

**BHUTAN:**  
*Contemporary Issues and  
Perspectives*

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**I V**

# POLITICAL PARTIES

## and Participation

VIKASH KUMAR

### INTRODUCTION

**B**hutan has been a country of absolute monarchy since 1907. During this period, Bhutan experienced many ups and downs in its political system. Monarchy had failed to address the public grievances for a long time. Despite being under Monarchy for so long, Bhutanese did not find themselves very much attached to the system.

After the experience of monarchy over 100 years, the Bhutan king realized a need for a big political shift towards democracy. In 21st century, Bhutan king seeking to authenticate his country's individuality like other democratic countries in the world began the ground work to usher in the democratic system. , In 2008, "The nation finished a successful transition from an absolute hereditary monarchy to a Democratic constitutional monarchy alongside an elected parliament, marking the final step in the transition to a parliamentary democracy."<sup>1</sup>

In Bhutan, socio-political setbacks such as corruption, human right violations, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of political awareness, lack of representation of youth and women, racial/ethnic discrimination etc. could be seen clearly. The political participation at the local level was not very satisfying because neither the Bhutan's media nor the political parties were interested in the issues of the rural people. In 2008 general election, Bhutan successfully formed its first democratic government and witnessed people's participation in political process. After 2008, however, participation in the newly created democratic set up did not reach the expected levels. The political makeover in Bhutan had provided glimmer of hope to the people of Bhutan in safeguarding their participation in political matters of the nation. In this regard, the most vital document was the constitution of Bhutan. The constitution was adopted by Bhutan on 18 July, 2008. The constitution of Bhutan had sought to increase the political participation with many steps like, two-party system, parliamentary

form of government, universal suffrage and democratic electoral process etc. The constitution contained various provisions which could create a positive atmosphere in direction of ensuring political participation of Bhutanese People. Some of the provisions included Polls process, representativeness, political awareness, political right and nationality and citizenship etc. Today, it has become important to analyse and enquire into the factors that explain the present status of political participation in Bhutan. This study, focused on explaining the democratic transformation in Bhutan and its impact on Bhutanese people. It also discusses the constitution of Bhutan and its compatibility with Bhutanese people.

### **STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL PROCESS**

In Bhutan, political institutionalization has been major part of political process but the process of political institutionalization and nation-building started significantly late. In 1952, the King was given all the powers—the executive, legislative and judicial. The fourth Third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuk and Fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuk has played an important role in “Bhutan’s modernization and development of political institutions.”<sup>2</sup> The present task of developing these political institutions has been done perfectly by Khesher Namgyal Wangchuk. “It was that time of Absolute hereditary monarchy, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, the Third King who introduced the first National Assembly in 1953, of 150 members composed of government officials, monks, and people representatives elected by the local community from each district, sub-division and from the block level.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the Encyclopedia of South Asia, “Even though there were provisions for the representation of all the areas and groups in the setting up of the National Assembly but electoral process was not fully adopted. The Druk Gyalpo could issue royal decrees and exercise veto power over resolution passed by the National Assembly, its establishment was a major move towards the a Constitutional Monarchy.”<sup>4</sup>

During 1960’s, King made significant changes in the political structure of Bhutan and desired to form a government by joining the monarchical and democratic system. The step was taken by him to safeguard the stability and solidarity of the country. During this period ‘the strength of Bhutan’s bureaucracy was concentrated in centralized monarchy.’<sup>5</sup> In 1968, ‘the Bhutanese king seized decisions that re-established the political structure in Bhutan.’<sup>6</sup> In May 1968, the ‘Druk Gyalpo decreed that sovereign power, encompassing the Power to remove government priests and the Druk Gyalpo himself, should reside with the National Assembly.’<sup>7</sup> In 1968, the king established for the first time a Council of Ministers by separating the judiciary from the executive. In Thimphu the *Thrimkhang Gonma*, the high court of six judges was established. The same principle was later spread to the districts in 1969 after District Courts were established.<sup>8</sup>

During the process of reinforcing the political institutions in Bhutan, the role of Bhutanese people in decision making processes was negligible. But after 1972, the role of people in decision making process was decided. It was the time which showed the way towards democracy to the Bhutanese people. This became possible by the efforts of Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk. He provided an opportunity to the Bhutanese people to take part in political process for the progress of Bhutan.

The Political reforms of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck can be categorized at two levels— , decentralization of institutional power and the devolution of personal power. In a way, the devolution of power parallel to the decentralization of institutional power was infact 'a means of impressing upon the Bhutanese people that decentralization was not a disguised strategy to concentrate power in monarchy. As powers were delegated from the throne, people were expected to assume it.'<sup>9</sup> The devolution of power took place gradually through the decentralization process. "This also took place at two levels; First, Decentralization of economic planning and Second, Developing decision-making institution and making them more representative."<sup>10</sup>

At that time, in the year 1972, the development philosophy of Bhutan, "Gross National Happiness" was also introduced. The concept of GNH was based on four pillars: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. These were further classified into a number of domains to reflect the totality of its range. These included psychological well-being, health, education, time-use, cultural diversity, resilience, and living standards.<sup>11</sup>

Along with this, King had also engaged the country in a politicization process. Thierry (2008) adds, "GNH has become an ideological vector. Up to some extent it has been participating to the progressive political maturation of the people." It should be noted here, that at the local governance, the "Three basic pillars"<sup>12</sup> of decentralisation in Bhutan i.e. political, financial and administrative decentralisation are interlinked with each other.<sup>13</sup> The Five Year development plan (1981-1986) was implemented to boost growth and abolish the central administration at the administrative level. The decentralisation was effectively implemented from the Eighth Five Year development plan (1997-2002) onwards, directly ensuring the participation of community groups in the activities of development.

