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## IN THIS ISSUE

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### Editorial

This edition of The Bhutan Journal is solemnly dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. Govinda Rizal—scholar, activist, and co-founding editor of this publication. Since the journal’s inception in 2019, Dr. Rizal remained a steadfast pillar of its editorial vision, intellectual integrity, and unwavering commitment to truth.

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### Govinda Rizal’s Words Have Lasting Significance

*Dr Susan Banki*

Govinda wrote powerfully about what it meant to be forced out. He wrote movingly about the last time he saw his Amai, and about the torture and death of a dear friend and classmate, Khadka Bahadur Magar, whose family was tricked into signing forms that made it seem as though he was already sick (pp. 102-103). He describes the slow impoverishment of his family in Lodrai, with no income and no ability to plow the fields. When his family left, he describes how the family plot was taken from him, and he was made landless and homeless. In one of the most emotive moments of the book, Govinda describes managing to cross back into Bhutan during the AMCC marches. I quote at length here, because Govinda’s words demonstrate the tension and hope that so many young Bhutanese must have felt about exile and the potential promise of return.

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## **GMC: A Challenging Vision**

*TBJ Team*

The proposed Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) represents a transformative urban development initiative in Bhutan, aimed at establishing a pivotal business connection between South East Asia and South Asia. Announced by King Jigme Khesar on December 17, 2023, the GMC aspires to create a holistic living environment attuned to Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), emphasising mindfulness, sustainability, and community well-being. This article explores the vision, strategic location, design principles, stakeholder collaborations, socio-environmental considerations, and potential challenges associated with the GMC.

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## **The Cultural History of Gelephu**

*TBJ Team*

Gelephu and its residents have an enduring capacity to adapt and respond to change when new factors/influences are introduced, while simultaneously preserving that which promotes unique aspects of culture and religion. This kind of adaptability supports the ambitions of the GMC. This study examines the pre-Gelephu culture, the impact of Nepali culture, the emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the role of religious artifacts, festivals, and traditions in shaping the region's cultural heritage. It also looks at the futuristic view of the cultural diversity if the GMC vision is realised in its entirety.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). The Cultural History of Gelephu. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 26-36. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb2](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb2)

## **Demography Dynamics in Gelephu**

*TBJ Team*

As the third largest city in Bhutan, Gelephu has the fastest growing population, which would be accelerated with the proposed Gelephu Special Administrative Region (GeSAR). However, there are restrictions already in place for land transactions in the district and people from the region are forced to seek land substitutions in other districts to make way for the city. Many of the demographic indicators of Gelephu are better compared to other districts in the country. This chapter examines the demographic indicators of the Sarpang district, within which the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is located, and do their comparative study.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Demography Dynamics in Gelephu. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 37-53. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb3](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb3)

## **Gelephu: Bhutan's Emerging Trade Powerhouse**

*TBJ Team*

Gelephu is a significant trade hub. Historically, Gelephu has played a major role in the country's trade, showing resilience through economic fluctuations and political upheavals. Its proximity to India is boon for both import and customers from across the border. Its potential as a business hub to connect South and South-East Asia will be tested over time. This article covers trade barriers, legal obstacles and other potential problems that might hinder the realisation of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) as a regional trading hub connecting Bhutan and South Asia with South-East Asia.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Gelephu: Bhutan's Emerging Trade Powerhouse. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 54-66. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb4](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb4)

## Health Landscape of Gelephu

*TBJ Team*

Significant progress has been made in healthcare delivery, particularly in the areas of infectious disease control, non-communicable diseases, and traditional medicine. There are also several challenges faced by the healthcare system, including infrastructure issues, increased NCDs, and the integration of traditional and modern medicine. The article concludes with recommendations for improving healthcare services in the region, emphasising the need for evidence-based practices, infrastructure development, and sustainable healthcare policies.

Page 67

**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Health Landscape of Gelephu. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 67-77. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb5](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb5)

## GMC And The Challenges of Geography

Gelephu sits on widest flat land of the country yet Bhutan's mountain terrain mean the uneven geography is the challenge for any infrastructure development that are necessary for a thriving commercial hub. Bhutan's commitments to ecology conservation is internationally recognised. On top of that GMC requires enormous investments to build infrastructure in the terrain, for which the country lack adequate capital. Under such circumstances, GMC leadership's task requires fine tuned marketing skills to win the trust of investors that GMC guarantees return on investments.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). GMC And The Challenges of Geography. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 78-87. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb6](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb6)

## **Lack of Infrastructure Blurs Mega City Vision**

*TBJ Team*

Gelephu faces significant infrastructure challenges, hindering its transformation into a major commercial hub. Despite its flat terrain, which is conducive to development, the town has repeatedly failed to evolve due to inadequate infrastructure. A notable issue is water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change and poor management. Other primary infrastructures such as sanitation, waste management, housing, educational facilities, health amenities and transport are not well planned to cater to the need of a futuristic city. This article traces the challenges of Gelephu in attaining these basic infrastructures that are fundamental to building a mega city.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Lack of Infrastructure Blurs Mega City Vision. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 88-112. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb7](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb7)

