

## **Welcoming a State That Possesses the Secret of Eternal Youth! A Reflection on Bhutan's UNO Membership<sup>+</sup>**

*Sonam Kinga\**

On 21 September 1971, Bhutan became the 128th member of the United Nations Organization during its 26th General Assembly. That same day, the Kingdoms of Bahrain and Qatar were also admitted as new members. It was one of the most important days in our journey to achieve international recognition as a sovereign nation. Our membership to this international organization is an enduring legacy of the far-sighted leadership and vision of our late King His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. In this article, I will recall some important milestones on the political and diplomatic journey towards Bhutan's UN membership.

His Majesty the Late King first sent an application for our admission on 10th December 1970 to the UN Secretary General U Thant requesting him to place the application before the Security Council and the General Assembly.

His Majesty highlighted two points in the application. First, Bhutan endorses the purposes and principles stated in the UN Charter and accepts obligations incumbent upon members. Second, we 'are acutely aware of the proven value of the United

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<sup>+</sup> My main source of information for this article is *Kingdom of Bhutan at the United Nations, Vol.1*, compiled by Lyonpo Dago Tshering, 2015. I also draw from my earlier books and articles as well as official websites of the United Nations.

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Nations Organization to small and developing nations of the world...'

Two important events precede the submission of this application. One, Bhutan had already become a member of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) on 7th March 1969. The UPU, which was founded in 1874 was the second oldest international organization. It had 131 members by 1969. Becoming a member to this organization with the assistance of India was very symbolic in our journey to UN membership since the UPU had become a specialized agency of the UN by 1948. The Colombo Plan, which was the first international organization that Bhutan joined in 1962 was not such a UN agency. It had initially only 7 members which later increased to 27. It was also meant to be a time-bound organization with a life-span of six years but was renewed and later became a permanent organization. Bhutan became the 15th member with the sponsorship of Government of India. The Republic of Korea joined Colombo Plan the same year that Bhutan did.

Two, even before Bhutan became a member of the United Nations, Deputy Chief Secretary Sangye Paljor was appointed as Bhutan's Permanent Representative to United Nations as well as the Minister of Communications. This appointment followed the vote in the 32nd session of National Assembly on 5th May 1970. Although we were not a member of the UN yet, His Majesty the Late King was preparing us much ahead.

His Majesty's application was circulated twelve days later, i.e. on 22nd December. A Committee for the Admission of New Members was set up on 9th February 1971 during the 1565th meeting of the Security Council as required under rule 59 of its provisional rules of procedure. This was the first meeting of the Security Council that year as well as the first meeting after the circulation of Bhutan's application.

It recommended that the Security Council should accept Bhutan's application. The Security Council voted unanimously

the following day, i.e. 10th February to recommend the General Assembly that year to admit Bhutan as a member. Hence, it is important to note that an important milestone in our membership to UN took place more than seven months before 21st September.

Besides the five permanent members of the Security Council, the following were the ten non-permanent members which supported Bhutan's application. Argentina and Nicaragua represented the Latin American and Caribbean countries, Poland represented Eastern Europe, Italy and Belgium – Western Europe, Japan and Syria – Asia and, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Burundi – Africa. India and Pakistan were invited to participate in the discussions without voting rights.

Resolution 292 of the Security Council of 10th February 1971 reads,

The Security Council,

Having examined the application of Bhutan for admission to the United Nations,

Recommends to the General Assembly the Bhutan be admitted to membership in the United Nations.

The statements made by the members of the Security Council after the vote reveal how each country reflected strongly, amongst others, on the merit of Bhutan's culture, tradition, Buddhism and a democratic monarchy as the basis of their support for our application. I will quote a few relevant parts of the statements.

British Ambassador Sir Colin Crowe said, 'The other outstanding influence on the life of the people of Bhutan has been the Buddhist religion. Today, no less than in the past, it directs their lives as obviously as it inspires their beautiful architecture...' The reference to our architectural heritage was also made by the French Ambassador Mr. Kosciusko Morizet.

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He said, 'Until very recently few travelers, or at least few Westerners, have had the rare privilege of admiring these grandiose landscapes and these well-known monastery-fortresses, the dzongs, whose formidable silhouettes dominate the important strategic mountain passes.'

Belgian Ambassador Mr. Longerstaeey stated, 'True to the most noble of Buddhist traditions, it has preserved its cultural and religious development from foreign influence and thus consolidated its political independence. Its spiritual teachings have constantly inspired and oriented the beneficent action of the sovereign and of the Government, particularly the humanitarian field, in the emancipation of women and in agrarian reform.'

The Japanese Ambassador Mr. Tsuruaka recalled how two distant countries are closely connected and that our ancestors were already linked by the sixth century. 'The link was made possible through the religion and civilization of Mahayana Buddhism.'