At the grass-root level we can see 'The establishment of Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogchung -DYT (District Development Committee) in every district between 1976 and 1981, which was followed by the establishment of (Block Development Committees)-GYT in 1991. The DYT consists of the Dzongda (district administrator), the Chimis (National Assembly members) of the district, the Gups (Village headmen) and member elected by the peoples in the blocks to represent them in the DYT. The District Development Committee discusses development as well as policy matters. All the proposals of the people of the

district to be submitted to the National Assembly are discussed and finalized by the DYT.<sup>14</sup>

The GYT comprises the members of the people from the villages in the Gewog, its responsibility includes social and political functions, religion and cultural affairs, development planning and implementation.

To quote Madhu Rajput,

*His enlightened leadership king Jigme Singhey Wangchuck has emphasised People's participation as the objective of Bhutan's development plans. District committees known as Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogchung were formed so that people could be more actively involved in the planning of their own district and in the working with government in improving essential service and facilities. The Gewog Yargay Tshogchungor Block Development Committees were also formed at the block level to bring about a higher level of national consciousness and active participation in decision making among people at the grassroot level. It was the king's personal initiative to decentralize, placing emphasis on people's participation in their own development.*<sup>15</sup>

The motives of DYT and GYT were to increase people's participation at the local level in the decision making process. However, the decision making which was conducted at the village level had more influence of feudal groups, of the elite class in people's decision which reflected the lack of transparency and accountability in the process of development.

Bhutan has initiated several policies aimed at creating participatory political culture. The elements of these policies were also attached to the ethnicity, which was somewhere more related to the rights, legitimacy and citizenship of Bhutanese people. This policy was introduced by the fourth king as "One nation one people" policy in 1988. He believed that united population is important for the survival of Bhutan as a sovereign, independent nation.<sup>16</sup> These problems were such that they made it mandatory to establish democracy for the attainment of justice and rights so that freedom of expression and rights can fully be realised.

## **DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONAL BEHAVIOUR**

In 2001, the King Jigme Singye Wangchuk drafted the first constitution and released the draft on 26 March 2005 for a nation-wide consultation. The whole process of drafting the constitution was a very long process. Let's have a look at the Constitutional making process in short:

- (a) On 30th November 2001, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo formally inaugurated the process of drafting the Constitution.
- (b) The first meeting was convened from 30th November to 14th December 2001 at the Royal Banquet Hall, Thimphu, followed by eight consecutive meetings held at Punakha, Bumthang and Thimphu.

- (c) The First Draft of the Constitution was submitted to His Majesty on 9th December 2002.
- (d) The Second Draft of the Constitution was submitted to His Majesty on 11th June 2003.
- (e) The Draft was then submitted to His Majesty the DrukGyalpo and distributed to every household and to international organizations based in Thimphu on 18th August, 2005.
- (f) The Draft Constitution was publicly distributed and launched on the Internet simultaneously on 26th March 2006.<sup>17</sup>

On May 5, 2005 the first constitution was released and the monarch was declared as the constitutional head. The king can now only be removed by a two-third vote in the parliament. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk as a president abdicated throne in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk in 2006. Bhutan's Constitution is not an ordinary law. Its most distinguishing mark is the "statement of fundamental rights of the citizens, which normally forms part of modern written Constitutions." Some of the salient features of Bhutan's Constitution are:

- It is based on popular sovereignty. Hence, the Constitution ordains "Bhutan is a Sovereign Kingdom". In fact, the defence of sovereignty is the supreme law and sacred duty.
- Sovereignty of people and legislative sovereignty.
- Freedom of choice, a rational-choice model of collective action, public approbation of choice, public choice, radical choice, arbitrary choice or purely preferential choice, social choice, etc.
- Social public and political morality.
- It also has provision for a referendum on the proposed amendment in order to elicit popular reaction. It is direct and popular democracy.
- The Constitution of Bhutan is not a Federal Constitution. It is a Unitary Constitution with decentralized Local Government.
- It has an independent Judiciary, which is established to interpret and expound the Constitutional provisions.
- It has adopted the doctrine of explicit unlike other written Constitutions, which are generally rigid and ambiguous.
- It is also a limited Constitution. Hence, discretionary executive and legislative decisions are circumscribed through judicial review.<sup>18</sup>

In 2008, the constitution of Bhutan provided the Parliament, with a two party system and 21 fundamental rights including the right to information, right to privacy, freedom of press, radio and television so on. It also gives the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion while identifying Buddhism

as the 'spiritual heritage' of Bhutan. Article 3 deals with spiritual heritage and states, "It shall be the responsibility of religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country while also ensuring that religion remains separate from politics in Bhutan. Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics."<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubt that while framing its constitution, Bhutan adopted all those principles which were necessary for the establishment of democratic processes. According to Bhutanese king, "this constitution was made after studying 100 different constitutions and not merely by copying some constitutions."<sup>20</sup> In spite of all these facts, there have been doubts on the participation and faith of Bhutanese people in their constitution. We should not forget that when the framing of Bhutanese constitution was done, participation of entire Bhutan was not ensured.

Gautam Basu says, "Bhutanese Constitution Provides its citizenship with three type of rights: first, civil citizen (equality before law), second, political citizen (he is granted access to representative institutions) and third social citizen (it means he is provided with a guarantee of economic and social well-being.)"<sup>21</sup> The social and religious behaviour which Bhutan has reflected over the years has put a contradiction on the philosophy of rights and equality of the Bhutanese people. For example, the present political system casts a challenge before Nepali speaking people and their political rights. This in fact creates situation of alienation on the basis of their culture and religious values, and the drift is further increasing because of religious values of Drukpa culture. The situation definitely affects the political culture of Bhutan as Bhutanese of Nepali origin have been denied the rights of citizenship so deprived from the actual political participation.

