

# GELEPHU

M I N D F U L N E S S C I T Y





# HIS MAJESTY'S NATIONAL DAY ADDRESS

(TRANSLATED FROM DZONGKHA)

17 DECEMBER, 2023

It is awe-inspiring to see our people arrive from the night before and wait in the cold outdoors, to celebrate National Day at the stadium. There can be no better demonstration of the Bhutanese people's love and loyalty for the nation. This year's National Day is truly special – Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother, who is 93, made it a point to be here in person, along with His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and Their Majesties the Gyalyums. On this auspicious occasion, I want to offer my deepest respects to His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo.

First, I want to know if you have heard about the development of a new city in Gelephu.

Good, I'm pleased that the community representatives I met over the year have kept you well informed.

Today I want to formally share plans for the new city in Gelephu to establish an economic hub for Bhutan. It is important that you fully understand why we are embarking on this national initiative.

South Asia is experiencing an unprecedented economic transformation. This is a period of growth and a period of immense opportunities for our region, which is home to around two billion people. The land connection from Gelephu or Samdrup Jongkhar through Assam and Northeast Indian states, to Myanmar, Thailand, to Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, is a vibrant economic corridor linking South Asia to Southeast Asia. We are in a unique position to reap great benefits if we seize the opportunity, make good plans, and work together diligently.

Some have suggested that we export high value Bhutanese products, like Bumthang honey, organic fruits, and mushrooms to niche markets in the Middle East, Singapore, or Japan. Such efforts may help but they won't bring us sustained prosperity.

I empathise with our youth who are at a crossroads. Given limited opportunities at home, they are faced with the challenging decision to move abroad for better incomes. Even our professionals—doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, lawyers, architects, and engineers, are in a similar position. Separated from their families and friends, they make sacrifices to venture abroad for the sake of their children's future.

Our challenge is that we have barely 700,000 people in our country. Unless we find the right solution, our population may dwindle

to the point when we have more shops than customers, more restaurants than diners, and more houses than tenants. Guided by our collective aspirations and concerns, a clear path unfolds before us. Our immediate goal is for Bhutan to become a developed country.

To our fellow Bhutanese living abroad, know that you are always in my thoughts. You are part of the reason why we conceived this Gelephu project. Even though you are away from home, I know your hearts are with us in Bhutan. You yearn to be home with your family and friends. If you could choose, you would be here. The Gelephu project is to enable you to return. In the meantime, please work hard and gain knowledge and skills. Your experience and exposure overseas will be invaluable for Bhutan as we build our future together.

Over the years, I have met thousands of young people. I have urged you all to study and work hard and contribute as responsible citizens. My one regret has been that I could never tell you your future in Bhutan is assured. I want to change that. Young people should be excited for the future. You should look forward to it with confidence.

As we start such an ambitious project, all our efforts and prayers will be for its success. Some of you may also have concerns about whether Bhutan is ready and able to carry out such an endeavour, and whether everything will go according to plan and bring desired results. When we set a path for ourselves, it is good to have legitimate concerns. But we must not hesitate. It is in our own hands to determine our success.

Will we succeed? Yes, we will succeed.

It is far easier to draft good plans and frame good policies than to come up with the right strategy, and even more difficult to formulate new ones. Small countries like Bhutan can swiftly innovate and implement what other countries might hesitate to pursue or fail to achieve.

We will establish a Special Administrative Region (SAR) in Gelephu. As our economic hub, the SAR will have the autonomy to formulate laws and policies that are needed. It will have executive autonomy and legal independence.

Many countries will be observing us with close interest. Many large and industrialised countries may find themselves unable to implement an enterprise of this scale and ambition due to the lack of internal consensus, deliberate obstructions, and conflict of ideas among vested interest groups.

Bhutan is in an enviable position. We can capitalise on the inherent strengths of small nations to be more flexible and agile. Above all, we are blessed with the harmony and trust between the King, government, and people that binds us all together in a single vision. I have previously spoken about the many opportunities we are afforded due to our ability as a nation to exercise our Sovereign Prerogatives. The SAR in Gelephu exemplifies this.

