

His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

Translation of the National Day Address

17 December 2023

It is awe-inspiring to see our people arrive from the night before and wait in the cold outdoors, to celebrate National Day at the stadium. There can be no better demonstration of the Bhutanese people's love and loyalty for the nation. This year's National Day is truly special – Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother, who is 93, made it a point to be here in person, along with His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and Their Majesties the Gyalpums. On this auspicious occasion, I want to offer my deepest respects to His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo.

First, I want to know if you have heard about the development of a new city in Gelephu. Good, I'm pleased that the community representatives I met over the year have kept you well informed. Today I want to formally share plans for the new city in Gelephu to establish an economic hub for Bhutan. It is important that you fully understand why we are embarking on this national initiative.

South Asia is experiencing an unprecedented economic transformation. This is a period of growth and a period of immense opportunities for our region, which is home to around two billion people. The land connection from Gelephu or Samdrup Jongkhar through Assam and Northeast Indian states, to Myanmar, Thailand, to Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, is a vibrant economic corridor linking South Asia to Southeast Asia. We are in a unique position to reap great benefits if we seize the opportunity, make good plans, and work together diligently.

Some have suggested that we export high value Bhutanese products, like Bumthang honey, organic fruits and mushrooms to niche markets in the Middle East, Singapore or Japan. Such efforts may help but they won't bring us sustained prosperity.

I empathise with our youth who are at a crossroads. Given limited opportunities at home, they are faced with the challenging decision to move abroad for better incomes. Even our professionals— doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, lawyers, architects and engineers, are in a similar position. Separated from their families and friends, they make sacrifices to venture abroad for the sake of their children's future.

Our challenge is that we have barely 700,000 people in our country. Unless we find the right solution, our population may dwindle to the point when we have more shops than customers, more restaurants than diners, and more houses than tenants. Guided by our collective aspirations and concerns, a clear path unfolds before us. Our immediate goal is for Bhutan to become a developed country.

To our fellow Bhutanese living abroad, know that you are always in my thoughts. You are part of the reason why we conceived this Gelephu project. Even though you are away from home, I know your hearts are with us in Bhutan. You yearn to be home with your family and friends. If you could choose, you would be here. The Gelephu project is to enable you to return. In the meantime, please work hard and gain knowledge and skills. Your experience and exposure overseas will be invaluable for Bhutan as we build our future together.

Over the years, I have met thousands of young people. I have urged you all to study and work hard and contribute as responsible citizens. My one regret has been that I could never tell you your future in Bhutan is assured. I want to change that. Young people should be excited for the future. You should look forward to it with confidence.

As we start such an ambitious project, all our efforts and prayers will be for its success. Some of you may also have concerns about whether Bhutan are ready and able to carry out such an endeavour, and whether everything will go according to plan and bring desired results. When we set a path for ourselves, it is good to have legitimate concerns. But we must not hesitate. It is in our own hands to determine our success.

Will we succeed? Yes, we will succeed.

It is far easier to draft good plans and frame good policies than to come up with the right strategy and even more difficult to formulate new ones. Small countries like Bhutan can swiftly innovate and implement what other countries might hesitate to pursue or fail to achieve.

We will establish a Special Administrative Region (SAR) in Gelephu. As our economic hub, the SAR will have the autonomy to formulate laws and policies that are needed. It will have executive autonomy and legal independence.

Many countries will be observing us with close interest. Many large and industrialised countries may find themselves unable to implement an enterprise of this scale and ambition due to the lack of internal consensus, deliberate obstructions, and conflict of ideas among vested interest groups.

Bhutan is in an enviable position. We can capitalise on the inherent strengths of small nations to be more flexible and agile. Above all, we are blessed with the harmony and trust between the King, government and people that binds us all together in a single vision. I have previously spoken about the many opportunities we are afforded due to our ability as a nation to exercise our Sovereign Prerogatives. The SAR in Gelephu exemplifies this.

We build on the strong foundations laid by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. Bhutan is globally renowned for Gross National Happiness (GNH) and our strong spiritual heritage. We are known as a country with a high level of credibility. Under His Majesty's wise leadership, Bhutan is admired for safeguarding our culture and traditions, distinct national identity and values, as well as our pristine ecology. Without the goodwill and high regard Bhutan inspires, we would have never been able to embark on such an endeavour.

I will be personally involved as we strive to accomplish all our goals, with no qualms or hesitation. We will engage the brightest and most competent Bhutanese as well as the best foreign expertise.

The purpose of establishing this SAR is to create a vibrant economic hub. There are economic hubs elsewhere that invite foreign investment by providing a conducive business environment and compelling incentives. Bhutan's economic hub will offer all that and more. It will be one-of-a-kind, anchored on the vision and values of GNH. It will be a Mindfulness City, encompassing conscious and sustainable businesses, inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage, and distinguished by the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity.

Some of us may worry about an influx of foreigners into our country. Those are valid concerns. However, for the project to succeed, it will be necessary to attract adequate foreign investors and expertise. We will put in place an effective screening process to ensure that the companies and people who come to Gelephu are sensitive to our culture and traditions, respect our identity,

and share our values. All businesses will be based on invitation, and we will select those that are most beneficial for our country and people.

The Gelephu Mindfulness City will cover an area of 1000 sq kms, or 250,000 acres. This is only 2.5 percent of the total surface area of Bhutan. Yet it will bring vast benefits for the entire country.