## **ELECTION PROCESS**

After the establishment of democratic constitutional regime, elections at the National and Local levels have been conducted in Bhutan. Election laws were enacted by the Bhutanese parliament. These laws define voter registration, campaigning, political parties, and procedural aspects. "The Constitution provides a bare substantive and procedural framework, incorporating then-existing election laws insofar as they did not conflict. Notably, religious figures and institutions must remain above (out of) politics."<sup>22</sup> Bhutan has played a very crucial role in setting the role of voters as per different time periods and time for the effective participation as discussed below:

## **VOTING AND GENERAL ELECTIONS, 2008**

In the year 2008, when Bhutan was being transformed from monarchy to democratic constitutional monarchy, and when the framing of democratic parliamentary elections was established, the Bhutanese "*Gyalpo Tshogdu*" (National Assembly) consisted of 47 members elected by the people from the 47



Constituencies in the Country. Serving members were given a five-year term. In the 2008 elections, 79.4 percent of registered voters turned out to cast their votes and after several rounds of voter registration, 318,465 voters were ultimately registered by March 2008. The final total number of voters registered were 318,465, of which 161,169 (50.6 percent) were females, and 157,296 (49.4 percent) were male registered voters.<sup>23</sup> In this election “Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) secured 169,490 votes and Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) secured 83,322 of total Votes.”<sup>24</sup> This was the positive sign of strengthening Bhutnese democracy. This statistics below shows the voting percentage.

TABLE-1: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY RESULTS, 2008

Political party	EVM votes received	Valid postal ballot received	Total votes secured	Total votes cast	Percentage of votes secured	No. of seats won	Gender
DPT	156,170	13,320	169,490	252,812	67%	45	41 Male 4 Female
PDP	79,523	3,799	83,322		33%	2	2 Male

Sources: Eu Election Observation Mission Bhutan 2008

After the results of this election, the election analysts and observers were taken by a surprise. According to Muni, (2008), ‘The PDP has asked for re-poll or, at least, a serious investigation into the factors that caused such a landslide win in favour of the DPT. Some have blamed automatic voting machines for their faulty mechanism or improper use.’<sup>25</sup>

If we properly examine the experiences of the elections, it reflects the mentality of the voters. We find the same situation in the mock elections of 2008 as was seen in 2007. The Bhutanese election Commission conducted this mock election in two stages which was like the original election. These elections reflected the political participation and political will of Bhutan. According to Sonam Kinga, “At time of mock primary round, four dummy parties were formed by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB). Druk Yellow Party (DYP), Druk Red Party (DRP), Druk Blue Party (DBP) and Druk Green Party (DGP). The election symbol of each party was the colour of the party’s names”<sup>26</sup>

It was seen this time that the people of Bhutan did not have enough knowledge about the political parties and their manifestos to enable them to understand the election related activities and decision making process. They

also could not decide upon how to choose the right candidate, the same selection process and situation prevailed in the election rallies which means that Bhutanese people did not participate in the election rallies with enthusiasm. Sonam Kinga said,

*When they voted yellow party, they did not vote for DYP but for the king or je khenpo whom they thought the yellow colour represented. This is because both of them adorn yellow scarves as insignia of their offices. A voter said he voted for the yellow party because he loved his king and still wanted him to rule the country. He did not trust politicians "because they will make a lot of promises but will hardly keep them." The red colour, a symbol of the monastic community came second.<sup>27</sup>*

In other words we may say that the elections which were conducted in Bhutan showed a lack of political understanding. The Bhutanese people contemplated more on participation, persona and religious belief rather than neutrality.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS, 2011**

At the local level, the creation of Block (Gewag Yargay Tshaghung) and District (Dzongkhag Yargay Tshoghung) Development Committees had been a significant institutional innovation. Basically, 'these elected bodies' that were scattered all around the country, had been created to co-ordinate development activities. Used by their members as forums to articulate local needs and grievance, they fully participated in the 'legislative process.'<sup>28</sup> This in turn helped in spreading political consciousness and awareness at the grassroots level.

Three years after 2008, Democracy had finally been expanded to the local level, with two rounds of Local Government Elections, one on 21 January and the second on 27 June 2011. Bhutan's democratization had by now reached the level of district, block, and municipal administration. In the first round of elections; 37 candidates contested the elections for the position of Mayor (*Thrompon*) or city council representative (*Dzongkhag Thromde Tshogde Tshogpa*). Most residents of the capital and the other towns who had moved there from rural areas, had still kept their census in those villages, as a result the number of registered voters for the elections of *Thrompons* was only 8,462,<sup>29</sup> similarly for the election of *Tshogpas*, it was just 7,137, and some constituencies did not even had a single candidate to contest the elections. The constituency size varied considerably between 6,226 and 614 voters for *Thrompon* elections and 27 to 1,634 voters for *Tshogpa* elections. Though the voters could at least chose between two or three candidates for mayor, four *Tshogpa* constituencies (*Demkhongs*) remained vacant, and another 16 constituencies went uncontested, leaving voters only with the choice to accept or reject the lone contender. "Overall turnout"<sup>30</sup> was 50 percent.

