

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HE JIGMI Y THINLEY

The Royal Government, the people of Bhutan and I are truly pleased to extend to all of you a very warm welcome to the land in pursuit of Gross National Happiness or GNH.

We are especially honoured by the high level of official representation which include ministers, parliamentarians and senior government officials from a large number of countries.

We are equally enthused by the presence of many distinguished thinkers, academics, civil society leaders and journalists especially in light of the indispensable role of think tanks, academia, civil societies and the media in promoting good governance and ensuring democracy.

Beyond the importance you attach to the theme of the Conference, I consider the efforts you have made to travel all the way to the Kingdom of Bhutan to be a measure of your affection and support for our country as a newborn democracy.

I extend a special welcome and appreciation to HE Mr Ajay Chhibber, UNDP Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific. Inspired by the surge of democratic vigour and events in our region and mindful of the challenges faced by our countries, Ajay and I conceived the idea of the Conference a year ago in New York. We felt that such a Conference would provide a useful opportunity for various actors in our countries to share concerns, knowledge and experiences toward deepening and sustaining democracy.

Its realisation today is a source of satisfaction for both of us, and I thank him deeply for his encouragement and pivotal role in making it happen. I must also thank the UNDP offices in various countries for bringing many state and non-state actors to this Conference.

For Bhutan, this Conference is of special significance, a celebratory event indeed, as it is happening just a year after our country held its first parliamentary elections and enacted its Constitution to make it the

youngest democracy in the world. In a befitting manner, this Conference is being attended by members of the Bhutanese cabinet, parliament, civil service, judiciary, political parties, businesses, media, and NGOs. No sector of the society is irrelevant to a discussion on democracy, for democracy and good governance are not and cannot be the function of governments and politicians alone.

Being new to the ways of democracy, we look forward to interacting with all of you from outside and learning from you. I am hopeful that this Conference will enrich all of us with a deeper understanding and knowledge of democracy and how each of us can contribute to its growth and advancement in our countries.

Beyond the walls of this Conference hall, our people will be listening to the conversation we have here, as it will be broadcast later for the benefit of the public. There are also journalists from all the Bhutanese newspapers, and I know that they will share with our people the insights they gain from our deliberations. I am also certain that the journalists who have taken the trouble to come here from various other countries will ensure the reach of our endeavour to people beyond the borders of our Himalayan nation.

Bhutan became a parliamentary democracy in a way that is rare, if not entirely unique, in the history of democracies. Democracy for Bhutan, came not by the will of the people but by persuasion, persistence and sacrifice of a King who believed in the collective wisdom, the right and capability of the people to shape their own destiny. It came by virtue of our King's faith in the love of his people for their own country being no less than that of his own immeasurable devotion to his country.

It did not happen suddenly or impulsively. The transformation took place over a period of some thirty years, spanning the entire reign of our fourth ruler, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Legal instruments, institutional arrangements and administrative systems were methodically and meticulously put in place to support the progressive democratisation culminating in the parliamentary elections of 2008. These included a policy of decentralisation which placed decision making on local development matters in the hands of the

elected from the centre to the districts in 1981 and from there to the more than 200 local entities in 1991.

Among reasons why democracy in Bhutan ought to have an advantage in succeeding over other young or yet struggling democracies is because ours did not come by way of a struggle or through divisive forces, but through the most peaceful and orderly means overseen by our revered and trusted rulers.

There are no broken pieces to mend and yawning divides to bridge; no festering wounds to heal and psychological barriers to confront. Such a legacy is not easy to bear or sustain.

The challenge for the first democratically elected government is to ensure that not only must peace, stability and harmony be maintained but that democracy becomes the paradigm within which all our actions and pursuits are undertaken. It must serve to inspire and be the motivator for good governance and progress.

To this end, my government is committed to ensuring that our democracy takes root and that this transition is irreversible. Even though structurally, we have an ideal democratic architecture including a wonderful constitution, we are mindful of the all too familiar capitulation of elected leaders to forces of vested interests and resultant undermining of the laws and processes of democracy.

In the ultimate analysis, it is the people themselves who must dwell within the house of democracy or let it collapse. In truth, it is less a question of choice and more a question of capacity of the people to choose their representatives wisely and to hold them responsible and accountable.

Democracies fail not because of inherent flaws but because they fall into the wrong hands and the people are too feeble to exercise their power with firmness and unity. People in many developing economies neither understand the power and value of the vote nor are able to assume responsibilities that come with it.

Democracies go wrong not for want of good laws and systems but because of the lack of democratic culture and polity, which must sustain them. Promoting the development and nurturing of democratic culture where it does not exist is, I believe, the moral obligation of governments and leaders.

This is the biggest challenge and the most important commitment of my government. It is a commitment that succeeding governments must continue with, for raising consciousness and changing mind-sets and a way of life takes time and persistence.

