

## Believing in a Vision

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Bhutan is poised on the precipice of a new chapter of history, an era personified by the kingdom's fifth Monarch, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. The Royal vision focuses on a Bhutan of the future, nation-building with fresh perspectives and progressive ideas. It is an era that is being designed and constructed.

Transformation is already in motion – reform of government and society – with a special emphasis on a new mindset and work culture. Today's generation of Bhutanese is challenged to revitalise the traditional Bhutanese *ngar* (tempered resilience), adopt the marvels of the fourth industrial revolution, and draw on the wisdom of the ages that cultivated the Bhutanese system which has evolved but fundamentally not changed.

It is a century-old tradition that the broad and long-term vision for the nation is conveyed and driven by the Monarchs. With the celebration of National Day being shared nationwide by print and radio from the 1970s and then televised and livestreamed since 1999, the Royal address became an important inspiration for the nation's priorities. In recent years, with Bhutan leaving behind a culture of complacency to strive for a global level of excellence, His Majesty The King's Royal addresses have grown in urgency. They have culminated in specific commands and kashos (Royal decree) for far-reaching reform.

The Royal vision for transformation has echoed with convincing consistency in His Majesty's Royal addresses. On December 17, 2023, His Majesty announced a major new stride in the transformation process – the establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City as a Special Administrative Region. His Majesty described this moment as an inflection point in Bhutanese history – a powerful prompt for a generation of people now taking up the mandate of nation-building.

Bhutan, which redefined the concept of human development, is redefining the concept of a modern sustainable city. Gelephu Mindfulness City is unique because it is a city for human society as well as wildlife and nature,

in a wholesome ecological balance. Modern suburbs are to merge with natural flora and fauna, high-tech transportation systems enhance niche agricultural production, custom-designed bridges criss-cross the natural snow-fed rivers and streams, traditional architecture frames modern living spaces, and electric cars run side by side with wild tigers and elephants.

Is this a turnaround from GNH? No, it is not. In 1979, His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck coined Gross National Happiness as a pun on a world enamoured with Gross National Product. As early as 2007, His Majesty The King said that what GNH is will never change but how we achieve GNH will. This is what is happening in the Gelephu Mindfulness City.

Gelephu Mindfulness City is a valid interpretation of Gross National Happiness. It is GNH interpreted into urban living. Many people misunderstand GNH merely as an alternative to materialism, missing the essence of this profound concept. GNH, which is an expression of the Bhutanese values that evolved over the centuries, remains relevant as a higher vision for human development; it is a stimulus that is needed more than ever.

His Majesty, who has publicly declared his own conviction for the vision, is personally guiding a team of Bhutanese and international experts to develop the city as a Special Administrative Zone with an independent administrative system and investor-friendly laws. Having drawn lessons from Special Economic Zones and Special Administration Zones that have seen various degrees of success and failure, the Gelephu Mindfulness City, according to veteran planners, is one-of-a-kind.

A team of eminent Bhutanese officials and experts are involved full-time with the groundwork as the concept of a mindfulness city takes shape. There is a growing traffic of visitors who are builders, economists, planners, and potential investors in the Gelephu Mindfulness City. These visitors range from global personalities arriving in private aircraft to prominent members of Bhutan's business community to Bhutanese and international media professionals and influencers. The story is being told.

From a vantage view on a ridge overlooking the southern flat lands of Gelephu, small landlocked Bhutan suddenly feels like a vast land, extending

as far as the eye can see. The Gelephu Mindfulness City is not an overnight decision to urbanise and convert the countryside into towns to facilitate commercial activities. Nor is it a corner city in Bhutan. It is a gateway to the region and to the world, linked by road, rail, and international aircraft that land on a modern runway which cuts through the green fields.

The aerial perspective shows the gentle slopes to be transformed into an ideal habitat where man and nature exist in balance. Early designs convey an image of a city of modern suburbs intermittent among fertile farmlands, pristine foliage, and rich forests which are home to a diverse range of wildlife. Communities live and work in innovative structures of mud and stone, wood and bamboo.

It is also natural that there is anxiety among citizens, given the magnitude and pace of change that Bhutan's transformation represents. There is fear of the unknown because there is much that we do not know. This can be provoked - in fact, it is being fanned - by gossip and rumour towards negativity and suspicion.

The reality is that it is not possible for everybody to understand everything, especially at an early stage of a vision of such proportions. But it is a conversation that must go on, with hope and enthusiasm rather than doubt and scepticism. The task has just begun.

A related challenge compelled by national transformation is that the situation forces a deep look at Bhutan's own credibility as a nation. The previous tourism slogan, "Happiness is a Place" was a claim that worked for tourists on a short break in Bhutan which is the Himalayas at its best. The current brand and tagline, "Bhutan Believe", takes reflection among Bhutanese to a deeper level. We are not asked to believe for the sake of believing. We are asked to recognise the sense of trust, awareness, ambition, adventure in "Believe" as an aspiration and inspiration. We are asked to believe in ourselves, in our worth, in our future, with hope and confidence.

"Bhutan – Believe" comes as a vital necessity at a time when Bhutanese society is grappling with tensions and problems caused by a credibility gap and trust deficit. It was introduced as a time when the post-Covid atmosphere was tainted by an economic battering and unprecedented out-migration of Bhutanese seeking jobs overseas. For a society which has

seen the rifts of party politics, “Believe” is a reminder of the vision of a “dependable and trustworthy” society. It conveys a strong sense of national cohesion.

We need to believe in a vision that we know is designed for Bhutan. It is the goal for change, evolution, and transformation into a new reality. It is a vision that will not just happen. “Bhutan-Believe” has to be a shared consciousness and, therefore, a shared identity. It is a vision that will be achieved only when we ourselves believe in it.