We build on the strong foundations laid by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. Bhutan is globally renowned for Gross National Happiness (GNH) and our strong spiritual

heritage. We are known as a country with a high level of credibility. Under His Majesty's wise leadership, Bhutan is admired for safeguarding our culture and traditions, distinct national identity and values, as well as our pristine ecology. Without the goodwill and high regard Bhutan inspires, we would have never been able to embark on such an endeavour.

I will be personally involved as we strive to accomplish all our goals, with no qualms or hesitation. We will engage the brightest and most competent Bhutanese as well as the best foreign expertise.

The purpose of establishing this SAR is to create a vibrant economic hub. There are economic hubs elsewhere that invite foreign investment by providing a conducive business environment and compelling incentives. Bhutan's economic hub will offer all that and more. It will be one-of-a-kind, anchored on the vision and values of GNH. It will be a Mindfulness City, encompassing conscious and sustainable businesses, inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage, and distinguished by the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity.

Some of us may worry about an influx of foreigners into our country. Those are valid concerns. However, for the project to succeed, it will be necessary to attract adequate foreign investors and expertise. We will put in place an effective screening process to ensure that the companies and people who come to Gelephu are sensitive to our culture and traditions, respect our identity, and share our values. All businesses will be based on invitation, and we will select

those that are most beneficial for our country and people.

The Gelephu Mindfulness City will cover an area of 1000 sq km, or 250,000 acres\*. This is only 2.5 percent of the total surface area of Bhutan. Yet it will bring vast benefits for the entire country.

Some people may ask: why only Gelephu? Why not all 20 dzongkhags, or existing towns like Thimphu and Paro? It is said, when you are thirsty, you do not jump into the river. We must be cautious and weigh the associated risks and benefits when we embark on an important initiative like the Gelephu SAR. A great deal of thought and planning went into developing this project.

From studying why many countries who tried failed to establish economic hubs, we learnt that in most cases, they were disrupted by conflicts that arise when large fortunes are at stake. Political interference, greed, opportunistic behavior, short-term thinking and, ultimately, corruption derailed their best plans.

We don't want to do the same. By focusing on a single area like Gelephu, we will be able to insulate the economic hub from undue influence, ring-fence it to contain the risks, and manage it closely. While the project will be implemented in Gelephu, the economic benefits will accrue to people in all our dzongkhags.

*\* As of 2024, the area identified for the Gelephu Mindfulness City has been expanded, and now measures 2500 sq km.*



Some will ask how the project will benefit us personally, our families, and our children. The establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City will involve major investments in public infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and airports. With inflow of foreign investments, there will be construction of offices, residences, schools, hospitals, and businesses such as shops, restaurants, and hotels. The growth in economic activities will offer greater opportunities to the private sector.

Economic growth will generate demand for goods and services. The benefits will encompass all dzongkhags, especially farmers, providing niche and lucrative markets in the country for all our products. With FDI, there will be more jobs for the youth, with international salary scales and greater access to technology and skills. A flourishing economy means that our people need not always think of migrating and the government coffers will be in a better state to distribute wealth more evenly to our people.



I want to emphasise three immediate priority areas that will support the Gelephu project: Energy, Connectivity, and Skills.

First, we need to further expand our energy sector. We should tap all available sources including solar, wind, thermal, and hydropower. Considering our current expertise, we need to enhance the installed capacity of hydropower by expediting the construction of projects such as Kholongchu, Chamkharchu, Dorjilung, Nyera Amari, Wangchu, Bunakha, and Sunkosh, for which Detailed Project Reports are ready. Our electricity prices should be among the most competitive in the region so that our hydro resources are not just a source of revenue, but also an enabler of other investments.

Second, we need efficient and reliable connectivity, which is critical for a landlocked country. This includes constructing the international airport in Gelephu for which the ground breaking ceremony will be held later this month. Our experts tell us that the airport construction can commence after the monsoon season in 2024 and be completed within 2 years.

I am also pleased to share that during my recent visit to India, the Government of India expressed their full commitment to improve and expand the major roads leading to Bhutan. They also pledged to connect two or three of our border towns with railway lines. I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Government of India for their continued goodwill and support.

Digital infrastructure and digital connectivity is equally important in this age of artificial

intelligence. We have to improve our digital infrastructure and mobile, internet, and satellite connectivity.

Third, to ensure that our people do not miss out on this great opportunity, we will prioritise building up the skills of our people. In turn, our people must take advantage of every opportunity to equip themselves for success. What we lack in numbers, we have to make up for in the abilities and talent of our people.