## **Legal Basis For GeSAR**

The GeSAR represents a groundbreaking initiative with executive, legal, and policy autonomy. Established by a Royal Charter issued in February 2024, the GeSAR operates under a unique legal framework. While Bhutan's Constitution does not explicitly provide for SARs, Article 2, Section 16e grants the King prerogatives for actions not covered by existing laws, legitimising the SAR's creation to some extent. The Local Government Act 2009, which governs local administrations, does not envision an SAR, suggesting the GMC operates outside current legal structures. Parliamentary approval was bypassed and national referendum was not deemed appropriate. This article shall look into constitutional, legal and other operational hurdles in the GMC realisation.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Legal Basis For GeSAR. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 113-122. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb8](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb8)

## Political Representation in GMC

*TBJ Team*

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is established as an independent entity with executive, legislative and judiciary independence. The city is unlikely to have political independence though. The ‘one country, two systems’ is practiced only in Hong Kong and Macau. While these two territories were returning to their homeland from foreign rule, the GMC is the other way round – getting self rule. Gelephu citizens lack the experience of democracy and liberties compare to Hong Kong and Macau. This basic difference will determine the success of a ‘one country, two system’ test in Bhutan.

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**Citation:** TBJ Team (2025). Political Representation in GMC. *The Bhutan Journal*, 6(1); 123-133. DOI: [doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb9](https://doi.org/10.55564/tbj61tbj25yb9)

## Gelephu Beats Inside Bhutanese in Exile

*TBJ Team*

The relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese in exile, particularly the Nepali speaking community, is a complex narrative shaped by socio-political movements, demographic shifts, and state policies. This paper examines key historical events, including the political awakening in 1950, 1990s, the king's visits and assurances, the mass exodus of Nepalis, and the subsequent resettlement of northern Bhutanese in Gelephu. Through an analysis of these events, this study highlights the enduring emotional and cultural ties between Gelephu and the exiled Bhutanese, as well as the broader implications for identity, citizenship, and national unity in Bhutan.

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## Editorial

This edition of *The Bhutan Journal* is solemnly dedicated to the memory of the late Dr. Govinda Rizal—scholar, activist, and co-founding editor of this publication. Since the journal's inception in 2019, Dr. Rizal remained a steadfast pillar of its editorial vision, intellectual integrity, and unwavering commitment to truth.

Life of Dr. Govinda Rizal, born into a modest farmer family in the serene southern regions of Bhutan, was marked by exile and adversity, was defined by a relentless pursuit of knowledge and a deep commitment to the betterment of his community. Born to a poor farmer family, his natural inclination towards learning was unmistakable, his thirst for knowledge was not to be quenched.

In exile, Dr. Rizal's commitment to education became even more pronounced - playing a pioneering role in the establishment of the Bhutanese Community Development Centre (BCDC) and Disability Education – outside the formal school education setting. This innovative approach to non-formal education provided a haven for youngsters and adults alike.

His advocacy extended to the political realm through his engagement in Appeal Movement Coordination Council (AMCC), lobbying in both Delhi and Kathmandu during the height of our repatriation activism.

His thirst for knowledge led him further afield to Japan post-doctoral research at the International Rice Research Institute in Manila contributing to rice cultivation and genetic modification. Dr. Rizal continued his agricultural research through teaching at Tribhuvan University, enriching the academic landscape with his insights into rice cultivation.

Beyond his scientific and academic contributions, Dr. Rizal was a prolific writer. His literary works, written in Nepali and English, spanned a variety of genres including educational and satirical stories. These writings were more than mere literatures; they were tools for enlightenment and social commentary.

Dr. Rizal's dedication to education found another outlet in his role as the founding editor of *The Bhutan Journal*. This publication played a groundbreaking role in educating the resettled Bhutanese community about the importance of research and writing in journals. Through *The Bhutan Journal*, Dr. Rizal aimed to not only preserve Bhutanese cultural identity but also to empower the community through knowledge dissemination.

His untimely demise in 2024 sent shockwaves through the Bhutanese diaspora. It was a profound loss, felt deeply by those who had known him well. This issue of *The Bhutan Journal*, therefore, stands as a tribute to Dr. Rizal, reflecting on his life and his concerns regarding the proposed Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC). The project, to be established on land historically occupied by evicted

Bhutanese, including Dr. Rizal's family, raised ethical and legal issues that he had vehemently contested. His voice continues to resonate, urging for justice and respect for the rights of displaced communities.

Dr. Rizal's legacy is one of inspiration. His story is a beacon of hope and inspiration. Even in death, Dr. Rizal's voice compels us to reflect on the ethical implications of development projects like the GMC and to honour the rights of those who have been displaced.

Dr. Rizal took a particular interest in the GMC project. Dr. Rizal had been closely monitoring the early signs of this development, concerned not with its urban aspirations but with the complex historical and ethical grounds on which it was being planned.

