

Country paper on Bhutan

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COUNTRY PAPER – BHUTAN

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Brief Background on Bhutan

Bhutan is a land-locked country. Geographically, the mountainous terrain of the Kingdom has influenced the level and development throughout its history. Bhutan's population is mainly dependent on agriculture. Environment and socio-economic issues continue to be the dominant area of interest both within the Kingdom and the international community in the foreseeable future.

Introduction on Media in Bhutan

Radio Broadcasting is still an evolving field in Bhutan. In its short history, it has witnessed many changes both in the technology, the management and program orientation. Each incremental change has been positive and augurs well for the station's future. If the trend continues, Radio Broadcasting in Bhutan can definitely shoulder its responsibility of being a catalyst for socio-economic improvement of its citizens and as an autonomous media organisation further enrich the pluralistic features of a Bhutanese society.

It is in this spirit that I would now like to take the opportunity to apprise you about the state of broadcasting media in Bhutan and how it is attempting to reach out to the far flung rural communities. To understand contemporary Bhutan and the dynamics of its modern institutions such as the media, it is useful to have some knowledge about the conditions under which Bhutan attempted to transform its centuries old traditional agrarian society into a western inspired modern - almost overnight in the early sixties.

Until the early sixties, Bhutan was a closed society with little interaction with the outside world. Communication within the country was limited and influenced by rugged terrain. Bhutan as a nation then, developed a common set of politics, laws, administration, development strategies, trading systems, culture, traditions and customs based on Mahayana Buddhism, which even to this day helps to define and symbolise national unity and identity of the country. By the late fifties Bhutan found that it could no longer depend on the policy of self-imposed isolation to guarantee its sovereignty. The only option was to open its doors and join the comity of nations to ensure its future well being. As a result almost overnight Bhutan took a giant leap, when it embarked on the process of modernisation with the launching of five-year development plan in 1961.

Under planned development many previously unknown and never seen activities were undertaken, such as opening of motor road, schools, hospitals wireless services and other infrastructures. To plan and coordinate these activities, external expertise was brought in setting in motion the development of government bureaucracy. To service these modernisation process- shops, restaurants and even cinema halls were established at focal locations giving rise to urbanisation in Bhutan. These activities were undertaken within a short span of a year after the decision to seek external assistance.

In a way, the process of modernisation has met its objectives. Bhutan has not only safeguarded its independence but has also become an active member of the international community. Within the country tremendous socio-economic progress has been made. Many facilities have been made available to promote the socio-economic well being of the people. The media is considered as one of them.

Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS)

The history of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service is synonymous with the history of electronic media in the Kingdom. It was in 1967, with the publication of a semi-government gazette, the Kuensel in English, that the systems of modern media began in Bhutan. Electronic Media followed shortly, when on November 11, 1973, members of the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB) started the first Radio broadcast in English on an amateur and voluntary basis using the Civil Wireless Department's 400 Watt Short Wave transmitter. Though limited to a weekly one hour transmission, Radio NYAB (as it was then called) immediately caught the imagination of all Bhutanese, young and old who looked forward to their Sundays.

As expectation from its listeners grew over the years, Radio NYAB found itself unable to run on a permanent basis solely on goodwill and enthusiasm. Personnel and technical issues surfaced and in 1979, the station became a part of the Department of Information and Broadcasting. Broadcast hours were also increased to nine hours a week, three hours daily on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. And in 1986, the old 400 SW transmitter was replaced by a 5 KW SW transmitter and BBS was officially launched in place of Radio NYAB. Five years later, in 1991, the new 50 KW SW transmitter and a studio complex built in Thimphu, under the Government of India assistance program, was successfully commissioned, bringing in a new era of short wave broadcasting in Bhutan.

To a parallel development which greatly facilitated the dramatic switch over to a high power radio station, BBS was fortunate that the US\$ 1.3 million four-year UNESCO DANIDA project came on stream in June 1989. This project was important to BBS for two reasons. It enabled the staff of the BBS to be professionally prepared to take over the new 50 KW SW radio complex in 1991. More importantly, the project provided invaluable access to international standard production, management techniques and skills to commensurate with the working of a full-fledged radio station.