On 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 when the second round of elections was held, greater

logistical and organizational challenges were faced by the authorities. The elections were called for in all the 205 counties (*Gewogs*) of the 20 districts (*Dzongkhags*), for committee (*Gewog Tshogde*) headmen (*Gups*) and their deputies (*Mangmis*). 'Out of total 1,044 representatives to the county committees (*Gewog Tshogde Tshogpas*), 16 were directly elected members (*Dzongkhag Thromde Thuemis*) from the class 'B' *Thromdes* to the respective district councils (*Dzongkhag Tshogdu*), and the remaining 5 were municipal council members.'<sup>31</sup>

The elections were conducted at the local level but in spite of it questions were raised on participation and representation. According to an analysis by Gallenkamp; "In the first round of elections, the lack of qualified candidates for local government positions had posed a serious problem. After 1,102 candidates were successfully elected on 27th June, 370 positions remained vacant. Only a single candidate contested elections in 535 constituencies, of which 31 candidates were rejected by the electorate. Women candidates were extremely under-represented during both rounds of elections. Out of 37 candidates in the first round, only four were women, of which two had been elected. In the second round, 165 women out of 2,185 candidates contested elections, of which 76 were elected".<sup>32</sup> Chief Election Commissioner, Dasho Kuzang Wangdi in an interview with the German radio, Deutsche Welle had mentioned, 'Peoples' culture and their mindset is yet to be mended in the democratic process'. In this situation the interest of the 'Bhutanese people was seen less in the local administration. Another reality was that few people of Bhutan were not allowed to cast their votes. This is also reflected from a statement of the election commission in which they say that all the people cannot be allowed to cast their votes in Bhutan.'<sup>33</sup>

### **GENERAL ELECTIONS, 2013**

After Five years, elections were again conducted as the 'General Parliament Election' for the national assembly in Bhutan on May and 31<sup>st</sup> July, in the year 2013. DPT won only 15 seats out of 47 seats in the national assembly elections whereas it had 47 seats in the previous elections, and on the other hand, PDP won 32 seats in these elections. There were four parties that contested in the recent elections in Bhutan, namely, the DPT, the PDP, the *Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa* (DNT) and the *Druk Chirwang Tshogpa* (DCT). 'Given that Bhutan follows a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, in the May 2013 primary round the PDP and the DPT won. The voter turnout was of 55 percent of the total population, 10 percent more than that of the National Council elections.'<sup>34</sup> The 'PDP won the second round held on 31 July defeating the DPT in an election with 66 percent turnout.'<sup>35</sup>

These results were entirely in contrast to the results of 2008 elections, one thing of particular importance in these elections was India's Contribution to the Bhutan's Election process. In these elections, 'India also provided logistical support; including gifting of nearly 4,130 Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) to Bhutan along with Chief Election Commissioner V S Sampath witnessing the democratic process in the Himalayan nation as an observer.'

POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTICIPATION

In this election, India had become the catalysts in Bhutan’s election results.<sup>36</sup> According to Marian Gallenkamp,

*Indian government banned Energy-Economic subsidy such as kerosene and L.P.G. during the peak of election time. India’s decision on 1 July 2013 to withdraw all subsidies on kerosene and LPG for Bhutan amidst the country’s already heated election campaign left most analysts and observers perplexed and caught Bhutan completely off-guard. Shortly afterwards, the media reported that India was also considering a revision of power tariffs from the Chukha hydro power project. While these actions resulted in a complete shift in the electoral campaign from which it did not recover until polling day.*<sup>37</sup>

During this election, the voter turnout was low with a nationwide percentage of only 55.27 percent. Whereas, in some 13 constituencies turnout was below 50 percent. Although constituency-wise results were not relevant, the entire national vote cast determined which parties were to move on to contest the general round of elections, results clearly played out in favour of the DPT, which received 44.5 percent of the votes and was the strongest party (Table 2) in 33 constituencies.<sup>38</sup>

**TABLE 2: ELECTION RESULT PRIMARY ROUND-2013**

Party	No. of Votes	% of Votes	No. of constituencies ‘won’ Simple/absolute majority
DPT	93,724	44.5%	18/15
PDP	68,545	32.5%	6/6
DNT	35,941	17.1%	2/0
DCT	12,453	5.9%	0/0

**No. of constituencies with ‘opposition’ vote share > 50%:30**

Sources: IPCS Special Report, 2013

The next phase of polling day saw a rise in voter turnout with 66.1 percent, 252,485 votes were casted out of 381,790 registered voters. To the surprise of many observers, the DPT was not at all able to capitalize on its good results from the primary round. Although it received roughly an additional 20,000 votes, its vote share stagnated and rose only marginally to 45.1 percent. In contrast, the PDP was able to double the number of votes cast in its favor, gaining 54.9

percent of the national vote. It appears that the majority of voters that voted for the new political parties or did not vote at all in the primary round,<sup>39</sup> decided in favor of PDP (Table 3) and voted for change.

**TABLE 3: ELECTION RESULT GENERAL ROUND**

<i>Party</i>	<i>No. of Votes</i>	<i>% of Votes</i>	<i>No. of Seats</i>	<i>% of Seats</i>
<b>PDP</b>	138,558	54.9%	32	68.1%
<b>DPT</b>	113,927	45.1%	15	31.9%

*Sources: IPCS Special Report, 2013*

There were also several local reasons that determined the result of recently held Bhutanese elections. In these elections the issues like the declaration of PDP for employment for 100 days, the issue of shortage of Indian rupee, and fixation of national minimum rate were in the agenda and due to this only Bhutan could see a change in power.

