

Bhutanese values: A catalyst for Responsive Leadership

Author	Abstract
<p data-bbox="272 373 711 506">Tshering Wangchuk¹, Lecturer, Norbuling Rigter College.</p> <p data-bbox="272 583 464 621">Key words:</p> <p data-bbox="272 653 711 779"><i>Tha Damtshi, Ley Jumdrey,</i> selflessness, responsive, compassion, leadership.</p>	<p data-bbox="734 373 1393 1194">Change exerts pressure on governments and leaders to respond and adapt. Therefore, governments and leaders respond differently to change and situations based on socio-political, economic and other parameters. The responsiveness and adaptability strategy result into varying outcomes. In the last two turbulent years, guided by the wisdom of the benevolent Druk Gyalpo, Bhutan responded and adapted effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this paper will study the responsiveness and adaptability of Bhutan to navigate through the turbulent years. This paper will study the Bhutan's response within the framework of the Bhutanese fundamental values and responsive leadership.</p>

Background

Buddhism helps us understand permanence of change and impermanence. It is futile to resist change and wise to respond and adapt. The analogy of grass and wind is an appropriate lesson for human beings on adaptability and responsiveness to change during turbulent situations. On a stormy day, grass gracefully bends in the direction of the wind and survive the storm. It never resists the current of the storm.

* I extend my gratitude to Dr. Biswajit Mohapattar, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India for his valuable time and comments. I also extend my gratitude to. Dr. Tandin Dorhi, President, Norbuling Rigter College for his support and guidance when writing this paper.

¹ Lecturer, Political Science and Sociology, Norbuling Rigter College

Bhutan had its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 5 March 2020. He was an American tourist. As cases started to increase in Bhutan, social issues such as dissemination of fake news, spread of misinformation, stockpiling of rations, and closure of educational institutions and gradually, the pandemic affected all the spheres of life.

Fortunately for the Bhutanese, under His Majesty's wise leadership, Bhutan devised strategies to respond effectively to the pandemic. Bhutan also looked at the pandemic as an opportunity to initiate key reforms. Against this backdrop, this paper will analyse Royal Addresses to the people of Bhutan by His Majesty, newspaper articles, government announcements, and addresses by the Prime Minister of Bhutan to the people, National Day Addresses and other relevant official state documents. The analysis will shed light on the responsive strategies embraced by Bhutan under the leadership of His Majesty. Further, this paper also will discuss the four fundamental Bhutanese values that served as a catalyst to propel responsive leadership during the turmoil caused by the pandemic.

Responsiveness and adaptability: an inherit regal attribute of Bhutanese Monarchy

Responsive leadership and adaptability are established trademark of the Bhutanese monarchy. Since, the establishment of Monarchy in 1907, each Monarch demonstrated unparalleled leadership qualities. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck exhibited the quality of a benevolent leader. And this leadership quality played a significant role in adapting to the political atmosphere of the time period which was characterized by internal conflicts and power struggle. Aris (1994) wrote:

Ugyen Wangchuk inherited the strengths and weaknesses of his father, but he seems to have rearranged these into a decisive new pattern. He consolidated the hold his father had gained on the country, using to begin with some of his father's methods, but early in his career he turned, crucially, from tactics of blunt coercion to those which promoted harmony and consensus. By doing so at a time when the shifting balance of power in Asia favoured the emergence of Bhutan as an independent buffer between India and Tibet, he was able to introduce constitutional changes that left him and his heirs triumphant and the country's survival as a sovereign state assured. (p. 75).

During the reign of King His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck, Bhutan had to respond and adapt in a new challenging political environment. According to Phuntsho (2013) King Jigme Wangchuk was in the command of the country which was at a very difficult stage of history and His Majesty faced the challenge of protecting the sovereignty of the nation with the shift of power in India in 1947, and consolidating the nascent monarchy from both internal and external threats during his reign. However, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck undertook a historic step towards framing Indo-Bhutan Treaty, 1949 and helped protect the sovereignty of the nation. Internal threats which challenged the sovereignty of the nation were also dealt with and thus, consolidated the Monarchy and the nation.

And in the mid 20th Century, with the new changes in South Asian geopolitics, decolonization and creation of new independent states and emergence of new democratic political practices, His Majesty the King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck established National Assembly and introduced the modernization processes. These reforms were new to the Bhutanese political and social setting and it significantly benefitted Bhutan to emerge from a feudal based social and political setting to a modern and democratic based society. Thus, helping Bhutan to adapt in a new global reality of the 20th Century.

The reforms introduced by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck were also appropriate to changes of his time. The establishment of local government bodies, Council of Ministers, Drafting of Constitution and establishment of democracy and framing the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness emerged as Bhutan's response and adaptation approaches. These reforms helped Bhutan to adapt in a new era characterized by increasing democratization movements, environmental destruction and social inequities. A reform of such magnitude, from a political setting which has limited prior experiences, reveals the inherent disposition of institution of monarchy to respond, adapt and survive in a global mood which is in a constant fluidity. Truly, the institution of Monarchy has been an agent of change in Bhutan which otherwise was associated with tradition and status quo.

