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## Role of Media in Emerging Democracy of Bhutan

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### **Abstract:**

*Democratic reforms initiated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk, the fourth king, paved the way for democracy in Bhutan. However, it was only with the coronation of His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in 2006 as a fifth king that the process of democratization in Bhutan accelerated. In 2008, Bhutan joined the growing number of democracies in the world. Bhutan recently conducted its second general election on 31 May and 13 July 2013. A true democracy empowers people to voice their concerns; it demands accountability and transparency and ensures justice and equity. Being a young democratic country having weak institutions, poor accountability and low people's participation poses considerable challenges for Bhutan to achieve the constituents of true democracy. In the functioning of a democratic system media plays an important role. It constitutes the backbone of democracy. Media in Bhutan is still at a nascent stage. It was only in 2006 when some legislation was enacted in support of media, which led to its further development. Moreover, Bhutanese media has somehow bridged the gap between people as whole. For the last five years, awareness about media in Bhutanese society has increased. It has educated, enlightened and empowered the society, which is now becoming capable of enjoying the rights in a democracy. Media is helping to construct a new political culture in Bhutan. In terms of good governance, it is providing the space for public discourse and playing an important role in decision-making. So the present paper would analyse how media has created awareness among the people for strengthening democracy in Bhutan. It will focus on the role of media in democratic transformation of Bhutan.*

**Keywords:** Media, monarchy, democracy, religion, culture & society

### **1. Introduction**

The practice of oral transmission of information was a characteristic feature of Bhutanese society in the past. However, it is still strong in rural areas. Correspondence in written form was also prevailing within a limited section of society, but the literacy rate in the country was not significant. Therefore the impact of the written form of media was not so efficient<sup>1</sup>. Mapping out Growth of media in Bhutan can be draw since the mid-1980s, with the establishment of BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Services) and the newspaper *Kuensel*. While in a field of electronic it was the small information revolution that took place in the late 1990s with the introduction of television and the internet<sup>2</sup>. In the same decade, a pro democratic movement in Bhutan was at its peak, along with pressures of international organizations. Altogether it compelled Bhutan to change its approach towards the role of media in Bhutan. As a result, Monarchy government had stepped out for some liberal policy, aimed at modernization of Bhutan. Moreover, Government of Bhutan is gradually supporting and allowing the private media enterprises to fill up vacant public sphere. However, lack of infrastructure and inadequate capacity building measures are the reasons in hindering the overall development of media in Bhutan. So for Bhutan it is necessary to have a free media, which can inform, educate and enlighten the people to enjoy their rights.

### **2. Monarchy and Evolution of Media in Bhutan**

Third King of Bhutan His majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck showed firm believe towards modernizing the Bhutan's economy and open its door to the other parts of world<sup>3</sup>. Consequently royal government of Bhutan included media development policy in its five year Plan. As a result Publicity Department came into existence in 1965<sup>4</sup>. It has two schemes under it, direction and printing press. Moreover, *Kuensel* was founded as an internal government bulletin in 1965<sup>5</sup>. It was acted as an official mouthpiece of the government under the Department of Publicity. It was not supposed to generate debate on the issues of public interest. It was the fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who paved the way for modernization in Bhutan. In 1974 with the help of India, Bhutan successfully installed a press machine in Thimpu<sup>6</sup>.

Foundation of Electronic media in Bhutan was laid down in the mid-1980s, with the establishment of BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Services) and the introduction of Television and the Internet in 1990s<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, in 1986, with the establishment of a small broadcast studio equipped with a 10KW short-wave transmitter, Radio NYAB (National Youth Association of Bhutan) was renamed as Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS)<sup>8</sup>. For the development of fast communication, the India-Bhutan microwave link was commissioned in 1984 with the assistance of the government of India. Another landmark in history of Bhutanese telecommunication was the

commissioning of the Thimpu satellite earth station in March 1990. This facilitated telephonic contacts with India and other countries. In the beginning, Bhutanese government was reluctant to use its enhanced communication facilities for the public. But monarchy government felt that it would give a wider exposure to people and create problems for survival of state, particularly in the context of the emerging ethnic conflict. So in April 1989, all Television sets and private channel were banned in Bhutan. The ban was on television sets and private channels, and not on the other forms of telecommunication such as a wireless system and a medium wave radio service.

However, in 1999, the ban on Television was lifted and BBS TV was launched on June 2, 1999<sup>9</sup>. This has happened due to rapidly changing socioeconomic and political situation in Bhutan. The pro-democratic movement in Bhutan as well as pressure from international organizations compelled Bhutan to change its approach towards the role of media. Moreover, the global media has already criticized and highlighted the negative aspects of Bhutanese media as it worked as a mouthpiece of Bhutanese government.

