

## **Pandemic: A Big Fight for a Small Nation of Bhutan**

This is a story about a small nation of Bhutan. Bhutan is a kingdom tucked between China (to the north) and India (to the south). The country has barely around 800,000 people within the border of some 38, 394 per square Kilometers area. Indeed, the country is just a small speck compared to the two neighboring giants. The country is still a developing country and its GDP is just about 2, 842 billion dollars. The country is small, the GDP even smaller and the fight it has to fight has never been challenging.

Late 2019, Wuhan city in China declared the first case of Corona Virus. Within weeks, the number of infected people doubled and death was incessant for months. Within months it spread to the other side of the world. Since the news of the first COVID-19 case, Bhutan began to brace herself for the impact. It has been around 7 months since the outbreak of the virus and still shows no sign of stopping. It is still spreading as much as it has been. It is even more dreading that we have not found a cure yet. Amidst this pandemic, Bhutan is struggling but putting up a brave fight against the virus.

### **The Challenges of the Nation**

Bhutan depends solely on India for almost anything and shares a very porous border with her. Salt, sugar, coffee, rice and other needs as well as wants too. This includes cars, mobile phone and even the clothes. Let alone these needs and wants, Bhutan also depends on India and other countries like Japan, Korea and Bangladesh for workforce. The workforce includes the manual labor workers, special skilled workers and even the experts. These foreign workers are very essential work force in hospitals, construction areas and even the garages of various Auto-Mobile workshops.

As the world got drowned by the virus, the Bhutanese people living abroad began to rush back to the country. It is a dangerous journey back home and nothing could be deadlier than an unchecked patient coming into the country. Given its small size and cohesive environment, one unchecked person could have the whole nation coughing for life.

On May 2020, the country saw its first case of COVID-19 infection. Since then whole education was put in a different room altogether. The nation closed down all the schools and institutions and went online for learning. This brought about its own set of problems to be solved.

### **The Big Fight and What is Wrong**

To ensure that the country has all the necessities stocked up, the government under the advice of His Majesty and led by the Prime Minister, is importing all the necessary items from India by regulating, checking and ensuring a safe import. The border area of Bhutan (in the south), is under heavy surveillance. Military personnel, police and voluntary task forces of Desuup (Protector of Peace) are always on the watch. What makes the border area such attention worthy

threat is its porous nature. The border of Bhutan and India does not have a huge wall to demarcate the area; it is all bushes and a meter long wall in some areas. The challenge is stepped up for the surveillance team by the smugglers from Bhutan and India. Even during such times or more during such times, people desperately try to smuggle in tobacco products. Some 15 individuals are caught but it doesn't stop the people from smuggling. The challenge is yet to be overcome. All the country need is a potential virus carrier to plunge the whole nation into a desperate fight for life. Bhutan is a small country and it indeed has a cohesive environment. If such things happen, Bhutan does not have the skilled required, the money and the equipment needed to fight such widespread infection. It is a not a rich country.

The garages in the capital city of Thimphu are all stranded. It is not just because of lack of spare parts (which would be imported from India) but also due to lack of skilled workers. Now that people from India and Bangladesh went back home, the garages do not have skilled worker in their garages. And those with skills in the nation are too shy to work in these garages. The youth of Bhutan think a blue collar job is just work and not a job. Here the challenge is not just about lack of skilled worker and spare parts, it is more about the mentality of the youth and the people.

Most of the Bhutanese families raise their kid to be a *Dasho* (A high ranked official). It is not very uncommon to see Bhutanese parents emphasizing to be a *Dasho* and urging them to study hard. The inherent result with the kids is *Dasho* and nothing else. So, in Bhutan you have a job only if you sit behind a desk on a rotating chair. These things and mentalities are now manifesting themselves as challenges. To make the matter worst for those who aspire to be mechanics, most of the people associate these works with *Jaga* (term used to refer to people from India and Bangladesh). And truth be told, there is some racist meaning to that, you are considered inferior and often associated with being underprivileged. If the society thinks that way, Bhutan is in this for a long war.

There are thousands of Bhutanese who are unemployed. There are hundreds more who need to make some cash to make their ends meet, immediately. Yet, the construction business is facing serious labor shortage. So, the government has to bring in workers from Bangladesh and India while the unemployed and those businesses that are not doing well are given free money by His Majesty the King. The King has to give money to these people while all of them could have come together and worked in those areas where workers are needed. It is true that skills are needed in some places but not all. If the pandemic goes on for years, there is only so much the benevolent king can provide. At last, it comes down to the people of Bhutan; one can see that a change for open minded in needed here.

It is quite ironic that Bhutan has labor shortages while there are more than some 60,000 Bhutanese living abroad. The main objective was to earn some foreign cash for the nation. It was a great idea, only if the COVID-19 didn't emerge. Now the government has to pay more than these people has earned as subsidies to various flight companies in and outside of Bhutan to bring these people back to the country. On top of that, the government has to quarantine these

people for 3 weeks. In these three weeks they are provided with food, lodging and other services. This is an expensive task and a big one for such a small country. Bhutan might have to think about other options than to send people out in other countries in future. If another of such thing happens in future, Bhutan cannot afford to bring back the people. It is just not worth what they earned and way too risky for the country. Currently, as of 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 Bhutan has 66 COVID-19 cases with 18 recoveries and zero death. All of these 66 cases are imported and Bhutan did not have any internal transmission as of now. So, the more the people they send out at first and bring in during such hours, the riskier the business becomes. This is not complaining, it is stating the truth and as well, no solutions as such are mentioned here. The solution lies with the people of Bhutan and not with an individual writer.

Then there is great news of people from various villages providing vegetables to these quarantine centers. These are farmers who have formed organization to do cooperative farming. It is such a good news and makes it even better that most of them were illiterate and only few of them had some basic education.

The education sector and institutions are all facing their own set of problems. The shift to online learning can be both doom and a boon. There are people who can manage to go online every time and learn. There are even more students who cannot afford a phone let alone a laptop. Then comes the problem of network. Students living in far flung corners of the country do not have good internet connections. These are students whose parents are farmers who work all day. It is a challenge from them to stay in the house writing and reading while their parents are out in the sun working. The parents might support their kid's studies but it can be quite challenging for the kid to resist not to help their parents, especially when they are sweating through pouring rain and scorching sun.

Yet, the government is trying their best to help all the students as they are providing the students with data plans, helping students by providing with online resources and even organizing online classes on national television.

Bhutan is fighting a brave fight. The fight is far from winning but it is not losing either. All thanks to the great leadership of His Majesty the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. There is still hope for Bhutan to win this big fight. However, the mentality and the population of Bhutan need some serious upgrade regarding their mentality. The main point here is, the government is literally doing almost anything for the people. Then there are people who are complaining on the failures of the government. When there is too many a time someone try, there is bound to have some failures.