For Dr. Rizal, Gelephu<sup>1</sup> was a land embedded with memory and pain still alive within the hearts of many evicted citizens. He was concerned GMC project may be an economic progress but more that is a strategic attempt to erase the history and identity of the region. In his final months, Dr. Rizal discussed the implications of the GMC project with the Bhutanese diaspora. He convened conversations and drafted an appeal directed at potential investors, stakeholders, and international observers. The document laid out a moral and legal argument against the project—calling it a disruption of historical justice and a barrier to the rightful repatriation of evicted citizens.

The proposed establishment of a Mega City on these lands raises significant ethical and legal concerns. It not only disrupts the rights of the evicted people but also complicates and obstructs their potential repatriation. Our intention is not to perpetuate victimhood

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<sup>1</sup> We have used Gelephu and Sarpang interchangeably in this edition when referring to GMC – name originates with Gelephu but includes whole of the Sarpang district.

but to protect our rights, honor the historical significance of these lands, and seek a just and equitable resolution to this longstanding issue.

Dr. Rizal was hopeful to open a broader, transnational scholarly discussion on the GMC. He believed that only through rigorous intellectual engagement could the silenced histories and contested narratives of the region be fully understood and responsibly addressed.

He had planned for several public talk on the subject and was preparing to join the expert panel for The Bhutan Watch Discussion Forum, a dedicated event designed to explore the ethical, historical, and political dimensions of the GMC. This forum was slated for 5 May 2024. Tragically, his shocking accident on that very day left that dream unfulfilled forever. He died in a road accident.

Now, with the untimely demise of Dr. Rizal, the responsibility to carry forward his mission—to raise awareness within the international community about the historical injustices tied to the GMC—remains more crucial than ever. It falls upon all of us—scholars, activists, and concerned global citizens—to ensure that his work does not end with him. The struggle to protect the truth, to honor the dispossessed, and to advocate for justice must continue with renewed vigor and unwavering commitment.

As a mark of respect to his legacy and a tribute to his contribution, this edition of *The Bhutan Journal* is devoted entirely to exploring the GMC. We do so not just to inform, but to critically engage with its implications, both historical and contemporary.

I would like to extend my deep appreciation and gratefulness to *The Bhutan Journal* editor I P Adhikari for working singlehandedly to bring this edition to completion. I would also like to thank Alexia Adhikari (Simpson) for her valuation contribution, dedication, and behind-the-scenes efforts in making this episode of the journal possible. Also thanks to all other reviewers of the content presented on this edition of the journal.

Ram Karki  
Hague, The Netherlands

## **Govinda Rizal's Words Have Lasting Significance**

Dr Susan Banki

I arrived in Beldangi for the first time in 2008. Since then, I have been conducting research on the situation of Bhutanese refugees. To complete my recent book, *The Ecosystem of Exile Politics: Why Proximity and Precarity Matter for Bhutan's Homeland Activists*, over 16 years I conducted nearly 100 interviews and read (I believe) read every English-language book about the history, politics and social situation that shaped the Bhutanese refugee experience.<sup>2</sup> All have been valuable, but my exposure to Govinda Rizal – his book, some additional articles, and one very informative and long-ranging interview with him in person – has profoundly shaped my understanding of Bhutan's refugee history. In all of these, Govinda Rizal's words have had a lasting influence.

I first heard of Govinda Rizal when Indra Adhikari told me about his book, *A Pardesi in Paradise*, published in 2018<sup>3</sup>. Within days, I had filled the margins with exclamation marks and the pages with Post-It notes to mark where I had gained new insights. This book allowed me to develop a powerful sense of the on-the-ground experience for the Lhotshampas, whom Govinda called Bhutanese. Of course I had read much about these experiences before, and I had spoken to many refugees themselves. But Govinda's story is remarkable in its depth and breadth. He starts with narrating his days as a young child, before going through the years of Bhutan's problematic policies that alienated, harmed, and expelled one-sixth of the country's population. He describes his personal experiences after leaving Bhutan, and the most important moments of the opposition

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<sup>2</sup> Banki, S. (2024). *The Ecosystem of Exile Politics: Why Proximity and Precarity Matter for Bhutan's Homeland Activists*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Rizal, G. (2018). *A Pardesi in Paradise*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Discourse Publications.

movement, before explaining his later work and education in Japan, Nepal, and elsewhere.. His are words with endurance. These words are part of his legacy.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to return to Nepal to conduct several interviews for my book. There, I met Govinda in person. He was generous with his time. He suggested other individuals to interview, commented on my ideas about homeland activism, and answered my questions about his book. Even though his book has so much embedded knowledge, and despite being very well-read on the issue, I still sought some explanations and context, which he affably offered. Thereafter, I remained in email correspondence with him, particularly as we made efforts to support the work of the Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan. Govinda sent additional pieces he had written, including a trenchant analysis of Bhutan's foreign policy approaches as a landlocked country between two giants.<sup>4</sup> From these materials I learned much about how the remaining refugees in camps in Nepal were managing in the post-resettlement phase.