## **ADULT FRANCHISE**

Bhutan established the system of Adult Franchise for its citizens. This system implies that, there shall be no discrimination on the basis of cast, class, sex and culture among its citizens. It promotes political freedom and as well as the representation. As Laski had stated, 'political freedom refers to the right to be active in states activities specially, it is related to the right to vote and also to get elected.'<sup>40</sup>

The constitution which was adopted on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2008 in Bhutan included all the provisions to ensure the participation of different ethnic groups, women and youths in its political system. Articles 6, 7 and Article 23 of the Bhutanese Constitution establish the standards of fundamental rights, citizenship and election related eligibility for their citizens. Article-23 says, "A person shall have the right to vote by direct adult suffrage through secret ballot at an election if the person is:

- (a) A Bhutanese citizen as evidenced by a Citizenship Card;
- (b) Not less than eighteen years of age;
- (c) Registered in the civil registry of that constituency for not less than one year, prior to the date of the election and;
- (d) Not otherwise disqualified from voting under any law in force in Bhutan."<sup>41</sup>

All these rules and qualifications explain the right of a common man to elect his leader but inspite of it, Universal Adult Suffrage remained indifferent on the Bhutanese land. According to I.P.Adhikari,

*Bhutan never allowed its citizens to choose their leader. Voting rights in Bhutan remained only for the King and in 2008 when people were asked to vote, it was controlled, decision made from the top and lollipops distributed in such a way that it was the grace of the King to let people choose their leader.*<sup>42</sup>

There have been conflicts time and again on the voting rights of Bhutan. “Many Bhutanese were not using their adult franchise in the land where they were born. About this problem, Bhutanese Government says, that they are working towards solution of the stateless people in the country and that we must forget the past to work for future. It was referring to the resettled Bhutanese.”<sup>43</sup>

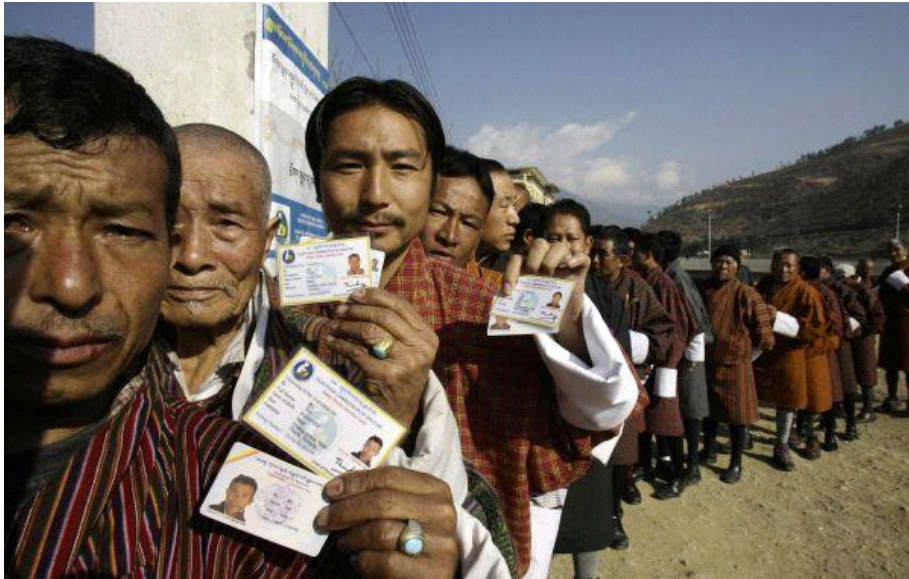
On the other hand, the issue related to adult suffrage brings along the issues of religious interests in which lamas, *pandits* and other religious preachers ask for political activeness for themselves. According to *Choedey Lhentshog* or Commission for Religious affairs, the issue of voting registration of the 16 religious organizations was looked into. The Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kuenzang Wangdi, in a statement during the *Choedey Lhentshog's* meeting in gelepu, had said, ‘Individuals, though not religious personalities, once registered as members of any religious organization, will not be issued voter’s identity cards. They will not be allowed to participate in elections as candidates or voters.’<sup>44</sup> If a religious personality enters into the politics, he is likely to influence political affairs of the Country. Therefore religious priest and lamas in Bhutan have been kept deprived of voting Rights.”<sup>45</sup>

In the Elections of 2008 and 2013 for National Council and in 2011 for Local governance, the principle of Universal Adult Suffrage was not enjoyed in its totality. In this regard, the issue of Bhutanese people of Nepalese Origin is important. Though “some of them have got the Citizenship of Bhutan, they are not able to enjoy their right to vote in democratic political system of Bhutan.”<sup>46</sup> In this Context, It is “generally heard from candidates that, it is the government of Bhutan who shall decide who is eligible to vote and who is not. One of the citizens of Bhutan in Thimphu had stated, ‘although during the census my name had been included in Samdrup language, but I had been born and brought up in Bhutan,’ he further added, “If I was given the opportunity to vote, I could have certainly cast my vote.”<sup>47</sup>

During the elections in 2008, thousands of Lhotsampas were arbitrarily denied voting rights based solely on their ethno-religious background and affiliation with relatives living in refugee camps in Nepal and/or involvement in the 1990 Anti-Government Demonstrations. Additionally, many ethnic Nepalis have been denied citizenship cards following the 2005 census, effectively rendering them stateless.

## DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Decision-making process decides the role of citizens, government and administration. In this regard, people of Bhutan in the elections of 2008, 2011 and 2013 of different levels, were provided an opportunity to form a government by a 'Single Party' so that a stable and representative government could be established, leading to a democratic society in which women, youths and media could equally participate in decision-making processes along with the Government. In this context, Mathou says, 'political patterns refer to the question of the decision-making process. Who takes the decisions in the Bhutanese political system? What has been made responsible to encourage greater participation of the people? To what extent does this process gives indication regarding the general attitude towards modernisation?'<sup>48</sup>



## WOMEN PARTICIPATION

Article-7 provides equality and security before law against gender based discriminations in Bhutan. But if we look at the role of women in political representation, we find that though Women and men are given equal status in the political process of Bhutan, in reality, "if there are 1000 politicians in Bhutan, Only 100 would be Women.<sup>49</sup> Therefore women's political participation has been low. Women's Representation in "Bhutanese parliament is limited to 14 percent only and there are only 10 women out of 72 parliamentarians."<sup>50</sup>

Presently, the Bhutanese general election in 2013 saw only "6.9 percent

women representation in politics, which is lower by 7 percent from the first elections in 2008. For the local government elections in 2011, only 7 percent of women participated in the election process.<sup>51</sup> UN Resident Coordinator Christina Carlson says, “Recent studies conducted with UN support on women’s political participation in Bhutan have shown that prejudices against selecting female leaders are high. Most Bhutanese men and women, see women as less capable and inferior to men in public decision-making and leadership.” These studies send us a clear message,<sup>52</sup> It is not enough for only women to be active and stand as candidates in elections, but in order for this to happen, women need support and encouragement both from the political parties and from their own families.

Comparing the two elections, Drude Dahlerup says,

*“It may have come as a shock to many that women’s representation actually fell from the first democratic election in 2008 to the next 2013. While women’s share of the seat in the general election for the National Assembly remained the same low (8.5% in both elections, 91.5% to the men), women’s representation in the National Council actually dropped, since not a single woman was elected. Only the King’s appointment of 2 women (and 3 men) prevented the National Council from being 100 percent male, e.g. totally male dominated”.*<sup>53</sup>

**TABLE-4 WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN BHUTAN’S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND NATIONAL COUNCIL 2008 AND 2013 ELECTIONS**

Year	2008			2013		
	Total	Women	Women %	Total	Women	Women %
<b>National Assembly, elected</b>	47	4	8.5%	47	4	8.5%
<b>National Council, elected</b>	20	4	20%	20	0	0
<b>National Council, appointed</b>	5	2	40%	5	2	40%
<b>National Council, total</b>	25	6	24%	25	2	8%

Source: statistics from (Election Commission of Bhutan)

In a country like Bhutan we see different behavioural patterns between men and women. If we contemplate on the study of issues of Bhutanese women, we are drawn towards several issues. In this study, reports from many surveys on women participation have been included. According to one such survey of Sherubtse College done in 2010 to know the attitude of students on



“Discrimination against women” and “Gender and Leadership” in Bhutan, “Around 48 percent of female respondents and only 29 percent of male respondents felt that there was very serious or somewhat serious discrimination against women. Similarly, about 62 percent women as against 28 percent men felt that the country still needs to continue making changes to give women equal rights with men.”<sup>54</sup>

Another data shows that “58 percent of men think that they are complete in themselves as a political leader while on the other hand only 36 percent of women see themselves as good leaders”<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, men did not accept that women can be good leaders too. A survey was conducted by Madhu Rajput from 1<sup>st</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> June, in 2010 to study the role of women in the active politics of Bhutan. She found that “Out of 250 women 13.5 percent said it is because of the family circumstances, 18.25 percent held the attitude of the political parties responsible for their absence from political arena, 2.24 percent opined that there were not many opportunities but overwhelmingly 46.03 percent said that they were not interested in coming into politics.”<sup>56</sup>

In another study of Sherubtse College Survey, it was found that female respondents were more likely to “give societal factors as reasons to account for the barrier. The top reason given was that Bhutanese are not ready to elect women, followed by a lack of current role models to inspire others, and the presence of discrimination against women in politics. In this Survey the study has also found that, female respondents were least likely to agree that ‘lack of capability or interest’ could be factors’ and reasons such as ‘women don’t make as good leaders as men, ‘women aren’t tough enough for politics’, or ‘women themselves don’t have interest in occupying top government positions’<sup>57</sup> etc. were mostly quoted by women for their absence in politics. ”.

Although, “the quota for women has been demanded by many politicians and journalists but it has never been given a positive response in Bhutan.”<sup>58</sup> In the last elections, only People’s Democratic Party (PDP) pledged to ensure 20 percent quota for women in all elected offices. On the other side, politician Lily Wangchuk said she is unsure if quota is really required at the national level. ‘But it is necessary at the grassroots level,’ she said. In the light of local government elections she added, “It will be unfair for empowered women to speak for less empowered women at the local level.”<sup>58</sup>

One USSD Report stated:

*“Women constituted 26 percent of civil service employees and held more than 30 percent of positions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There were no women on the high court, although there was one female judge in a district court. Women in parliament decreased from 9.3 percent in 2005 to 2.7 percent in 2008. There was no provision for allocating a set number or percentage of parliamentary seats for women or members of minority groups.”<sup>60</sup>*

But now-a-days, the participation of women has been increasing in Bhutan. One could notice that the “Head of the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan is a women—Dasho Aum Neten Zam. There are other ladies who are occupying important constitutional offices also, like the Election Commission. We now also have women Dzongda (governor). Recently we have a new woman Justice ‘Tashi Chhozom’, who was appointed to the honourable Apex Court of Bhutan. She is of course the first and only woman occupying such a prestigious office. More importantly, she is also the youngest of all the Supreme Court judges.”<sup>61</sup>

In the meantime, Bhutan Government took an initiative to conduct a programme regarding ‘Decreasing participation at the political level’ through Institute of Management Service in 2010. Discussions done on the status of women had concluded, “Women can establish models in planning and decision making process but the schemes and policies which were framed during this time were mostly drafted by men and no role for women was ensured.”<sup>62</sup>

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION

At the time of election of 2008, Supreme power of the country was in the hands of Young Royal King Jigme Khesher Wangchuk. It gave lot of inspiration to the youth of Bhutan to participate in the election of 2008 in large numbers. With Young King Wangchuk coming to power, there was also a hope among the youth that this King would certainly take some measures in regard to ensure youth representation and participation in Bhutanese Politics.

