

The Symbolic and Functional Significance of Chhoetse Penlop: A Tribute to the Sixteenth Chhoetse Penlop

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As Bhutan celebrates the ascension of His Royal Highness Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck as the 16th Chhoetse Penlop in three hundred and fifty seven years, the Bhutanese people once again affirm the centrality of monarchy in our lives. This landmark event has a symbolic and functional significance. It is symbolic by way of upholding an important national tradition. Its functional significance lies in the continuity of monarchy that defines the Bhutanese character.

First, the symbolic significance is historical in nature. Chogyal Mingyur Tenpa, who became the first Chhoetse Penlop in 1647, pioneered the unification of eastern Bhutan into the new nation-state. On the other hand, neither the Paro Penlop nor Daga Penlop was ever entrusted with any responsibilities of unification. This distinction is an important historical antecedent. In the leadership of future Chhoetse Penlops, particularly Jigme Namgyal and Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, we discover their contribution to unification when the political climate of the country deteriorated. Jigme Namgyal, the 10th Chhoetse Penlop defended the country during the Duar War by rallying behind him the whole country. As often, history repeated in an extraordinary way when His Majesty the King led Bhutanese troops in the recent war against militancy.

Although he was first a Chhoetse Penlop, Jigme Namgyal established himself as the unchallenged leader of the country and became one as the 48th Druk Desi. The last six Druk Desi who succeeded him served almost at the will of Chhoetse

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Penlop. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, the 13th Chhoetse Penlop distinguished himself in both domestic and foreign affairs, earning respect and confidence of the Bhutanese people like no other leaders. After the Chhoetse Penlop, he became the first Druk Gyalpo. An important historical fact we tend to overlook today is that Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck did not force the establishment of monarchy. It was the Bhutanese people who, exhausted by two centuries of instability and political in-fighting, opted to establish monarchy as an alternative political system. In Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, they found a person whose spiritual and genealogical lineage as well as statesmanship and diplomacy assured the founding of a strong monarchy. When he was crowned king, it was already the 20th century. As we celebrate His Royal Highness assumption of the office of Chhoetse Penlop, we also pay tribute to his illustrious predecessors.

Second, the functional significance of the event must be understood in relation to the continuity of monarchy. By becoming the Chhoetse Penlop, His Royal Highness upholds the sacred tradition of the crown prince assuming this position. The more important reason for our celebration is the knowledge that monarchy is strong, loved and will continue into the 21st century. For a monarchy to be so popular, established and leading a country into the new millennium surprises many skeptics.

Generally, monarchy is regarded as a medieval and receding political system that is feudal in nature. Its relevance and success in the modern age is often questioned. On the contrary, Bhutanese monarchy presents an entirely opposite phenomenon. Its establishment symbolized the defeat of a feudal medieval structures and institutions. The modernity of Bhutanese monarchy is its distinguishing characteristic. It represents change and progress as opposed to stagnation and regression. For example, introduction of modern education became possible only with the coming of monarchy. In the court of His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck was found a mobile school where students from most humble backgrounds

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studied. Heavy taxation, a legacy of the past, underwent profound reforms during the reign of the first two kings. It was monarchy who abolished serfdom, introduced land reforms and established democratic institutions. Whereas decentralization and people's participation would be considered radical ideas in traditional monarchies, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck spearheaded these political reforms. Monarchy has been the source of modernization and cause of all socio-economic developments. As we affirm monarchy by celebrating the investiture ceremony of His Royal Highness, we endorse progress; we celebrate progress.

The success of monarchy in a small Himalayan society demonstrates the special relationship between Bhutanese people and our benevolent rulers. Our celebration today is a celebration of this relationship. This relationship is of great relevance in a modernizing Bhutan. The realities of our time contrast with those a hundred years ago. Hence, challenges and concerns confronting us also contrast in their nature and dimension.

As a leader, His Royal Highness straddles two ages, the secluded and the globalized, the traditional and the modern. He represents balance and harmony, which has been the basis of our development. Therefore, the continuation of the specialty of relationship of Bhutanese people to the monarchy is insurance for a secure future. In the beginning of the last century, a Chhoetse Penlop ushered Bhutan into a new millennium of progress. This century also begins on an auspicious note with another Chhoetse Penlop ushering Bhutan into yet another hundred years of peace and prosperity.