Some will think that the main goals of the Gelephu project are to attract investments, boost trade and businesses, and create employment. While these remain important, the larger vision of all our endeavors is to serve and protect our three precious jewels: our inheritance – Bhutan, our spiritual legacy of Ugyen Guru Rinpoche and Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyel, and thirdly, the future of our children. It is our sacred responsibility to safeguard our three jewels.

His Majesty the Third Druk Gyalpo opened our country to progress and modernity with the construction of the first motor road between Phuntsholing, which was a mere tract of forest, and Thimphu, which was largely rural. This economic lifeline, built with the sweat and toil of our ancestors, has transformed the nation in a single generation.

The peace, happiness and stability, that our generation enjoys today is the legacy of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and His generation.



Future generations will ask about the achievements of the Fifth Druk Gyalpo and our generation. We cannot tell them that we merely held on to what we have inherited and failed to build anything noteworthy in our time.

We are a small landlocked country wedged between large and powerful neighbours, living in an era of rapid and unpredictable global changes. If our efforts are lackluster, our future will be in peril.

However, we are blessed with an incredible opportunity to build our own legacy. We have a noble vision backed by a clear idea, at the right time. I am fully confident that we will succeed. My confidence comes from my deep and abiding trust in our people. Bhutanese are loyal, responsible, capable, and resilient. They are innately intelligent, and adept at learning new ideas, and care deeply about our country and our future.

Furthermore, with the incredible amount of work already done to develop the Gelephu project, I trust our vision and our strategy. Bhutan is a country of destiny, and I trust destiny. We are embarking on this task in the service of our people and nation. Our Guardian Deities will continue to guide and protect us.

During my reign as King, and for our generation, this is one of the most significant undertakings. It is an inflection point, a moment in history that is very important for us.

This is a mandate and opportunity for us all – the King, the government, and the people to join hands and work tirelessly to pave the road to the future. Gelephu will become a gateway connecting Bhutan to the world and the future. The road we have chosen is a gateway to the world – to markets, capital, new ideas, knowledge, and technology towards our future, and – to chart our destiny.

Our responsibility is not just for the immediate future. Four hundred years ago, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel built the nation state of Bhutan, and his legacy, our inheritance, remains intact to this day. Let us build a legacy that will continue to benefit Bhutanese 500 years into the future. Are you ready to shoulder this responsibility with me?

I became King at 26, and now I am 43 years old. I will do everything in my power to realize this vision. I will put my own life on the line. And I will do it for your sake. Because you are an extraordinary and noble people. You are extraordinary in your devotion to one another and your love for the country. Let us work together with fearless determination to build an extraordinary legacy during my reign, and for the next generation.

# BIG UNVEILS GELEPHU 'MINDFULNESS CITY' IN THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN



In the 116<sup>th</sup> National Day address to an audience of 30,000, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck presented his vision for a new economic hub in Bhutan, the world's first carbon-negative country. Located in the town of Gelephu in Southern Bhutan, the 2500+ km<sup>2</sup> masterplan titled 'Mindfulness City' by BIG, Arup, and Cistri is informed by Bhutanese culture, the principles of Gross National Happiness index (GNH), and the country's strong spiritual heritage.

The future Gelephu Special Administration Region, located on the India-Bhutan border, will leverage its location and connectivity to South and Southeast Asia to lay the foundation for the country's future growth and create economic opportunities for its citizens through investments in green technology, education, and infrastructure. Designed by BIG's Landscape and Urban

Design Team, the masterplan includes a new international airport, railway connections, a hydroelectric dam, public spaces, and a language for local building typologies, based on the nine domains of GNH: Psychological Wellbeing, Health, Education, Living Standards, Time-Use, Ecological Diversity and Resilience, Good Governance, Cultural Diversity and Resilience, and Community Vitality.



Nestled between mountains, forests, and rivers, Bhutan stands as one of the last biodiversity hotspots in the world, with 70% of the country covered in forest. Mindfulness City aims to amplify the country's abundant biodiversity by emerging as a vibrant tapestry of interconnected ecosystems and lively neighborhoods shaped by the flow of the 35 rivers and streams that run through the site. The resulting ribbonlike neighborhoods resemble paddy fields, forming urban terraces that cascade down from the hills to the valley. The city increases in density from the rural and recreational highlands to the urban and dense lowlands.