Inspiration of Bhutanese values on responsive leadership.

His Majesty anchored on Bhutanese values to design strategies to respond effectively to turbulent times. The first Bhutanese value which underpins His

Majesty's resolve to address the issues caused by the pandemic is compassion. Compassion has been a defining value of Bhutanese leaders since the creation of Drukpa government in the 17th Century. Kinga (2008) states that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel is an embodiment of the Buddha of Compassion called *Lokesvara*. And thus, strived to promote the spiritual wellbeing of all the sentient beings. During the pandemic, His Majesty also provided leadership and protected and helped in reducing the socio-economic shock felt by the people irrespective of their income, region and profession. And in view of the difficulties caused by the pandemic, His Majesty the King directed state must prioritize addressing the issues caused by the pandemic and protecting the lives of the citizens to take precedence above other affairs of the state. As per the press release on Comprehensive National Response to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic Phase II, His Excellency the Prime Minister of Bhutan shared, "In view of the ongoing difficulties, His Majesty the King has commanded that in these extraordinary circumstances, the State must rise above all other considerations and continue to provide substantive, timely and inclusive support to sustain public confidence and build resilience in these challenging times" (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2020, p. 2). Similarly, in Royal Address to the People of the Nation, on 22nd March 2020, His Majesty mentioned in such unprecedented circumstances, that the government would take the obligation of easing any suffering to the people due to the virus. Likewise, in His Majesty's Address to the people on 12th, September 2020 His Majesty commanded for building the resilience, confidence and security of our people which must be prioritized over conserving the resources (Royal Institute of Management, 2020). This policy guidance is a result of compassionate leader. Peday (2020) wrote that His Majesty is a Compassionate Warrior King and thus, no Bhutanese were left behind, every Bhutanese were looked after and received His Majesty's care. And stated that in the present day where Social Darwinism takes precedence, His Majesty looked after the weak including the vulnerable and the elderly. Thus, His Majesty revealed himself as an exemplary leader. His Excellency Lyonpo Thakur Singh Powdyel (2021), Former Minister of Education wrote that His Majesty has challenged the orthodox notion of monarchy and revealed institution of Monarchy as a powerful force for public service and promoting national well-being.

Moored on the value of compassion, His Majesty also revived the practice of *kidu* to absorb and minimize the suffering of people caused by the

pandemic. *Kidu* is believed to have been brought into Bhutan during the 17th Century, and became a fundamental part of the political system during the 1950s when His Majesty the Third King of Bhutan begun land and social reforms (Shaw, 2015). The State of the Nation report in 2020 mentioned, "...*kidu* system – a Royal Prerogative, which literally means wellbeing, a quintessence of the sacred responsibilities and moral authority the Kings have towards the people" (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2020, p. 13).

Further, for Bhutan, *kidu* holds a key historical social, economic and political role and features prominently as a part of established practice of our monarchs. *Kidu* is also understood as a compassionate act of a virtuous leader and the institution of monarchy is inseparable from this established practice. Due to the pandemic, large number of Bhutanese people lost their source of livelihood and exposed vulnerable population to further vulnerabilities and risks. Thus, during the Address to the people of Bhutan on 10th April, 2020, His Majesty announced Druk Gyalpo's *Kidu* Relief. The Relief *Kidu* granted monthly income support to individuals and loan interest payment support to borrowers for a period of one year (April 2020, March 2021). As per the press release from Druk Gyalpo's *Kidu* Relief, Nu. 4,163.33 million has been disbursed to affected individuals as of February, 2022 (Druk Gyalpo's *Kidu* Relief, 2022). By July 28th, 2022 Druk Gyalpo's Relief *Kidu* has provided monthly income support for the past 27 months to 58, 667 people since the country was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic (Staff reporter, Kuensel, 2022). The beneficiaries of the *kidu* also included children of the citizens who were directly affected by the pandemic. However, the important lesson which emerges from granting of *kidu* by His Majesty is, *kidu* acted as a social safety net for the Bhutanese people.