Here, I'd like to point to several insights that I have learned specifically from Govinda and his writings.

First, as a migration scholar and advocate, I often encounter people who claim that refugees are 'lucky' to have found another place to move to, and that, once settled there, their focus is purely oriented toward the host country, so much so that their memories of home no longer matter. But Govinda's book shows that even in exile,

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<sup>4</sup> Rizal, G. (2023). 'Bhutan's Foreign Policy and Its Strategic Handling of Big Nations'. In C. D. Bhatta & J. Menge (eds.), *Walking among Giants Foreign Policy and Development Strategies of Small and Landlocked Countries*. Lalitpur: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, pp. 141-162.

memories of home are sharp and important. Govinda wrote of the simple pleasures of life in Bhutan, including picnics, school shenanigans, going to the cinema, singing songs while farming, and traditional dances.. In Govinda's words, '[I] grew up there studying the sun, the moon, stars, their positions in the risings and settings. I learned about the time of the day and seasons of the year from everything that I saw around. My horizon was limited, but everything existed there' (p. 13).

Memories from those years in Bhutan were also bitter. Along with the joys of childhood, Govinda aptly describes the impending restrictions that he and his compatriots felt. In Chapter 4 ("Abrogation of Citizenship"), Govinda shows how it felt personally for Lhotshampas to: have Nepali books burned; be forced to wear *Gho* and *Kira*; have land confiscated; have schools in the South close arbitrarily; witness the falsity of the Green Belt policy; experience the pain of the Census; and feel discriminated against by the racialised policies enacted by the government. The chapter allowed me to sympathise with the sense of strangulation felt by the Lhotshampa community in Bhutan, even by those who desperately wanted to remain, who loved Bhutan, and who – like Govinda's family – were so deeply devoted to the King that they put Tika on his portrait (page 48).

Second, Govinda wrote powerfully about what it meant to be forced out. He wrote movingly about the last time he saw his Amai, and about the torture and death of a dear friend and classmate, Khadka Bahadur Magar, whose family was tricked into signing forms that made it seem as though he was already sick (pp. 102-103). He describes the slow impoverishment of his family in Lodrai, with no income and no ability to plow the fields. When his family left, he describes how the family plot was taken from him, and he was made landless and homeless. In one of the most emotive moments of the



book, Govinda describes managing to cross back into Bhutan during the AMCC marches. I quote at length here, because Govinda's words demonstrate the tension and hope that so many young Bhutanese must have felt about exile and the potential promise of return:

*We entered Bhutan at 10:35 in the morning of August 15, 1996. Fifty marchers: 36 men and 14 ladies walked through Phuntsholing gate with white vest[s] reading "Appeal March to Bhutan" in blue letters. Once inside the gate, we reduced our pace and walked normally.... The objective of our march was to walk to Thimphu, appeal to the Monarch W4, and present the proposal of national reconciliation for an amicable solution to the ongoing problems.... Very soon we were in front of a crowd of more than 200 people. A crowd of Drukpa soldiers and officers in plain clothes came behind as the backup force. They human shielded the road going to Thimphu and began to approach towards us gradually studying our moves.... Our only request was to take us to the Monarch. Only the Monarch can solve our problems; we neither had feelings nor sinister intention towards anyone.... In about two hours, they brought three old buses to pack us. We wanted to go to Thimphu (North) but the buses were kept facing south towards Jaigoan, India. The soldiers in the plain clothes caught the most active leaders and pushed them forcibly into the buses. We, the younger marchers resisted without using force. They pulled the marchers into three buses and drove to Jaigoan.... I had [had] a high expectation that they would take us seriously. They did not. I felt cheated and defeated....*

*A pain erupted inside my [cheekbones], my voice stopped, and tears flowed profusely. I cried. After many years, I cried loud and without feeling ashamed. For the first time, I felt the pain of losing a nation. (pp. 288 -291)*

Until that moment, Govinda truly believed that he would be able to return to Bhutan. After all, he knew that he had no violent or anti-national thoughts. Despite the treatment that he and other Lhotshampas had experienced, he simply wanted to demonstrate that he, and others like him, were eager to be a part of the Bhutan polity. Of the many sadnesses about Govinda's death, one is that he was never able to return to Bhutan in any form to demonstrate this.

Third, Govinda's story – through both his book and my interview with him – helps to illustrate a phenomenon that scholars of refugees (and refugees themselves!) have always known: that being 'forced' to leave one's home is not as simple as, say, a soldier holding a gun to one's head. Indeed, in the case of Govinda's family, a series of indignities, threats, deprivations, and anxieties all converged to make Govinda realise that it was impossible for him to stay in Bhutan. In high school in Thimphu, he sat silently as the Lhotshampa people were mocked. At the BPP office he realised with a shock that he could be targeted simply for being associated with those who had already been labelled as anti-nationals. In his home town he watched as his own father became incapacitated, deeply sad that he could no longer earn a livelihood. Govinda pointed out to me that this was not about his father not having enough material things, but instead it was about him feeling distressed that his dignity had been compromised when he could not support his family and give back to his community.

