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## Bhutan: In praise of Gyalpo IV - Update No. 114

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Bhutan celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of Gyalpo 4, the father of the present King in a grand manner on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. A series of celebrations is being planned for the whole year. A book that is a collection of articles by various important people who had known the King with the title "The Bodhisattva King" by Tshering Tashi and Thierry Mathou is soon to be released.

Some extracts from the book have already come out in the media. One such article was from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who had spent some time in Bhutan after her marriage. In paying a tribute to Gyalpo she said that the greatest tribute that could be given (to him) is not anything that could be written in a book but in the Gross National Happiness he has made possible for the people.

This is very true. In a survey done recently on the gross national happiness, it was found that 91.2 percent of the people in Bhutan are very happy and indeed this is the best tribute the former King could have had from the people. The survey was multi dimensional that took into account many aspects of the life of the people, governance, health, living conditions, harmony with environment and above all governance per se.

Many years ago, when Gyalpo 4 presented the concept of Gross National Happiness- there were not many takers. There were doubts- how happiness that is subjective could be measured? Now the view is coming round that GNH is more important than the GNP and it is being internationally acclaimed as a concept worth trying.

To me personally, the greatest contribution of Gyalpo 4 to Bhutan is the way he pushed the country into a democracy when the people were not willing or ready to accept it. The King could have continued with the old order for as long as he wanted. He realised the importance of

people's participation and the need to go with modern times.

It was very inspiring to see an editorial in one of the newspapers in Bhutan on its parliament. It said that the Parliament was growing day by day in confidence and strength. There is an improvement in the quality of discussions and more importantly the legislative research that goes into such discussions. This is admirable indeed.

I often compare Bhutan with Maldives that introduced democracy more or less at the same time. While Bhutan has progressed under the able guidance Gyalpo 4 and the present King, Maldives is sliding back and turning to be an autocratic regime.

Gyalpo 4 always surprised me. He had just reached a youthful 60 now, yet he abdicated his throne to his young son many years ago. In his a final decree before he abdicated he made a moving declaration and I quote "I repose my full faith and belief in the people of Bhutan to look after the future of our nation-for it is the Bhutanese people who are the true custodians of our tradition and culture and the ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty and continued well-being of the country"

In two other areas Gyalpo IV had made lasting contributions to the well-being of Bhutan. One was on the environment and the other was on the foreign policy. Today Bhutan has retained 72 percent of forest cover of which 60 percent comes under protected areas. He was one of first persons to ban the use of plastics.

In the field of foreign policy, he realised the importance of maintaining good relations with India and Bhutan has benefitted in being close to India. It is not that Bhutan was ever a client country, but he saw to it that Bhutan maintained its independence, sovereignty and integrity and at the same time took care of India's security interests. Bhutan gained where Nepal failed and it is there for all to see how Nepal failed to manage its relations with India. (See the update no 113 -Note 752 of 20 November in this site)

If there is one area where the former King could have done better was in the refugee crisis in southern Bhutan. I personally felt that he could have shown more compassion. Generally speaking, save for a few bad coins, the Lhotsampas (people of Nepali origin) were honest, innocent and hardworking. They had to languish in eastern Nepal for many years before US and other western countries agreed to settle them in. Today over 100,000 refugees have settled abroad with the bulk going to the United States. There are hardly 18000 people left of whom over 12000 are either not keen or not eligible for third country settlement.

Perhaps the King was worried about the ethnic balance in his Kingdom which he thought that in the long run may affect the well-being of the people as a whole.

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