The natural elements and the existing infrastructure, agriculture, and utilities of Gelephu naturally create eleven distinct neighborhoods across the 2500+ km<sup>2</sup> area. Each of the eleven neighborhoods is designed based on the principles of the Mandala: defined by a series of repeating typologies organized symmetrically around a central public

*"The Gelephu Masterplan gives form to His Majesty's vision to create a city that becomes a cradle for growth and innovation while remaining founded on Bhutanese nature and culture. We imagine the Mindfulness City as a place that could be nowhere else. Where nature is enhanced, agriculture is integrated, and tradition is living and breathing, not only preserved but also evolved. Shaped by waterways, Gelephu becomes a land of bridges, connecting nature and people, past and future, local and global. Like the traditional Dzongs, these inhabitable bridges turn into cultural landmarks, doubling as transportation infrastructure combined with civic facilities. Among these, the Sankosh Temple-Dam embeds the city's fundamental values into a cascading landscape of steps and landings, that like a 21<sup>st</sup> century Tiger's Nest will be a manmade monument to the divine possibility of a sustainable human presence on earth. Turning engineering into art and turning the forces of nature into power."*

- Bjarke Ingels, Founder and Creative Director, BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group

space, a gradual transition in density is created, from small buildings dispersed in the landscape in the north to larger footprints within an urban environment in the south.

To protect existing and future development against flooding in the monsoon season, paddy fields will be established along the site's rivers and tributaries, running from north to south. These will further function as biodiversity corridors for local flora and fauna, leaving the migratory routes of elephants and other wildlife undisturbed.



*"Inspired by the Bhutanese culture of respect and compassion for others and nature, the Mindfulness City is designed to enhance ecological systems, through an urban development that connects flora and fauna, as well as people and ideas. It becomes a testament of humanity's inseparable bond with nature, and a global example of how to build a sustainable human presence on Earth."*

**- Giulia Frittoli, Partner in Charge, BIG Landscape, BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group**

The neighborhoods within the city, which are divided by rivers, are tied together by three main mobility connections. Occasionally, these double as transportation infrastructure combined with civic and cultural facilities, creating a series of 'inhabitable bridges' which are tailored to each of the nine Gross National Happiness domains.

Each of the bridges house key destinations within the city: the new airport, a Vajrayana spiritual center which allows glimpses into the daily practices of the monks and masters of mindfulness; a healthcare center as a meeting between Eastern and Western medicine; a university that exposes its academic activities; a hydroponic and aquaponic greenhouse putting ancient farming practices and modern agro-science on display for the daily commuters; a cultural center to immerse and educate visitors about Bhutanese culture and customs; and a market adorned with Bhutanese textiles.





Intimate streets, paved with permeable pavers provide resilience by allowing stormwater to seep into the ground rather than the sewage system. Local materials - wood, stone, and bamboo will be used in the new buildings, inspired by vernacular motifs such as rabsel, cornices, ornaments, and roofscapes.



The final bridge, a hydroelectric dam, will be constructed on the city's western border with a step-well retaining wall that offers viewpoints, staircases for meditative walks, and a temple. Visitors and pilgrims can ascend and descend along countless individual routes to the visitor center and temple nestled on the face of the manmade cliff. The Sankosh Temple-Dam embodies in architectural form all the foundational elements of Gelephu: the harmonious coexistence of culture and nature, conceived as a hybrid child of Bhutan's rich past heritage and its prosperous future legacy.





## **PROJECT FACTS**

**Name:** Gelephu Mindfulness City

**Size:** 2500+ km<sup>2</sup>

**Location:** Gelephu, The Kingdom of Bhutan

**Client:** The Kingdom of Bhutan

**Collaborators:** Arup, Cistri

## **PROJECT TEAM**

**Partners-in-Charge:** Bjarke Ingels, Giulia Frittoli Project

**Manager:** Nanna Gyldholm Møller

**Design Lead:** Dace Gurecka

**Team:** Anastasiia Golub, Filip Radu, Giancarlo Albarello Herrera, Krishna Arunkumar, Marius Tromholt-Richter, Matthew Goodwill, Monika Dauksaite, Sophie Høgg, Xian Chen, Xu Lian

**Visualizations:** Brick Visual, Atchain, BIG

**Animation:** Squint/Opera & Brick Visual

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# BHUTAN'S SAR

## *A Paradigm Shift in Global Economic Development*

In Bhutan, a groundbreaking vision is unfolding - the establishment of a Special Administrative Region (SAR) that challenges the norms for economic development. Far beyond the conventional pursuit of wealth, this bold initiative is a paradigm shift in which economic progress, mindfulness and sustainability converge. Bhutan is extending a unique invitation to like-minded international partners to join in reshaping the conventional narrative of prosperity.