Finally, Govinda's story helps us identify patterns that reveal a cautionary tale about the world we live in today. As I write this, Donald Trump has been elected as the President of the United States. One of his platform promises is that he plans to deport all undocumented migrants across the Southern border of the United States. Much to the surprise of many commentators, a significant cohort of citizens of Latin American descent supported Trump, because they believe that they will be protected while "illegal" Latin Americans will be deported. Something similar happened among the Lhotshampas in Bhutan. When the Census was first announced in YEAR, Govinda explained to me, many Lhotshampa citizens of the South supported it, never imagining that they themselves would be targeted. I believe that something similar will happen in the southern United States: if Trump begins mass deportations, American citizens of Latin American descent will be targeted. This form of denationalisation – something with which more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees are familiar – should be something that no one has to endure.

Early in *Pardesi in Paradise*, Govinda wrote that he wanted to find the 'authentic glue' to tell his stories. To me and many others, that's exactly what his story has provided – the glue to hold community and ideas together. He is greatly missed.

## **GMC: A Challenging Vision**

### **ABSTRACT**

The proposed Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) represents a transformative urban development initiative in Bhutan, aimed at establishing a pivotal business connection between South East Asia and South Asia. Announced by King Jigme Khesar on December 17, 2023, the GMC aspires to create a holistic living environment attuned to Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), emphasising mindfulness, sustainability, and community well-being. This article explores the vision, strategic location, design principles, stakeholder collaborations, socio-environmental considerations, and potential challenges associated with the GMC.

**Keywords:** Gelephu, futuristic city, mindfulness, metropolis

### **Introduction**

In December 2023, King Jigme Khesar announced the ambitious GMC project. The announcement marks a significant moment in Bhutan's urban development initiative, considering the country lacks the geography and population required for a mega city. As the country seeks to balance economic growth with the well-being of its citizens, the GMC is proposed as both a commercial hub and a model for sustainable urban living. This project aims to serve as a catalyst for attracting Bhutanese youths and professionals who have migrated abroad in search of better opportunities, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community. The GMC project aims to integrate contemporary urban planning with Bhutan's unique cultural values, creating a city that reflects both modern aspirations and traditional ethos.

Gelephu is one of the most industrial and commercial towns of southern Bhutan. The current city was established in the late 1960s when the settlement was shifted from the banks of Mau river into its present location - about 30 kilometres east of Sarpang, the district headquarters. Though Sarpang is the administrative centre for the district by the same name, Gelephu has prospered and developed as a market town serving the hinterland due to various factors such as its proximity to Indian consumers, flat land for commercial expansion, tropical climate and growing population in the region. The geographical setting of the town with relatively flat terrain, close proximity and easy connectivity with India, and its location as a nodal connection for east, west and the central parts of Bhutan, makes Gelephu a preferred location for development. These advantages have positioned the Gelephu region as highly attractive for strategic development proposals initiated by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB), including an industrial estate, a rail head, and an international airport.

At his announcement, the King highlighted that the land connection through Gelephu to link the two regions (South Asia and South East Asia) is a vibrant opportunity.

*“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 South East Asia. We are in a unique position to reap great benefits if we seize the opportunity, make good plans, and work together diligently” (Wangchuk, 2023).*

The King also envisions to bring back Bhutanese youth and professionals who have migrated overseas searching for better economic opportunities. There are at least 30,000 Bhutanese in Australia (Asian News Network, 2024), and one estimates put the close to 100,000<sup>5</sup> Bhutanese now live outside Bhutan. This population does not count towards Bhutanese refugees who have been resettled in several developed countries. Other notable countries with Bhutanese population include Canada, United States of America, Kuwait and Japan.

The vision of the GMC incorporates a holistic living environment that emphasises the principles of mindfulness, sustainability, and community well-being. The concept is rooted in Bhutan's GNH philosophy, which prioritises the well-being of citizens over economic growth. This project is envisioned as a sanctuary where residents can lead balanced lives, surrounded by nature and integrated with their community.

The project seeks to be a model for future urban developments in the region.

The GMC has three primary objectives:

**Globally** – To provide a sanctuary for professionals and businesses who want to transform the world into a more equitable, sustainable, and humane place.

**Regionally** – To create a tight-knit community that will drive the long-term economic and social development of South Asia.

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<sup>5</sup> As of end 2023, Bhutan records 64,000 of its citizens living overseas, in over 13 countries. The number has increased substantially since then.

**Locally** – To provide Bhutanese in Bhutan and overseas with meaningful employment and education opportunities, transforming the country and driving economic growth in a sustainable manner. The GMC initiative aligns with Bhutan's goal of becoming a developed nation by 2034 (Dorji, 2024). [Bhutan graduated](#) from least developed country to developing nation in 2023.