The Italian Ambassador Mr. Vinci said, 'Bhutan (has) strongly asserted their independence throughout the centuries – a country respectful of its religious, cultural and national heritage.' He was very generous with his statement when he said, 'We think the world civilization can only gain from the riches of Bhutan's culture and tradition.' Similarly, the Argentinian Ambassador Mr. Ortiz de Rozas also spoke about how Bhutan 'based upon its tradition and culture, will spell a valuable contribution to the cause of peace in the world.' The same argument about UN benefiting from Bhutan's culture and tradition was made by Ambassador Morizet of France. 'For its part, the United Nations can benefit from a closer co-operation with a country that is imbued with the Buddhist spirit of tolerance and respect for life. Some contend that our Organization has aged prematurely. How should it fail to hasten to welcome a State possessing the secret of eternal youth?'

Ambassador Morizet goes even further by quoting a Bhutanese proverb. 'When a Bhutanese draws a sword, the entire valley trembles. We are nevertheless convinced that Bhutan is a peaceful country. It is true that this 'land of the dragons' carries on its flag the image of a redoubtable beast. But we know that the image is white, the colour of purity.' Ambassador Savage of Sierra Leone also made references to Bhutan as a 'small, peace-loving country.'

The Ambassador of USA Mr. Charles W. Yost, who was also the President of the Security Council said, 'Although Bhutan is a relatively small country, it has long prided itself on its cultural traditions and its strong sense of national identity. In recent years not less than three different United States ambassadors have visited Bhutan. They have all been impressed by the beauty of the country and by the determination which it is demonstrating in its efforts to achieve economic development while simultaneously preserving Bhutan's rich traditions and culture.'

Ambassador Crowe of the United Kingdom had also said, "Under a democratic Monarch and his accomplished Queen, the Bhutanese have already taken several important steps forward on the world stage." Likewise, Ambassador Morizet of France reflected on Bhutan's democratization process. 'But no one will regret that in the last few years Bhutan has made a spectacular step forward toward democracy and economic and social progress...'

Mr. Sen from India recalled the special ties of friendship between the two countries and how India supported Bhutan's membership to Colombo Plan as well as the UPU. He said that the Council's decision to support Bhutan's candidature for admission to the United Nations 'is a final manifestation of Bhutan's independent stature and nationhood. He also reflected on the natural beauty of Bhutan, the charm and gentleness of Bhutanese people as well as India's 'unqualified

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confidence in Bhutan's ability to fulfill the obligations of the Charter as a member of the United Nations...'

The significant element in most of these statements is the close relationship seen by the members of the Security Council between Bhutan's culture, tradition and Buddhism with our national identity, independence and sovereignty. We can never lose sight of such perspective, and hence must be guided by the vision of all our successive Kings which posit culture and tradition as key to our identity and survival. It is also noteworthy that the members were very mindful and appreciative as early as 1970s about Bhutan's democratic monarchy.

In its 1934th plenary meeting on 21st September 1971, the 26th General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously endorsed Bhutan's membership. There was no vote cast. It was a unanimous decision. Resolution 2751 of the General Assembly states,

The General Assembly,

Having received the recommendation of the Security Council of 10 February 1971 that Bhutan should be admitted to membership in the United Nations,

Having considered the application for membership of Bhutan,

Decides to admit Bhutan to membership in the United Nations.

The delegation to this General Assembly was led by His Royal Highness Prince Namgyal Wangchuck. In his address to the United Nations at 5 pm that day, he stated, 'This is a historic occasion for us and marks the realization of one of our most cherished dreams' and thanked all members particularly the Republic of India for supporting Bhutan's admission into 'this free association of sovereign countries.' He also highlighted our commitment for the 'importance of preserving our national identity by retaining the best in our culture and tradition,' even as we are committed to modernization. He also spoke about

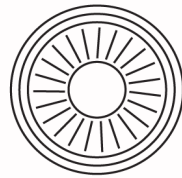
democratization process in the country under the personal leadership of His Majesty the Late King. Likewise, he expressed Bhutan's confidence 'in its ability to participate as an active and useful member.' The first statement of Bhutanese delegation at the UN thus echoes the very basis on which the Security Council recommended our admission: culture, tradition, Buddhism, peace etc.

After Bhutan's admission, UN Secretary General U Thant came out in front of the UN building to raise our national flag as well as that of the Kingdoms of Bahrain and Qatar. His Majesty the Late King hosted a special reception in Thimphu to celebrate our membership.

True to the expectations then, Bhutan has taken its obligations seriously. For example, we served as Chairman of the Asian Group in 1976, and as Vice President of the 30th General Assembly in 1977. Under the leadership of His Majesty the King, we are already making significant headways to participate in peace-keeping missions. The blessings of the Triple Gem and tutelary deities, good fortune of our people and particularly the leadership of our monarchs have ensured that our smallness have not prevented us from fulfilling our huge international commitments as responsible members of the international community.

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