Some people may ask: why only Gelephu? Why not all 20 dzongkhags, or existing towns like Thimphu and Paro? It is said, when you are thirsty, you do not jump into the river. We must be cautious and weigh the associated risks and benefits when we embark on an important initiative like the Gelephu SAR. A great deal of thought and planning went into developing this project. From studying why many countries who tried failed to establish economic hubs, we learnt that in most cases, they were disrupted by conflicts that arise when large fortunes are at stake. Political interference, greed, opportunistic behavior, short-term thinking and, ultimately, corruption derailed their best plans.

We don't want to do the same. By focusing on a single area like Gelephu, we will be able to insulate the economic hub from undue influence, ring-fence it to contain the risks, and manage it closely. While the project will be implemented in Gelephu, the economic benefits will accrue to people in all our dzongkhags.

Some will ask how the project will benefit us personally, our families, and our children. The establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City will involve major investments in public infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and airports. With inflow of foreign investments, there will be construction of offices, residences, schools, hospitals, and businesses such as shops, restaurants, and hotels. The growth in economic activities will offer greater opportunities to the private sector.

Economic growth will generate demand for goods and services. The benefits will encompass all dzongkhags, especially farmers, providing niche and lucrative markets in the country for all our products. With FDI, there will be more jobs for the youth, with international salary scales and greater access to technology and skills. A flourishing economy means that our people need not always think of migrating and the government coffers will be in a better state to distribute wealth more evenly to our people.

I want to emphasise three immediate priority areas that will support the Gelephu project: Energy, Connectivity, and Skills.

First, we need to further expand our energy sector. We should tap all available sources including solar, wind, thermal and hydropower. Considering our current expertise, we need to enhance the installed capacity of hydropower by expediting the construction of projects such as Kholongchu, Chamkharchu, Dorjilung, Nyera Amari, Wangchu, Bunakha and Sunkosh, for which Detailed Project Reports are ready. Our electricity prices should be among the most competitive in the region so that our hydro resources are not just a source of revenue, but also an enabler of other investments.

Second, we need efficient and reliable connectivity, which is critical for a landlocked country. This includes constructing the international airport in Gelephu for which the ground breaking ceremony will be held later this month. Our experts tell us that the airport construction can commence after the monsoon season in 2024 and be completed within 2 years.

I am also pleased to share that during my recent visit to India, the Government of India expressed their full commitment to improve and expand the major roads leading to Bhutan.

They also pledged to connect two or three of our border towns with railway lines. I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Government of India for their continued goodwill and support.

Digital infrastructure and digital connectivity is equally important in this age of artificial intelligence. We have to improve our digital infrastructure and mobile, internet and satellite connectivity.

Third, to ensure that our people do not miss out on this great opportunity, we will prioritise building up the skills of our people. In turn, our people must take advantage of every opportunity to equip themselves for success. What we lack in numbers we have to make up for in the abilities and talent of our people.

Some will think that the main goals of the Gelephu project are to attract investments, boost trade and businesses, and create employment. While these remain important, the larger vision of all our endeavors is to serve and protect our three precious jewels: our inheritance- Bhutan, our spiritual legacy of Ugyen Guru Rinpoche and Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyel, and thirdly, the future of our children. It is our sacred responsibility to safeguard our three jewels.

His Majesty the Third Druk Gyalpo opened our country to progress and modernity with the construction of the first motor road between Phuntsholing, which was a mere tract of forest, and Thimphu, which was largely rural. This economic lifeline, built with the sweat and toil of our ancestors, has transformed the nation in a single generation.

The peace, happiness and stability that our generation enjoys today is the legacy of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and His generation.

Future generations will ask about the achievements of the Fifth Druk Gyalpo and our generation. We cannot tell them that we merely held on to what we have inherited and failed to build anything noteworthy in our time.

We are a small landlocked country wedged between large and powerful neighbours, living in an era of rapid and unpredictable global changes. If our efforts are lackluster, our future will be in peril.

However, we are blessed with an incredible opportunity to build our own legacy. We have a noble vision backed by a clear idea, at the right time. I am fully confident that we will succeed. My confidence comes from my deep and abiding trust in our people. Bhutanese are loyal, responsible, capable and resilient. They are innately intelligent, and adept at learning new ideas and care deeply about our country and our future.

Furthermore, with the incredible amount of work already done to develop the Gelephu project, I trust our vision and our strategy. Bhutan is a country of destiny, and I trust destiny. We are embarking on this task in the service of our people and nation. Our Guardian Deities will continue to guide and protect us.

During my reign as King, and for our generation, this is one of the most significant undertakings. It is an inflection point, a moment in history that is very important for us.

This is a mandate and opportunity for us all – the King, the government, and the people to join hands and work tirelessly to pave the road to the future. Gelephu will become a gateway connecting Bhutan to the world and the future. The road we have chosen is a gateway to the world– to markets, capital, new ideas, knowledge, and technology towards our future, and– to chart our destiny.

Our responsibility is not just for the immediate future. Four hundred years ago, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel built the nation state of Bhutan, and his legacy, our inheritance, remains intact to this day. Let us build a legacy that will continue to benefit Bhutanese 500 years into the future. Are you ready to shoulder this responsibility with me?

I became King at 26, and now I am 43 years old. I will do everything in my power to realize this vision. I will put my own life on the line. And I will do it for your sake. Because you are an extraordinary and noble people. You are extraordinary in your devotion to one another and your love for the country.

Let us work together with fearless determination to build an extraordinary legacy during my reign, and for the next generation.