### **Location And Size**

The GMC is strategically located in the south-central region of Bhutan, along the India-Bhutan border, enhancing its role as a transit hub for trade and tourism. The projected city is expected to cover approximately 2,500 square kilometres<sup>6</sup>, extending beyond the borders of the Sarpang district, which itself encompasses less than 2,000 square kilometres. This expansive area has the potential to serve as a central point for inland traders from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, while also facilitating connections with India, Tibet, and Central Asian nations.

The geographical positioning of the GMC not only offers logistical advantages but also embodies Bhutan's aspirations for regional integration and economic collaboration. The city's strategic location will foster cross-border exchanges, attracting businesses and tourists alike. The GMC says, the final size of the core city will be determined through comprehensive environmental assessments, community consultations, and infrastructural capabilities, ensuring that the development aligns with the aspirations of the local population, while also adhering to Bhutan's commitment to environmental stewardship, such as being world's first carbon-negative country, constitutional requirements for 60 per cent of the nation's total land under forest cover.

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<sup>6</sup> During king's announcements, the city was proposed within 1000sqkm but the online portal for GMC has now expanded this size to 2500sqkm.

## **Design Principles**

The proponents of the project claim the design of the GMC is influenced by GNH principles, prioritising individual and collective well-being over economic metrics. The urban layout will incorporate green spaces, walking paths, and recreational areas, encouraging outdoor activities and social interactions. This focus on designing for well-being is crucial in creating a community that promotes healthy lifestyles and fosters social ties among residents.

## ***Green and Sustainable Infrastructure***

One of the hallmarks of the GMC would be its commitment to sustainability. The urban design would embrace renewable energy sources, sustainable building materials, and water conservation practices. The integration of green roofs, solar energy, and efficient waste management systems would be fundamental to reducing the city's carbon footprint. Additionally, the project would prioritise the preservation of existing natural landscapes, integrating them into the urban environment to create a harmonious coexistence between nature and urban life.

## ***Community-Centric Spaces***

By fostering a mix of residential, commercial, and cultural spaces, the GMC aims to cultivate a vibrant and interconnected community. The layout would encourage mixed-use developments that promote local businesses, cultural activities, and social interactions. Community centres, art spaces, and marketplaces would serve as focal points for residents, enhancing social cohesion and cultural identity. The design would prioritise accessibility, ensuring that all segments of the population, including the elderly and differently-abled, can navigate the city with ease.



## **Development Partners**

The RGOB has invited and engaged several international and regional partners for successful realisation of the GMC dream. These partners were handpicked and not selected through competitive tender process, which is contrary to the country's existing procurement rules and regulation. Current partners engaged, as per the GMC website, are:

### ***Bjarke Ingels Group***

Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) is a prominent architectural firm based in New York City, (Hadley, 2022) founded by architect Bjarke Ingels in 2005 (in Copenhagen, Denmark). Known for its innovative designs and sustainable approaches, BIG has made a significant impact on modern architecture, advocating for solutions that are both environmentally sustainable and socially responsible. The firm's philosophy revolves around the idea of "Yes is More", which emphasises a positive and proactive approach to problem-solving in urban design and architecture.

BIG's work spans a diverse array of projects, including residential buildings, cultural institutions, and urban planning initiatives, all characterised by a commitment to enhancing the quality of life for residents through thoughtful design and community engagement. The firm is particularly recognised for its ability to integrate natural landscapes into urban environments, creating spaces that foster interaction and promote well-being.

### ***Magnolia Quality Development Corporation***

Established in 1994, Magnolia Quality Development Corporation (MQDC) is a real estate company based in Thailand. With an emphasis on sustainability and innovation, MQDC has experiences of building high-rise luxury living spaces that enhance the quality

urban life. The company has a diverse portfolio, including residential, commercial, and mixed-use developments, all designed with a focus on environmental stewardship and community well-being.

The company has faced criticism and controversy over several projects, particularly regarding environmental impact and community relations. One of the most notable controversial projects is 'The Forestias,' a large-scale mixed-use development in Bangna, Bangkok. While marketed as a sustainable community, the project faced backlash from environmentalists and local residents who raised concerns about deforestation and the disruption of local ecosystems. Critics argued that the development compromised green spaces and wildlife habitats, leading to significant ecological changes in the area (Bangkok Post, 2024).

### ***ARUP Infrastructure Engineering***

ARUP Group, founded in 1946 by English engineer Sir Ove Arup, is a global engineering and design consultancy firm. Headquartered in London, ARUP aims to influence the built environment through its interdisciplinary expertise, integrating engineering, design, and sustainability principles. The firm's expertise spans transportation systems, water management, energy infrastructure, and urban development, all aimed at enhancing the functionality and liveability of cities.

One of the ARUP's celebrated projects is the Sydney Opera House in Australia, where it played a crucial role in overcoming the engineering challenges posed by Jørn Utzon's visionary design. The firm's work on the Lotte World Tower in South Korea and the High Line in New York City exemplifies its commitment to pushing the boundaries of architecture and urban design.