Today, BBS is a daily broadcast station broadcasting thirty hours a week in four languages viz. Dzongkha, the National Language, Sharchagpkha and Nepali, two major regional languages, and in English. Given the formidable geographical setting (Bhutan is an extremely mountainous country with villages isolated by deep gorges, high mountains and fast flowing rivers), diverse language groups and low literacy and income level, radio clearly emerges as the most cost effective and accessible source of news, information and entertainment among the Bhutanese people. Present estimate indicate between 200,000 to 250,000 radio receivers in the country with a total listening population of over 400,000 people.

While Kuensel, the national Newspaper, is a predominantly urban habit, with the elite and the educated forming its readership, BBS primarily caters to the rural people, a classification that covers 90 percent of the Bhutanese population. The Government recognised that for radio to play its rightful role in an effective manner, the station required to have its infrastructure and professional skills developed first.

It was also aware that for the media to play an effective role in an environment of rising literacy and aspirations, the institute of broadcast itself required certain degree of flexibility. As a result, beginning with the establishment of the basic broadcasting infrastructure and steps towards professional skills-development, the government in 1992, de-linked the media from direct government control to enhance media professionalism and management.

The fact that over 90% of the population live in rural areas, are dependent on agriculture and have low income standards sets the agenda for the radio station on the types of programs to be broadcast. As a result development programs, which lead to improved personal and community health, hygiene and environment are aired every week in four languages. As most of the extension workers of various activities are located in far flung areas, BBS produces programs that act as an

extension magazine to keep them in touch with the headquarters. Audience research has shown farming programs to be most popular in rural areas followed by health and entertainment programs.

Though the impact of the radio on rural listeners cannot be stressed enough, the medium's full potential is still not realised as the quality of reception on the short wave is invariably affected by the mountainous terrain and changing atmospheric conditions. To overcome the problem of poor reception in several pockets across the country, the BBS has started a nation-wide FM network project with the assistance of DANIDA. The project, due to be completed by December, 1999 entails the establishment of relay stations on key mountain passes (close to existing telecommunication infrastructure). The expansion of the FM service will give BBS the option to have an alternative to SW broadcast as more districts are covered under FM transmission.

State of Multimedia in Bhutan

Multimedia, as such, has not yet arrived in the kingdom. However, the digitisation of Telecommunication services and the introduction of the Internet this year opens the possibility of multimedia usage. This possibility, again, is restricted mainly to the urban areas as the necessary 'tools' (infrastructure) and their relevant users are limited to the urban areas. Presently, there are just over 3,000 computers in the kingdom. In a context like Bhutan, where more than ninety percent of the population live in rural settings, the idea of widespread use of new media such as multimedia is an unrealistic concept. Present computer usage is prevalent only in government offices and institutions, and the concept for its daily use at home is yet to catch on, even in urban areas.

Though the national radio in Bhutan as a multimedia tool may not be relevant to most of its listeners, the process of its digitisation would help broaden and enhance its reach to a more global audience who are already equipped with the necessary 'tools'.

Challenges facing Bhutan with the expansion of media

The media in Bhutan, the BBS and Kuensel, faces a big challenge in what can be described as a crucial juncture with the Kingdom moving towards a modern economy. The government's policy of people's participation and decentralisation is considered the key guiding principle in any development plan or program. The recent decision of His Majesty the King to devolve his executive powers to the National Assembly is also a culmination of the process of decentralisation. Even the government's fiscal policy, which continues to retain the characteristics of a social

welfare state, is gradually being changed; it has started levying service charges and personal income tax beginning this year. Importance has been given to the development of the private sector and the government is gradually handing over the management of major industries and projects to the sector. Many public sector corporations have been given financial autonomy.

The Media organisations, although de-linked from the government, are also public service-oriented and have to depend largely on government funding. It is, therefore, difficult for the media organisations to be self-sustaining institutions. Bhutan has a tiny population of just over seven hundred thousand and the media organisations still have a long way to go before they become completely commercial-oriented.

Thus, the media in Bhutan is at a critical juncture. This challenge will be further accentuated with the start of the National Television Service on the 2nd of June 1999, coinciding with the Silver Jubilee celebrations of His Majesty the King.