The second value which guides Bhutan through the pandemic is modeled on the concept of *tha damtshig* and *ley jumdrej*. Wangyal (2010) defines *tha damtshig* as sacred commitments to others meaning that "...one must not deviate from certain inviolable actions that are deemed virtuous and honorable in society" (p. 109) and *ley jumdrej* as action and consequences of action. In Bhutanese political culture, the relation between leaders and citizens have been guided by the virtuous value of *tha damtshig*. And the Bhutanese leaders have led the nation during natural disasters, conflict and now the pandemic. During the Coronation Speech to the Nation in 2008, His Majesty reflected, "Throughout my reign I will never rule you as a King. I will protect you as a parent, care for you as a brother and serve you as a son. I

shall give you everything and keep nothing; I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it worthy to serve as an example for your children; I have no personal goals other than to fulfill your hopes and aspirations. I shall always serve you, day and night, in the spirit of kindness, justice and equality..." (Royal Institute of Management, 2018). This quote highlights His Majesty's precious thoughts on the noble role of a leader towards the nation. Evidently, during the pandemic His Majesty toured the areas severely affected by the pandemic, granted food and financial assistance, shelter and relief fund for people who lost their jobs and livelihood. Further under His Majesty's guidance, logistical support to facilitate movement of trade and people and, Bhutanese living abroad who wished to return to Bhutan were also arranged. Procurement of vaccine and vaccination of all the people living in Bhutan including entertainment programmes were broadcast by Bhutan Broadcasting Service to keep the people entertained during the lockdown periods.

Additionally, His Majesty undertook a visionary decision to build a resilient Bhutan in the post-pandemic period where His Majesty commanded citizens to be lifelong learners. Therefore, besides the tangible strategies His Majesty strived to promote to respond and overcome the turbulent years, He also reminded individuals to be open minded, become lifelong learners and embrace technology as a part of our responsiveness and adaptability skill. This guidance helps us understand His Majesty's genuine care for the citizen's welfare. His Majesty's command for the citizens to cultivate the culture of life-long learning to help adapt is not also new. During the National Day Address to the people of Bhutan on 17th, December 2018 His Majesty mentioned if civil servants fail in their duties and do not learn from past mistakes and rectify them, and remain adamant to feedback, lack accountability, remain unresponsive to new ideas and solutions and if organizations expand and increase without proper clear visions, even the best intentions will result in a devastating waste of time and resources (Kuensel, 2018).

As per the analysis of His Majesty's Addresses and Audiences with individuals from various professional and qualification background, His Majesty stressed the importance of embracing new ideas and new practices as a vital skill for the 21st Century. During the Royal Audience with the students and staff of NRC on 10th August 2020, His Majesty stressed on the importance of leveling up, which was a reference to explore, learn and

discover new ideas. His Majesty also underlined on the multi-disciplinary learning approach, encouraging students and faculty alike to focus on learning and preparing ourselves to explore life skills beyond curriculum to prepare for opportunities and success. His Majesty also shared an anecdote of Bhutanese citizen who currently works abroad in an IT firm on how the individual spend last 10 years of his life learning more about computers through online courses. Therefore, His Majesty also advised against being comfortable with the existing skills and closing our doors on learning and exploring new ideas and skills. To this end, His Majesty underscored the importance of humility in life to progress as a nation and as an individual citizen. Such precious word of wisdom and guidance by His Majesty exceeds the role undertaken by any contemporary leaders.

His Majesty allied the importance of life-long learning and the future of our nation. During the 112th National Day Address in 2021, His Majesty referenced the emergence of different technological advancements which would change the society and expressed the concern on whether Bhutanese people will be able to take advantage of those technological advancements and opportunities should we stop learning. His Majesty highlighted, "...breakthrough in technological advancement will transform the society. What deeply concerns me is whether our people will be in position to take advantage of those opportunities. Or if we will be left behind due to the inability to adapt" (Kuensel, 2021). His Majesty also pointed out about advancement of technology harnessing energy might make Bhutan lose its competitive edge and might be reliant on energy import. His Majesty also stated besides youth who are enrolled in schools and institutes there are large number of people who are working in villages and towns whose skills must be also renewed or risk becoming obsolete. His Majesty stressed on the need to renew their skills and knowledge and inculcate a culture of life-long learning. His Majesty also underlined irrespective of our socio-economic status and education qualifications the importance of life-long learning as a skill to compete and succeed. Thus, to achieve this end, skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling are underlined as important life-long learning skills to make Bhutanese citizens world-ready. Thus, His Majesty establishes an irrefutable relationship between opening up to learn and the survival of the nation in the coming decades. His Majesty the King therefore, took the opportunity of the last two turbulent years as a lesson to learn and strive towards the betterment of the country. Therefore, in this light, His Majesty passed two *kashos* (Royal Decrees) commanding reforms

in civil service and education sectors. These sacred documents are testament of a dynamic and hardworking leader undertaking and guiding a nation through a turbulent period so, the nation as a whole can overcome the barriers and emerge victorious. And it stands out as an exemplary act of a devoted leader who outperforms his mandated duties.

Based on a number of experiences from other countries during the pandemic, leaders who viewed their relation with the citizens as electoral, reciprocal and impersonal struggled to offer timely interventions. Such countries also took more time to respond to the pandemic resulting in loss of lives, disrupting and delaying the recovery efforts. Bhutan was insulated from this scenario with the zealous and diligent leadership. These unique leadership attributes of His Majesty helped Bhutan sail through the pandemic.