In Bhutan, “More than 56 percent of Bhutanese citizens are under the age of 25”. Bhutanese youth faces a unique challenge of balancing tradition with modernity while preserving traditional values and culture. Drug and alcohol abuse has become one of Bhutan’s biggest concerns for its youth. Pharmaceutical medicines such as pain killers, cough syrup, and inhalants are among the most commonly used drugs. In addition, the open and porous border with India allows for easy trafficking of drugs.”<sup>63</sup>

Unemployment is a major problem of Bhutanese youth today and also the rural-urban migration has increased significantly over the past few years. If the current rate of migration continues, it is expected that around 400,000 Bhutanese will live in urban areas by the year 2017, which is more than 4 times the present urban population. The unemployment situation in Bhutan is only expected to worsen in the near future. “Most youths who migrate to urban centres do so in the hope of finding work that is less laborious and more rewarding than those that can be found in rural areas.”<sup>64</sup>

Bhutanese Youth is full of talent and abilities. The Government needs to provide and facilitate their overall development. It is only then that the youth of Bhutan could take part in Governmental activities and Decision-making process with full enthusiasm. Youth otherwise may consider political activities useless and nothing more than wastage of time. At the time of Bhutanese Election, in 2013, “Bhutan had 112,600 young voters between the ages of 18 and

25 of whom 70,000 exercised their voting rights for the first time.” “The youth vote will make up 30 percent of the electorate, but that does not guarantee that the issues pertinent to this bloc will be addressed. The Bhutanese government’s bigwigs, who earned their fortunes working under the direct rule of the king, still dominate national politics.”<sup>65</sup>

The elections of 2007, 2008, 2011 along with the present election in 2013, had not seen a positive representation of young women, and few young men and women were not even allowed to cast their votes and their eligibility was cancelled. In 2010, Youth National Policy was implemented in Bhutan which marked three main problems in front of civil participation and representation of youths:

1. “Limited knowledge/opportunity in regard to civic education/participation;
2. Limited female participation in decision making processes particularly at the higher civic level;
3. Lack of participation in decision making by young people.”<sup>66</sup>

In the meanwhile, the youth policy which was implemented in Bhutan had the sole purpose of demarcating the empowerment at the rural and urban; and social and political levels. In 2008 elections, “out of total youth voters; 90,426 youth voters were eligible whereas in 2013, 69,000 youth voters were present.”<sup>67</sup> No doubt, Bhutan had given a unique opportunity to its youths to participate in the elections but most of the youths were not concerned about elections but desperately needed employment. During elections, while analysing the voting behaviour of youths, a newspaper report had said, “In globalised era, the youth online is not engaged in the political process, don’t read newspapers and are more interested in the latest fashion and entertainment trends. Also in the 2008 Elections the youth participation was comparatively lower than other demographic groups due to various factors, also the youths of Bhutan were not aware of election campaigning and had a very low participation in it.”<sup>68</sup>

## **EMERGING POLITICAL AWARENESS**

During the Elections for Local Governance in 2011, it was found that the people of Bhutan had a unique mentality regarding the political system of their Country.

The Election commissioner of Bhutan Kunzang Wangdi said,

*Political participation of people of Bhutan was totally influenced by the situation of Bhutan during 2008 when all the major decisions and policies were initiated by the King and his Ministers itself. People used to believe that all the decisions would be taken by Parliamentary government and there is no relevance of their participation in any of the Governmental activities.*<sup>69</sup>

Contradicting this view Nepali origin Scholar Professor Mahendra Lawoti mentioned,

*Since Bhutan's first parliamentary elections, the media and political opposition have become more assertive, but ordinary people still do not enjoy genuine political rights and civil liberties. The constitutional monarch, Jigme Kheshar Namgyel Wangchuk, retains considerable power, including the right to reject the decisions of the elected Parliament. Political rallies and public demonstrations are not allowed, and media outlets have been fined for criticizing government officials.*<sup>70</sup>

If we look into the role of Parliamentarians in the National Assembly, we find that they do not take interest in political debate being held in Parliament. One of the reports of BBC highlighted that once during the Parliament session, parliamentarians were not allowed to carry their laptops to the assembly.<sup>71</sup> The logic behind it was that Some of the parliamentarians used to play games on Laptops during the session; it was diverting their concentration from serious issues being discussed in the parliament. All this reflects the poor awareness and lack of social concern of the politicians towards the society.

During the recent election of 2013, Dzongkha language emerged as a problematic issue before voters. There were few voters who could not properly understand whatever commitments were made by candidates during election campaign. During the campaigning for the latest elections held in Bhutan, even normal shopkeepers played vital role. These Shopkeepers had put up photographs of those candidates who were supposed to contest National Election.<sup>72</sup> Poster of NC candidates had found a place on the walls and windows of shops and restaurants, not on election advertisement boards, and shopkeepers had become the plungers of the candidates.<sup>73</sup>

During both the elections of 2008 and 2013, Bhutan has also faced the problem of the registration of "postal Ballot". The Kuensel reported,

*During National Assembly's election in 2013, in Bhutan's Zhemgang Village, most of the students didn't apply for postal ballot, because they lacked information and knowledge about the postal ballot. It was very easy to carry out awareness campaign in such institution, what those officials have been doing during five years? Now see the situation villagers don't recognize what type of election is it? NC or NA they do not know how many parties exist and who are their candidates?*<sup>74</sup>

Talking about Bhutanese media Kinley Dorji said, 'we realize that media is not a distant, neutral phenomenon and it is not just a technology. When talk about Bhutanese media, we talk about ourselves. We are cultivating the public mind.'<sup>75</sup> We are performing a public function.'

