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Bhutan

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COUNTRY REPORT

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WORKSHOP

on

“RADIO and the INTERNET”

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BHUTAN

by

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Brief Background on Bhutan



Century. *Guru Rinpoche* brought in Buddhism, of which several forms are practiced in Bhutan today. Before that, an animistic religion known as Bon prevailed in most parts of the country. Bon traditions and rituals are still practiced in parts of Bhutan during the

celebrations of local festivals. Between the 7th and 17th Centuries, many important Buddhist lamas visited Bhutan; one, *Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal* (1594-1652), a lama of the *Drukpa Kagyue* school, came from Tibet in 1616 and unified the country. He set up a theocracy, an administrative system and code of law. However, 1907 marked the beginning of a new era when *Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck* was unanimously elected and crowned the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan by representatives of the general



public, the *Dratshang* (Central Monastic Body) and the *Penlops* (district governors). The country was then brought under a central authority that provided stability and an opportunity for development. Religion remains part of every aspect of Bhutanese life. Buddhism is still practiced by a majority; of other religions, Hinduism is most prevalent. A respect for peace, the need to do right and a spiritual sense are strongly reflected in painting, drama and dance. For instance, art forms focus on the individual only to place him or her in a particular role in the larger scheme of life. Indeed, an art form in Bhutan is first a religious work; its aesthetic value comes second. In the old days, it was also customary for one son from each family to join a monastery, again establishing a close link between family, religion and public life. Bhutan has made every effort to ensure harmony between economic policies and its long spiritual and religious traditions. Its development strategy thus has been extremely conscious of the need to enrich cultural values, nurture its rich environment and fulfill the aspirations of people.

The process of modern development in Bhutan started only in 1961, less than four decades ago, when His Majesty King *Jigme Dorji Wangchuk*, the third King of Bhutan opened up the country to the rest of the world by ending its era of self-imposed isolation. Until then Bhutan had been geographically isolated. Spread over 46,500 square kilometers, the country is landlocked, surrounded by India to the south and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China to the north and the north-west. Bhutan is almost entirely mountainous, with land rising from about 200 metres above sea level in the south to the high Himalayas in the north, towering over 7500 meters. The country was never colonized and has always remained independent.

The traditional society, meanwhile, was a self-contained rural economy. People cultivated as much as they needed and had a sustainable relationship with nature. Mountain slopes were terraced for agriculture and land was irrigated. People bred animals, wove their own cloth and made pottery. Surplus rice was exported to Tibet, and salt, tea and wool were imported in exchange. The ending of isolation paved the way for human development. It meant building infrastructure, both physical and social, promoting economic growth and simultaneously improving quality of life of the people.

Its Early History

Very little is known about Bhutan's early history. Stone tools that have been found indicate that the country was inhabited as early as 2000 – 1500 BC. However, historically records validate today begin only from the visit of *Guru Padmasambhava*, popularly known as *Guru Rinpoche*, or the precious Master, in the 7th

Introduction on Media in Bhutan



Satellite Earth Station based in Thimphu

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

Under the planned development many previously unknown and never seen activities were undertaken, such as opening of motor road, schools, hospitals, wireless services and satellite earth station etc. To plan and coordinate these activities, external expertise was brought in setting in motion the development of government bureaucracy. To service these modernization processes – shops, restaurants and even cinema halls were established at focal locations giving rise to urbanization 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 modernization 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 an unprecedented 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, particularly radio.

Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation (BBSC)

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 system 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.



Radio NYAB Building

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. In 1986, the old 400 Watt 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 new 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.

In 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.

environment, health and education, rural development, women and children besides the news and entertainment programs. We also broadcast weekly programs from the United Nations radio every Thursday and a musical program from Radio DW. By November the BBSC will be expanding its air time to 60 hours a week with morning broadcasts.

More importantly, BBSC has an important role in educating the people and encouraging them to actively participate in the socio-economic development of the country. For BBSC to be able to fulfill these important responsibilities, it has to grow into a professional modern organization and this among others, begins with the development of the capability of its employees. Moreover, the concept of modern media is a relatively new and no formal institutional arrangement for career and professional development exists either at the BBSC or in the country. We therefore, have no choice but to seek knowledge from outside.

There is tremendous pressure both from the public and the government for longer transmission hours. A need is also there to change the program format and content to cater to the changing tastes of the audience. BBSC therefore, under the DANIDA assisted project recently expended its Radio broadcasts from FM 92 and 96 Mhz that was only for the capital to FM 88.1 Mhz and FM 98 Mhz to four neighbouring districts as recently as 5th June 2000.

On 11th November, 2000 coinciding with the birth anniversary of His Majesty the King, BBSC will extend its radio broadcast time from 42 hours to 60 hours a week with three hours broadcasts in the morning. We will also be hosting our web page then, starting with text and slowly into audio and video.

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 BBSC challenge yet is to cover a nation-wide FM network service with the generous assistance of DANIDA.

Problems Foreseen

The FM services throughout the country is largely

affected by its rugged terrain. Therefore, establishing of relay station on key mountain passes are a tedious task. The expansion of the FM service will give BBSC the option to have an alternative to SW broadcast as more districts are covered under FM transmission.



Mountains of Northern Bhutan

Internet and the Expected Changes

The digitization of telecommunication services and the introduction of the Internet last June has opened the possibility of multimedia usage. This possibility, is at the moment restricted mainly to the urban areas as the necessary tools (infrastructure) and their relevant users are limited to the urban areas. Though the idea of IT culture is relatively new in Bhutan, more and more younger generations are realising the importance of this vast multimedia. It will indeed help broaden and enhance its reach to a more global audience who are already equipped with both knowledge and the necessary tools.

The Media organizations, 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 tiny population of just about six 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 last year on 2nd June, coinciding with the Silver Jubilee celebrations of His Majesty the King ●

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