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### **BHUTAN'S DISTINCTIVE APPROACH**

Located in the town of Gelephu in southern Bhutan, this SAR represents more than just economic aspirations. It encapsulates a transformative vision rooted in the nation's core principles. Bhutan aims to redefine success by departing from the traditional over emphasis on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Instead, it embraces the holistic approach of Gross National Happiness (GNH), recognizing that true prosperity should also encompass well-being and environmental sustainability. It also recognizes that the holistic well-being of professionals is often key to commercial success.

This approach positions Bhutan's SAR as a living laboratory for redefining success. In a world fixated with economic indicators, Bhutan has the potential to become a beacon for a more balanced and conscientious model that prioritizes the pursuit of individual and collective well-being.

### **HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT**

At the core of this SAR lies a commitment to holistic development beyond GDP growth. Unlike conventional economic zones, Bhutan's approach integrates the nine GNH domains: Psychological Wellbeing, Health, Education, Living Standards, Time-Use, Ecological Diversity and Resilience, Good Governance, Cultural Diversity and Resilience, and Community Vitality. It posits that sustainable economic development can go hand in hand with the pursuit of higher order outcomes.

The SAR is a testament to Bhutan's commitment to non-negotiable core principles that are deeply rooted in its cultural and philosophical heritage. This commitment shapes the very fabric of the SAR, in which prosperity should not be at the expense of ethical considerations.

## **SUCCESS REDEFINED**

Bhutan's invitation to like-minded international partners transcends the typical call for investors. It seeks discerning collaborators with a shared vision for a completely different kind of success. It invites them into a collaborative space that is intertwined with the nation's progress. In this long-term relationship, partners are not just investors. They are contributors to a legacy of mutual prosperity that goes beyond traditional notions of financial gains.

This collaborative approach is a testament to the belief that sustainable development is a collective long-term endeavor, requiring shared dedication to principles that prioritize well-being and environmental consciousness.

## **INNOVATION AND OPEN COLLABORATION**

Bhutan's departure from traditional economic zones extends to the structure of collaboration within the SAR. It wants to be a white canvas for innovation and co-creation. That the SAR will have executive autonomy and judicial independence just shows how serious Bhutan is about this. Indeed, this emphasis on innovation recognizes that the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand creative solutions and all hands on deck.

By fostering an environment in which ideas can flow freely and innovation can thrive, the SAR would become a dynamic space for continuous improvement and transformative efforts.

## **A NEW GLOBAL MODEL FOR PROSPERITY**

Bhutan's SAR is not an isolated initiative confined within its borders. It can be a global model for prosperity by challenging the predominant narratives of economic development. This is where like-minded international partners can join hands to reshape the narrative of economic progress.

Bhutan's commitment to sustainability, mindfulness, and economic progress respond to the need for a more considered approach to global development and progress. The SAR has the potential to emerge as a viable and visible example of how economic success can be achieved without totally compromising environmental, societal and individual well-being. It can perhaps offer a glimmer of hope in a world that is increasingly torn apart by man-made conflict and environmental degradation.

## **CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY**

The Gelephu SAR is unfolding as a visionary endeavor, challenging the prevailing norms of global economic development. Beyond economic growth, Bhutan's commitment to GNH and its unwavering adherence to core principles mark a paradigm shift. Against the backdrop of an increasingly troubled world, the SAR should show us a future where success is measured not only in profits but also in the harmonious well-being of people and the planet. As Bhutan invites like-minded International partners to join this transformative





journey, it hopefully heralds a new era in which prosperity can go hand in hand with mindfulness, sustainability, and the collective pursuit of well-being.

**Yeo Whee Jim, Transformation Office**