With the setting up of Constitutional democracy in Bhutan in the year 2008, one can see a lot of variation in the political participation during the

elections of 2008, 2011 and 2013, whereas in the election of 2008, people participated in large numbers in elections related activities, in the election of 2013, this participation had reduced a lot. Media could play an effective role in creating political awareness among the population of the Bhutan, which it has failed to do as yet. The majority of the media were restricted to the urban areas living aside rural areas. The need of the hour is to expand the reach of media, so that people of all sorts, whether literate or illiterate, poor or rich or belonging to any ethnic group, would get benefited out of it.

### **PARTICIPATION BY BHUTANESE NEPALI ORIGIN PEOPLE**

Bhutan has mainly three type of Ethnic groups like- Sharchops, Ngalops and Lhotshampas. The Sharchops are indigenous who reside in north-eastern Part of Bhutan. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group. They constitute about 44 percent of the population. The Ngalops are the Tibetan origin people. They live largely in the Western and Central part of Bhutan and constitute about 28 percent of the population. The ruling elite of the country belongs to this group.<sup>76</sup> They speak Dzongkha and they follow the Drukpa School of Mahayana Buddhism and last one is Lhotshampas (Bhutnese of Nepalese origin) living in Southern Bhutan.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lhotshampas people migrated to Bhutan. They have always faced ethnic and identity based discrimination by Drukpa Culture. According to Bisht,

*An analysis of southern Bhutan cannot be discarded when one analyses Bhutanese elections. Southern Bhutan played a decisive role due to the demographic dividend embedded in it. Demographic benefit favoured the PDP because the maximum numbers of voters are in the south, given its more habitable conditions. It is significant to note that Tobgay had been voicing the concerns of the south and that the PDP was able to garner votes in the south is an indication that people wanted a change in the DPT's policies. This is also an indication that many are not happy with the development path that Bhutan has been following during the past five years.<sup>77</sup>*

Nepalese origin Bhutanese had very bad experiences; they were deprived of exercising their voting right, citizenship and representation at the political level. In the first Democratic parliamentary election in 2008 of Bhutan, Lhotshampas took the official announcement of elections as an opportunity to solve their problem. A number of prominent Lhotshampas from government and private sectors were hopeful. The main among them were, Dr. Samdup Chetri, Ganesh Ghimiray, of the total MPs elected, 4 were from the Lhotshampa community.<sup>78</sup>

In 2013 Elections, His Majesty nominated on 8th May, 2013 from this ethnic group, 5 of his representatives to the National Council to counter-react against

the 20 National Councillors elected by the public on 23rd April, 2013 for the upper house of the parliament.” In this election, only two Lhotshampas got elected from the six Lhotshampa populated Southern districts. They are namely Kamal Gurung from Tsirang and Mon Bahadur Magar from Sarpang districts. The King did not nominate any of the ethnic Lhotshampa in this term too. Therefore, the Lhotshampa representation in the National Council is only 2 percent. This ethnic representation is dropping down in each election term.<sup>79</sup> It shows that how Nepalese of Bhutan have been alienated and marginalized politically in the widening arenas of political participation and democratization.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

These are struggling days for democracy in Bhutan; the Bhutanese government is trying to improve the condition of representation and political participation in Bhutan. But the most challenging factor before the government is the cultural diversity in Bhutan. This cultural diversity has always had great impact on Bhutanese politics in which Drukpa culture is the most influencing factor. As a result, the elite section of the society, which is born and brought up in Drukpa culture try to make final decision on the issue regarding politics, administration and ethnicity in Bhutan. This was only the reason why after getting democratic constitution enforced in the year 2008 till the election of 2013, Bhutanese people could not ensure their participation in Bhutanese politics effectively. As a matter of fact, in Bhutan the monarchy as a political institution has huge impact among other democratic political institutions. As a result, in the recently held elections, issues regarding voting behaviour, election process, citizenship etc., could not fit into the parameters of democracy. Still, there is tremendous need that the government of Bhutan must take some strong steps to improve and consolidate democracy in Bhutan.

As far as media is concerned because of government’s intervention, it seems unsuccessful in covering wider issues. Since the government is coercing the media not to go against it, the newspaper has changed its role from a mouthpiece of government to being a promoter of both the government and the ruling party. Taking advantage of the fact that the media cannot survive without government’s advertisements, the government is trying to take control of the media and dictating the way it should work.

On the front of the Bhutanese of Nepali origin and other minorities, they are constantly facing problems related to their recognition and voting rights. In Drukpa society, issues related to violation of human rights are also increasing day by day. Human Rights and Justice in Bhutan, summarizes the plight of minorities in Bhutan and specifically asserts by saying, ‘The Bhutanese government has delayed repatriation of Bhutanese refugees, restricted voting rights of the nearly 80,000 Nepali-speaking people still living in the country, and failed to set up a human rights mechanism to monitor the condition of minorities, and the population at large.’<sup>80</sup>

Non Buddhist minorities have been mostly neglected in government policies and programmes. There are official documents suggesting some concessions have been made for vulnerable groups however, these groups are supposed to include at the most the disabled persons, women and children. Since the minorities and the refugees have not been mentioned in the documents, it is clearly indicative of failure of government policies to analyse poverty properly. The Royal Government of Bhutan has not only failed to acknowledge discrimination as a factor in poverty but also in providing special education provisions for linguistic minorities. Therefore a lot needs to be done in Bhutan for equitable socio-political development of the society.

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