As the first elected government, and in keeping with the vision of His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, it is my privilege to work towards strengthening the foundations of democracy just as it is the determination of my government to build structures and establish practices of good governance.

Although it can be argued that one is more important than the other, i.e., democracy and good governance, and that they can be realised separately, we have chosen to accept the two as being integral.

We have chosen to be led by the conviction that democratic values and processes must form the basis on which the elected shall employ the instruments of the state to serve the people. This is not to disrespect those who hold the view that the two are parallel tracks for the advancement of society and that good governance seen as the more important, can do without the other track, quite like the monorail.

In this regard, I even see the basis for a discourse on whether democracy is the essence of good governance or vice versa or that they are one and the same.

In the context of Bhutan, a country that is committed to pursuing happiness as the purpose of development, democratic practices must also be embedded in the overarching and inclusive development philosophy of GNH. I would like to later dwell a little on the relationship between democracy and GNH.

## **Global Trends Affecting Us**

Allow me then to take a brief look at the broad global currents of change, the forces that have or will affect us in critical and profound ways. Even as we embrace democracies and, in so doing, must be guided by the will of our sovereign peoples, the trajectories of our inter-dependent nations cannot be set independently and will become increasingly common as dictated by the realities of a globalised world faced with common and increasingly basic challenges of security and survival. The fate of our nations will depend on how together we can creatively face these challenges.

If we glance back at the contours of the immediate past, we see that the last century has been one of titanic wars, struggle for military supremacy and the threat of a thermonuclear end. It was a century driven by production and proliferation of weapons of destruction; competition for market access and resource control.

Sadly, little has changed. Though the world is relatively more multi-polar now, we are far from reaping the so called peace dividends we once dreamed of. It was a century of heroic and humanistic struggles for freedom whereas conflicts now are mainly centred on challenging the coherence of nations. It saw a shift towards democracy which was accompanied by improvement in the living standards made possible by science and technology as well as the freedoms for broader social and economic participation. But it was also marked by explosion of population from two billion at the end of 19th century to 6.7 billion now. Of this, 800 million are malnourished, and by 2050, nine billion will crowd this small planet.

Societies in the developed world will age and most developing countries will become younger in the early part of this century. The aging societies in the North with a dwindling work force, will be demographically different from those of the south, leading to major contrasts in care-giving and medical care, not to speak of its new economic, social and cultural consequences.

How we can square such demographic and associated disparities between the two parts of the world is challenging from a GNH point of

view. Happiness, after all, is about joyful birth and parenting, meaningful and satisfying labour, aging with contentment amid security; and dying in dignified serenity. All these require a balanced and proportional age structure.

The last century was a century of free market and liberalisation that led to a surge in deregulation, privatisation and free trade. Unconscionable exploitation of natural resources, excessive production, wasteful consumption and pollution were the manifestation of the greed that powered our market economies. Although these have led to the highest level of aggregate wealth in the world, the absolute number of people suffering from poverty and vulnerability of all kinds are at a historic peak. Resultant collapse of biodiversity and climate change are, I believe, at the root of the increasing frequency and devastation with which natural calamities are exacerbating the plight of the poor and the vulnerable in particular.

Likewise, the unravelling of the global macro-economic system and the Asian financial crisis before they had affected all of us who are integrated through trade and finance. These serve as harsh reminders of the unsustainable nature of our way of life and the need for human society to reorient and realign its values and the means by which these are to be realised.

The last century was a century of urbanisation. From 30% of world urban population in 1950, it has increased to 50% now. We are resigned to the possibility that 70% of global population will live in cities in the next 40 years. But we need not accept that development means urbanisation. Urbanisation is the result of incongruent development and can be contained through localisation of production and scaling down of huge settlements. An urban future is not so radiant if we unflinchingly calculate the cost of dysfunctional aspect of cities, from slums to crimes. The negative consequences of urbanisation in terms of ecological foot print and carbon foot print are well-known, though not taken into account in policy making. Food that sustain urban populations travel perhaps the longest distance, leading to the longest food-miles. Food is too important not to be grown in a self-reliant way

and the quantities of waste production which cannot be metabolised by the ecology of the urban, are nothing short of horrendous.

Above all, the consequences in terms of breakdown of the social links and communal affiliations through urbanisation have been no less severe, resulting in lower level of happiness in urban areas. At least, that is the early evidence from GNH surveys in our country.

The last century was a century of amazing advancement in public health engineering and bio-science discoveries. But the treatments provided were more for non-communicable diseases wrought by unhealthy lifestyle. Our lifestyles, shaped by broader systems, have imposed a hidden cost on us. Roughly 64% of global mortalities are from non-communicable diseases. Some 450 million people - 12% of world population - suffer from mental health problem of one kind or another. Given that they are preventable and avoidable, it is a sad commentary on our society. It seems evident that people will slide into unhealthy lifestyle, imposed by wider systems, at a rate that will require increasingly more treatment of non-communicable diseases, including clinical depression, costing more and more. I dare hope that we can move from a century of treatment to a century of fundamentally happy and healthy lifestyle. This is no small aspiration because it will demand a big shift in work-life-leisure balance, which in turn will demand major changes in the structure and organisation of our economy.

