

**Keynote Address at the Opening of the Second International
Seminar on Bhutan Studies, '*Media and Public Culture in
Bhutan*'**

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The theme chosen for the seminar caught my attention right away. It is timely and relevant, for with the compelling changes that have been set in motion in Bhutan – the impending transition from the security umbrella of an enlightened Monarchy to the rough and tumble of democratic governance, the impact of new instruments of information dissemination, TV and the internet, two private newspapers, and so on – we are witness to a definite concern expressed on the influences that these may have on Bhutan's public culture, its national culture.

The term 'Public Culture' has obviously been chosen by the Centre with a purpose. We are not talking here of that inner refinement that characterizes a so-called 'cultured' individual; rather, public culture would be that system of values and norms that comprise the cultural component of national identity, in the way in which the citizens of a nation, individually and collectively, think, perceive and express themselves, the way we educate our children, and the instruments we employ for this purpose. It pervades and defines our politics, society and rhetoric, and in that sense is a source of identity.

The other element in the subject of our seminar is the media. A fundamental institution of democratic governance, the media reflects public opinion, but also plays a vital role in creating and shaping it. Some may argue that the media, to be truly free, should not be restricted by cultural constraints.

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I am unable to agree with this view. An enlightened media should strive to inform the public, to create and sustain as wide a range of interests as possible and encourage debate – all of which involve accurate and impartial presentation of news and views and evaluation of conflicting ideas, but within – and this is crucial – the public culture of the society it serves.

Because the cultural roots of any society go deep in religion, history and the environment, Bhutan, being a small society, derives strength from its distinct cultural identity. And this identity reflects in all aspects of public life: in the market and in street corners, in cinema, sport, entertainment – and the national media. Traditional religious performances are as much a part of public culture as editorials in the newspapers.

Popular taste is an index of culture, but it changes and is affected by new values emanating out of print media, television, internet and cinema, reflecting the reach of consumerism and global trends. Are we seeing a conflict between a globalized, generalized, essentially western-oriented culture and a regional, distinctively Bhutanese one that we would wish to preserve and see develop?

In New Delhi, as you enter the building that houses All India Radio, the following quotation by Mahatma Gandhi catches your eye: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”

No culture can flourish if it attempts to be exclusive. The point then is to see public culture not as a given, static entity but as a developing, living set of values that allows us to respond to our environment meaningfully. The national media in Bhutan in its myriad forms – traditional, folk, print or audiovisual – has an important role to play in supporting such a culture, besides reflecting it. What is then important is the media’s code of ethics: it should not lose itself to the

demands of the market and the politics of the day or, for that matter, to cultural dogmatism and an urbanized syndrome. It then promotes a culture of escapism that is limited and partisan, that cannot be termed a public culture. How this can be done will undoubtedly be the subject of many of the presentations at this Seminar. It is not an easy task, but under the guidance by His Majesty's vision of maximizing the Gross National Happiness of his people and given their faith and firmly rooted traditional values that are constantly reinforced in daily life, I, for one, am confident of its success.

I would have liked nothing better than to sit and listen to the galaxy of distinguished speakers assembled here. If other demands on time will not permit this, I will look forward to reading the proceedings of the seminar in print, and I do hope that the Centre will bring out a publication on these important questions. It has been a privilege and pleasure for me to be able to join this distinguished gathering this morning and I thank the Centre for Bhutan Studies for giving me this opportunity.

Thank you and Tashi Delek.