The third Bhutanese value, selflessness underpins His Majesty's resolve to create a resilient nation. Bhutan's journey through the pandemic has been a journey of selflessness, and His Majesty devoted to keep the nation safe and treated the nation as one big family where His Majesty placed himself in the service of the nation. Selflessness is a unique leadership attribute of our Monarchs and propels the nation through any adversaries. In the State of the Nation report, His Excellency the Prime Minister (2021) mentioned that, "Selflessness and compassion as the moral compass is what defines the Wangchuck Dynasty. Today, these divine virtues that emanate from His Majesty the King, are the foundations of our strong nation" (p.14). His Majesty's selflessness leadership provided vigor and inspiration to the nation when His Majesty frequently travelled across the nation to understand the ground realities. The value of selflessness drives compassion and unconditional devotion for the citizens.

Conclusion

The last two years have been a turbulent time for Bhutan. But Bhutan has a long history of leaders who have successfully overcome the difficulties of their time period. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck's benevolent leadership quality helped to end two hundred years of conflict, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck consolidated the institution of Monarchy and protected the sovereignty of the nation, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck opened the country for modernization processes and His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck further democratized the political system. Truly, the institution

of Monarchy had been responsive and tuned the policies and institutions to be receptive to change. And as Bhutan experienced the pandemic, His Majesty responded to it with a set of enlightened strategies to absorb and minimize the shock that it caused. His Majesty steered the nation through the pandemic keeping in the best interest of the nation. And while adopting different strategies to help the nation respond and adapt to the changing realities, Bhutanese values such as compassion, *tha damtshig*, *ley judrey* and selflessness features in His Majesty's guidance and wisdom while steering the nation through the pandemic. In doing so, His Majesty's guidance and leadership has been impactful, compassionate and apt.

References

- Aris, M (1994). *The Raven Crown: The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*. Serindia Publications.
- Bhutan Broadcasting Service. (2019). Highlights from the royal address on the 112th national day. Bhutan Broadcasting Service.
<http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=125669>
- Druk Gyalpo Kidu Relief. (2022). Press release. https://royalkidu.bt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Press_Release_21_03_2022.pdf
- Karma Phuntsho (2013). *The History of Bhutan*. Random House India.
- Kuensel. (2018, December). Translation of His Majesty The King's National Day Address –Samtse, Retrieve on December 17, 2018 from <https://kuenselonline.com/translation-of-his-majesty-the-kings-national-day-address-samtse-december-17-2018/>
- Kuensel. (2021, December). Translation of His Majesty's Address to the Nation on the 114th National Day. <https://kuenselonline.com/translation-of-his-majestys-address-to-the-nation-on-the-114th-national-day>
- Pedey, K. (2020). I hear my King calling. Kuensel Online. <https://kuenselonline.com/i-hear-my-king-calling/>
- Prime Minister's Office. (2020). National resilience fund. <https://www.pmo.gov.bt/?p=7271>
- Royal Government of Bhutan. (2020). Comprehensive national response to challenges of the covid-19 pandemic phase II.
<https://www.cabinet.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PR-Phase-2-fiscal-and-monetary-measured.pdf>
- Royal Government of Bhutan. (2020). State of the Nation. https://www.nab.gov.bt/assets/uploads/images/news/2020/State_of_the_Nation_2020.pdf
- Royal Government of Bhutan. (2021). State of the Nation.
<https://www.nab.gov.bt/assets/uploads/images/news/2021/State-of-the-nation-2021.pdf>
- Royal Institute of Management. (2018). His Majesty the King's Coronation Speech.
<http://202.144.157.211:8080/jspui/bitstream/1/583/1/His%20Majesty%20the%20King%e2%80%99s%20Coronation%Speech.pdf>

- Royal Institute of Management. (2020). Translation of His Majesty the King's Address to the People of Bhutan. <https://www.cabinet.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PR-Phase-2-fiscal-and-monetary-measured.pdf>
- Shaw, C.,B. (2015). Bhutan: Notes Concerning the Political Role of Kidu. https://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/JBS/JBS_Vol33/JBS33.pdf
- Sonam Kinga (2008). Polity, Kingship and Democracy: a biography of the Bhutanese state. Bhutan Times Ltd.
- Staff Reporter. (2022, July). Relief income support kidu extended for the needy. <https://kuenselonline.com/relief-income-support-kidu-extended-for-the-needy/>
- Tshering Wangyal (2010). Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan's Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values? https://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/JBS/JBS_Vol3No1/4.education.pdf
- Powdyel. T. S. (2021). Bhutan at her best, and for good reasons... Kuensel. <https://kuenselonline.com/bhutan-at-her-best-and-for-good-reasons/>