All these problems that we have brought with us from the last century compel us to open up new vistas of thinking and action, rather urgently. Unless we change ourselves radically, this century may prove to be terminal for human beings as a society and as a true civilisation at the very least. Democracy in this sense, must entail responsibility beyond the provision of a framework for good governance of one's own country. Democracy and democratic societies must be capable of taking into account the larger interest of human society.

In this respect, I beg your indulgence as I share some of my views for your consideration in the context of finding better frameworks of governance and democracy that incorporate GNH.

## **Orienting towards GNH**

I wish to take this opportunity to reflect and interpret democracy and governance in relation to GNH, rather than discussing elements of democracy on its own. We will have the next three days to explore conceptual and pragmatic limits of reforms and challenges in governance.

I wish to, however, connect democracy to happiness as an inclusive goal. Of all the forces that changed human society in the last century, there were two principle drivers. First, the last century was driven by the forces of democracy. Second, especially the last half of the century, was a century of GDP fetish, whereby the progress of societies were conceptualised and measured by production and consumption of goods transacted in markets. This, ironically, came at the cost of what matters most: well-being and happiness.

The philosophy of GNH as conceived by our fourth King has guided our development process for almost four decades now. His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck continues to inspire our country and those who are interested in GNH through his thoughts and public addresses on GNH that have kept alive a steady discourse here in Bhutan and around the world. The growing discourses on the subject have excited many leaders and countries especially in these difficult and uncertain times when the rationale for a paradigm shift is growing. But there are no doubt substantial challenges on its path.

Government policies, especially in democracies, must respond to deliberative preferences and choices of people. Whatever we call them – will, preference, choice – public success criterion has a major influence in shaping preferences and choices. We need to question whether those public criterion of success associated with GDP are serving us well, and whether they are orienting us towards good governance and development.

For far too long, GDP and the market have blinded us into thinking that they are the source of well-being and profound happiness. We have all succumbed to a culture of growth-mania. Our successes have been largely measured and communicated in purely economic terms.

Because of the application of GDP as the widespread criterion of success, we have been forgetful about what makes us happy, and what constitutes a happy life. This is now beginning to change.

Many academics, politicians, economists and ordinary people are not only beginning to see the disconnect between happiness and material wealth but agree on the unsustainable and dangerous path on which GDP led growth has set human society. The OECD secretariat is well advanced on a new criteria for promoting and measuring true human progress. And countries like Canada, Australia, the UK and most recently, France, have acknowledged the merit of GNH while attempting to incorporate its various elements in their public policy and programmes.

When states change the criteria for public success, define wealth in more holistic terms and give cause for public satisfaction with more sustainable and well being oriented programmes, people, I believe, will change their preferences, motives, and will.

The purpose of democracy and contents of development programmes will and must change as people consider happiness as their explicit goal in life. People will come to understand that happiness is relational rather than relative, and they will question the virtues of consumerism and will give up the self-defeating scramble for positional (status and material symbols of success) goods especially when corrected by institutions and laws. They will strike a balance between unreflective, fleeting pleasures, and deep satisfaction based on ethically legitimate reasons for happiness.

It is contested that the subjective nature of happiness cannot allow the concept of happiness to guide governance of any society.

Here, we must distinguish between subjective data and subjective interpretation of data as these are two entirely different things. Subjectively biased interpretation of data is unscientific in general just as in GNH. On the other hand, subjective data is the only data that can reflect first person account while subjective states are, by definition, not captured by objective data.

I would further argue that the category of subjective data, when appropriately elucidated, can be the primary information that represents reality of feelings and consciousness. There is no other way of knowing feelings and consciousness about happiness.

Such distrust of subjective data related to happiness can lead to negligence of happiness in governance and development planning. The process of governance disregarding subjective information can obscure happiness itself as an important object of governance. Information on the variability of happiness can be useful for evaluating various aspects of governance. Where deep unhappiness exists, surely something is wrong. We do not need to wait for a series of objective data, which by themselves cannot tell us the reality, which is ultimately subjective, of those who are suffering.

Let me finally conclude my statement. Democracies are seen as the best arrangement for protecting human freedom. The enhancement of freedom that lies at the heart of democracies begins with the idea that we have freewill and are guided by reasons. Free will and reason can be tapped to determine what we want to value and be. Giving happiness a larger focus in policy making does not conflict with rights and freedoms. Rather, in the context of GNH, a larger focus on happiness places what all beings value at the centre for policy making.