### **3. Democratization and growth of Media in Bhutan**

In 2006 His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk the fourth king of Bhutan hands over the throne in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. His son became king on 14 December 2006<sup>10</sup>. As a part of democratization of Bhutan, the government has initiated the process of permitting privately owned newspaper. The Royal Government recognized that a professional media is an important pillar of a vibrant democracy. A free and independent media is therefore viewed not only as vital for furthering democracy, but also important for ensuring institutional accountability and transparency. As a result, some legislation in support of media came into existence. Information, Communications and Media Act 2006 was enacted<sup>11</sup>. To enforce media regulation, Bhutan information, communication and media authority act (2006) was established<sup>12</sup>. In the same year Bhutan Information Communication and Media Authority, established Code of Ethics for Journalists<sup>13</sup>. It enhanced the responsibilities of the media and the journalists. Similarly, adoption of constitution in July 2008 provided a boost to media development and its functionality in Bhutan. Bhutan media foundation was established through royal kasho (Charter February 2010)<sup>14</sup>, so that it can carry out its roles and responsibilities in the interest of democracy.

With all the support and initiative by the royal government of Bhutan had set a different path for media development. Moreover, it was necessary for an emerging democracy to give more space for media to ensure its objectives. Consequently, some private media ownership came into existence. Moreover, since 2006 print media in Bhutan has developed rapidly and now it has

Eleven newspapers on the stand. These are, Bhutan Times, Bhutan Observer, Bhutan Today, and Business Bhutan. The Journalist, Druk Neysheul, Druk Yoezer, The Bhutanese, Bhutan Youth, Druk Melong<sup>15</sup>.

### **4. Influence of media in Bhutan**

#### *4.1. Good Governance*

Bhutanese media is playing an important role in informing and educating Bhutanese society. Keeping watch on every developments taking place in the country, particularly TV, has helped in fostering public discourse and debates in a young democracy. Since the commencement of democracy, particularly the private media has played a key role to ensure transparency, fighting corruption, informing and educating people. Unlike 1990s today private newspapers are showing courage to question the government's policies and programme. Enhanced journalism and with the support of standard editorial writing it is checking abuse of power, promoting human rights and strengthening democracy<sup>16</sup>. While it is also true that not all the private media has shown the same keenness. Hereafter it is the private media that has been at the forefront of Bhutanese journalism and also behind most of the biggest stories in the last few years. Liberal approach by government ownership and a bureaucratic set up led the private media exercise unrestricted. Certainly it has brought a breath of fresh air not only to Bhutanese media and democracy, but also to the national consciousness of Bhutan<sup>17</sup>.

#### *4.2. Socio Economic Development*

The information and media industry in Bhutan has grown in up and down in the last five years, and has generated economic opportunities and created employment for many Bhutanese. As of December 2012, it can be roughly estimated that the information and media industry (excluding internet and mobile telecommunication companies) employed around 3,000 people directly, out of which BBS employed 373, newspaper agencies employed 423, and other radio stations employed 30 people<sup>18</sup>. The rest worked in films/movies, music, drama and dance, publishing, cable TV, community information centers, and other information and media-based industries (advertising, designing, training, non-governmental bodies etc.)<sup>19</sup>. In addition, the information and media industry creates numerous indirect jobs in businesses supporting its economic activity such as housing and office spaces, food and catering, transportation, finance and banking, etc. In addition to the jobs created, the information and media industry also contributes to the government exchequer through taxes, levies and fees. Details could not be furnished as determining the information and media industry's contribution to GDP was not within the scope of BIMIS 2013.

#### *4.3. Society and Culture*

Both electronic and print media continue to play an important role in shaping public opinions, society's consciousness and thinking, and the cultural environment they live in. At the same time, there is a growing concern about the adverse effects of media on youth, social behaviour, fashion, and cultural ethics, among others. Exposure to unregulated media content have resulted in adoption of western culture and have led to increase in the number of gang fights, drug addiction, and violations of social and traditional norms

particularly among youths<sup>20</sup>. BIMIS 2008 (Bhutan information and media impact study) findings showed that TV had encouraged the process of globalization and was accelerating the adoption of new ideas. The increased penetration of TV and other media in rural areas is only expected to have a profound impact on local culture and traditions. Therefore, a strong need is felt for broad-based media literacy programmes to educate the people on the pros and cons of vast media content now easily available at our disposal.

### 5. Challenges for Media in Bhutan

In Bhutan's young democracy, the media remains a relatively weak institution compared to the other three key institutions of legislative, judiciary and executive. Though media in Bhutan have expanded rapidly and shown signs of taking on the task of being a watchdog of society, most journalists are new and lack professional training. Much of media reporting lacks depth and investigation, and often falls short of providing the incisive analytical reporting that needed to be informed citizens today. Most of the media organizations are not equipped with adequate technology and infrastructure to function to their full potential<sup>21</sup>. Media organizations still lack technical know-how to understand the full potential technologies to improve their productivity. Subsequently, most of the media institutions in Bhutan are depended over government monetary support<sup>22</sup>. Lack of adequate trainings and skills has created challenges for professionalism. Moreover, media literacy amongst the population is very low, as a result the news consumers do not critically analyze what they watch, hear and read. In the absence of Right to Information Act and the inadequate system for information distribution, media organizations have challenges in accessing information from the government agencies. Media regulation is also inadequate in Bhutan. The media regulatory authority is still struggling to develop regulations for all forms of media in the country.

