforts by Bangladesh exporters to take advantage of this could increase trade from Bangladesh to Bhutan significantly.

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