### 6. Conclusion

Media in Bhutan has changed through history in a rapidly changing environment. It will continue to be an important player in national development. Print media in Bhutan has shown some significant changes in short span of time, which gives a kind of insurance for a bigger change. With time, it will become more important for Bhutanese society. Print media is in its growing phase, it needs support from the policy maker as well as encouragement from civil society in Bhutan. There is an incremental change since last five years and, there will be dramatic changes in the next five years. The biggest change in the past five years is that, print media were a source of education and information in the past; they are now a critical player in the political process of an emerging democracy. The media is not just a watchdog of society, it is changing society itself. Media are constructing new realities and values and new culture. Here it is important to mention that the Bhutan has adopted democracy, but the behaviour and thinking of its functional executive, is still monarchical. It is not proactive in bringing changes, compared to other democratic countries of the world. The time will come when a new generation of Bhutanese society, having great faith in democracy will certainly change the face of Bhutan.

### 7. Notes

1. The old manuscripts, wall painting, writing on the wall of temples etc. available in Buddhist monasteries in Bhutan. Moreover for more details about evolution of media in Bhutan see, Balasubramanian. N & Nidup, Jigme. (2006), "Role of Media in the changing Socio-Political Situations in Bhutan", proceeding of international seminar on Media and public culture, Center for Bhutan studies, Thimphu.
2. Dorji, Kinley and Siok, Sian Pek. (2006), "The Bhutanese Media: In the Service of the Public in Rethinking Development", Proceedings of the second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, Center for Bhutan studies, Thimphu. p 3
3. In 1952 he initiated an intense political, social and economic reform starting with the institution of the National Assembly in 1953 as the parliament. In 1961, the first five-year development plan (1961-66) was launched with the focus on roads and social infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools. For details see, Wangchuk, Dorji (2006), "Media in the New Political Order", proceedings of Seminar on media and public culture, Centre for Bhutan studies, Thimphu.
4. During the very first five year plan (1961-66), government of Bhutan felt that a publicity department needs to be created so that activities of the development department could reach to the public. Later in 1965 it was created. For detail see 2<sup>nd</sup> FYP Bhutan(1966-71), <http://www.gnhc.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/02fyp.pdf>
5. <http://www.bmf.bt/media-in-bhutan/print>
6. Bhutan Media Foundation (June 2012), Media baseline Study, available at, [www.bmf.bt/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Media-Baseline-Study.pdf](http://www.bmf.bt/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Media-Baseline-Study.pdf). Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013.
7. Bhutan Broadcasting Service radio was initially started as Radio NYAB. It was started by a group of young volunteers, known as the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB) in November 1973. In 1979, the Royal Government recognized the importance of the radio and incorporated the radio station under the Ministry of Communications. For details see, Bhutan Media Foundation (June 2012), Media baseline study. Report available at [www.bmf.bt/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Media-Baseline-study.pdf](http://www.bmf.bt/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Media-Baseline-study.pdf)
8. Bhutan Media Foundation (June 2012), Media baseline study, p 21
9. It was also the day of Silver Jubilee celebrations of the coronation of His Majesty the Fourth King. Initially it broadcasted one hour programme in two languages, Dzongkha and English which was limited to Thimphu.
10. Gallenkamp Marian(2010), Democracy in Bhutan: an analysis of constitutional change in a Buddhist monarchy, IPCS research paper 24, March 2010, p 11

11. This act provides several positive developments in the field of information and communication. All acts of law related with media or information and communication technology are recently approved by the National Assembly and referred to in this section can be found at [http://www.bhutan.gov.bt/government/acts.php?av\\_id=0](http://www.bhutan.gov.bt/government/acts.php?av_id=0).
12. For detail description see, <http://www.bicma.gov.bt/index.php/bicm-act-2006-english>
13. Ibid, p 1
14. A detail description about Bhutan Media Foundation is available at, <http://www.bmf.bt/about-us/>. more information about Royal Kasho charter can be accessed at, <http://www.bmf.bt/wp-content/themes/bmfv2/documents/kasho.pdf>
15. Bhutan Media Directory 2014 can be found at [www.bmf.bt](http://www.bmf.bt)
16. The Bhutanese (2012), 'Private media and democracy in Bhutan', Newspaper Editorial , August 18, 2012.
17. Ibid, p77
18. RGOB (2013), Bhutan Media Impact Study 2013, Ministry of Information and Communication, Thimpu, p 77
19. Ibid, p 77
20. RGOB (2013), Bhutan Media Impact Study 2013, Ministry of Information and Communication, Thimpu, p 65
21. RGOB(2012),Media baseline study, Bhutan media foundation, June 2012, pp 27-29
22. Tshoki Pema(2013), Fate of Private Media?, August 16, 2013. It can be accessed at <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=30>

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13. Srivastava, Preeti (1978), *The role of mass media in shaping social and political attitudes and opinion: A bibliographical survey*, New Delhi, JNU.
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