However, ARUP is not without controversy. The firm was involved in the construction of the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics, which faced criticism for its cost overruns and design issues (Wainwright, 2008). ARUP's role in various infrastructure projects has raised concerns about environmental impacts and community displacement, particularly in large-scale developments.

### ***CISTRI Strategic Economics***

CISTRI is a Singapore-based consultancy firm (subsidiary of Australian company Urbis Ltd) specialising in economic strategy, urban development, and infrastructure planning. The firm has expertise in transport management, water management, and urban regeneration.

### ***NACO Airspace Specialist***

Established by Dutch aviation administrator Dr Albert Plesman in 1949, Netherlands Air Consultants (NACO) is airport engineering consultancy, headquartered in Hague. One of its iconic projects is Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. It has so far been involved in the consultancy and engineering of more than 600 airports around the world.

### ***ERM Ecology Consultant***

London based Environmental Resource Management (ERM) provides environmental, health, safety, risk, and social consulting and sustainability related services. Established in 1987, the company has worked mostly in the mining and energy sectors for environmental impact assessment. Outside of the UK, most of its projects have resulted in controversies. In 2022 the company and its partners were sued in a US court for knowingly exposing local residents to a toxic chemical that has contaminated the air, water, and soil. (Bloomberg Law, 2023).

### **CDR Hydrology Consultant**

Established in 2012, CDR International is Netherlands-based coastal, river and port engineering and consultancy firm. CDR, which stands for Coasts, Deltas and Rivers, is an expert in project development, management, design and engineering services, particularly in the marine and maritime industries. The firm is known for flood risk assessment, water supply management, and ecosystem restoration.

### **Teneo**

Based in New York City, Teneo is a public relation advisory company established in 2011. The company rose to prominence following the inclusion of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton as members of their advisory board. The inclusion ran into controversy and Clinton departed the following year. Company hiring of senior politicians continued, inviting both controversy and influence in expanding its business empire.

### **Feasibility Studies of The GMC**

There had been several attempts in the last few decades to convert Gelephu into a commercial hub. The GMC is not the first test for the city. In 1986, the National Urban Development Corporation (NUDC) prepared an Urban Development Plan for Gelephu, with support from the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. This plan aimed to address the needs of a growing population. However, political instability in the early 1990s and subsequent demographic shifts led to the abandonment of these plans and the transformation of Gelephu into a ghost town.

In the late 1990s, migration patterns shifted, revitalising the area as people moved from the northern regions of Bhutan to the south. This demographic change, coupled with a renewed focus on economic

development, prompted Bhutan to propose the establishment of a Special Economic Zone post-2000 (Department of Human Settlement, n. d). The proposal from the first elected government of the country was not materialised. The government has so far not published any reports outlining reasons of the failure. However, since the document projected plans until 2034, the transformation of Gelephu into GMC may form part of the proposal.

A joint study carried out by the Department of Urban Development and Gelephu Municipality in 2003 estimated the location population to be 12,398 with an average household size of 3.6 persons. The male to female ratio was 1.07 and about 50 per cent of the population were aged between 18 and 45. At that time, around 26 per cent of the Gelephu population were homeowners while 58 per cent were tenants and 8 per cent stayed in public housing. The literacy rate was 55 per cent, with 40 per cent reaching higher secondary level. The average household income was about Nu. 9,081 per month<sup>7</sup>, while the average income per person was about Nu. 2,522 per month. At least 20 per cent of the residents were government employees, 12 per cent were engaged in private business and 28 per cent were primary school students. The town also housed considerable numbers of police and army personnel.

This joint 20023 study highlighted the need for sustainable urban planning that could accommodate the aspirations of a young and dynamic population. The proposers claimed the area had all necessary primary infrastructure like telecommunications, roads, buyers' market, electricity and the good will of the government and public.

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<sup>7</sup> Average exchange in 2003 BTN 1 = AUD 54

## **Public Consultation And Community Engagement**

Despite the excitement generated by the King's announcement of the GMC in late 2023, there has been a concerning lack of community consultation. Local residents express uncertainty regarding the future of their land, the impact on agrarian lifestyles, and potential changes to their socio-cultural fabric. Many inhabitants fear that the rapid urbanisation associated with the GMC might displace them or alter their traditional ways of life.

Engaging the community in meaningful dialogue is essential to address these concerns and ensure that the GMC reflects the aspirations of its future inhabitants. Effective public consultation strategies should include village meetings, surveys, and workshops that allow residents to voice their opinions and participate in the planning process. By prioritising community-driven development, the GMC can foster trust and ensure that the needs and aspirations of the residents are met.

## **Potential Strategies For Community Engagement**

**Focus Groups:** Establish focus groups representing various demographics within the community, including youth, elders, farmers, and local business owners, to gather diverse perspectives on the development.

**Workshops And Public Forums:** Organise workshops and public forums where residents can learn about the project, express their concerns, and contribute ideas for the city's design and function.

**Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement transparent feedback mechanisms, such as online platforms or suggestion boxes, to allow residents to share their thoughts and concerns continuously throughout the development process.

**Partnership With Local Leaders:** Collaborate with local leaders and organisations to facilitate communication between the government and the community, ensuring that community voices are heard and considered.

### **Environmental Impact Assessment**

A crucial aspect of modern urban development is conducting a comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It remains unclear whether the government has completed or initiated this process for the GMC. Given Bhutan's commitment to environmental conservation, adherence to EIA protocols will be essential in balancing urbanisation with ecological sustainability.

The EIA process should evaluate potential impacts on local ecosystems, air and water quality, and the socio-economic fabric of the community. It should also incorporate mitigation strategies to address any adverse effects identified during the assessment. This approach will not only ensure compliance with internationally acceptable environmental practices but also reinforce Bhutan's identity as a nation that prioritises environmental stewardship.

EIA requires a comprehensive baseline studies to establish the current state of the environment, including biodiversity assessments, water quality analyses, and air quality measurements. It should evaluate potential impacts of the proposed urban development on the environment, including land use changes, habitat destruction, and resource consumption. If there are any negative impacts identified, propose mitigation measures to minimise negative impacts, such as preserving green spaces, implementing sustainable construction practices, and enhancing public transportation to reduce reliance on cars. The project should establish a monitoring framework to track the environmental

impacts of the GMC over time, ensuring that any unforeseen consequences can be addressed promptly.

## **Conclusion**

The GMC represents a bold vision for urban development in Bhutan, intertwining economic aspirations with the principles of mindfulness and sustainability. The project aims to create a model for future urban developments by demonstrating how cities can be designed to enhance both individual and collective well-being. By prioritising community engagement, environmental stewardship, and sustainable practices, the GMC has the opportunity to redefine urban living in the region and serve as an example for other nations facing similar challenges.

Integrating GNH principles into its urban framework means the GMC can create a thriving economic hub and foster a sense of connection between individuals, their communities, and the natural environment. As this ambitious project unfolds, it will be essential to navigate the complexities of urban development with a mindful approach, ensuring that the vision for the GMC becomes a reality that benefits all stakeholders involved.

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## The Cultural History of Gelephu

### ABSTRACT

Gelephu is rich in religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, each contributing to the town's unique cultural identity. Previous experiences show, Gelephu and its residents have an enduring capacity to adapt and respond to change when new factors/influences are introduced, while simultaneously preserving that which promotes unique aspects of culture and religion. This kind of adaptability supports the ambitions of the GMC. This study examines the pre-Gelephu culture, the impact of Nepali culture, the emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the role of religious artifacts, festivals, and traditions in shaping the region's cultural heritage. It also looks at the futuristic view of the cultural diversity if the GMC vision is realised in its entirety. It shall also shed lights on the extent to which Nepaliness and Hinduness of Gelephu eroded overtime and shall continue further in the future city.

**Keywords:** Culture, Nepali, Lhotsam, identity, history

### The Name

The name of the town Gelephu<sup>8</sup> (དགེ་ལག་ཕུ་ dge-leg-phu, गेलेफु) has gone through several changes over the years. The region was infested with elephants prior to first quarter of the last century due to the presence of dense forests until people began to settle in the area converting the it into commercial centre. At that time, the town was called Hattisar or Hatti Sahar.<sup>9</sup> Hatti means elephant in Nepali and Sahar as town - Hattisar literally translates to elephant sanctuary,

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<sup>8</sup> Historically, Gelephu (previously spelled as Gaylegphug) was within Tsirang (previously spelled Chirang) or Sarpang (previously spelled Sarbhong) region in many references.

<sup>9</sup> [Background History](#). Gelephu Thromde. Archived from [the original](#) on 2014-10-23.

resonating to its proximity to the cross-bordered Manas Conservation Park. There are no records or references in any literature as to what the town was called prior this. The region likely had some human settlement considering its proximity to the Duar plains where Bhutan fought a war with British India in 1864-65 and had controlled the region for a long time. The possibility of residents migrating to other regions following the war would likely have pushed the region to be infested with elephants and other wild animals. TBJ tried exploring myths and folklores associated with proper Gelephu prior to mid of last century without success. Elephants are still occasionally seen in the area to this day (Kuensel,2023), confirming the city was once habitation of elephants.

Hattisar was a name likely adopted from a neighbouring Indian village with the same name and resonates to the understanding of the local Nepali-speaking residents at the time. Areas south of Gelephu was once ruled by Bhutan, Hattisar was likely a bigger village that included modern day Gelephu.

The town was renamed to Gaylegphug in 1959. One popular oral story among the Bhutanese is that the names were the result initiative by the third king who wanted to have Bhutan-sounding names across the country, the mission Bhutan still pursues today. According to the story, the storekeeper of the third king, Lopen Nyapchhi, played a key role in coining the names of the frontier towns (including Gelephu) and in familiarising them. King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-72), once summoned Nyapchhi to his chamber wanting to know why letters with a Jaigon address came to him in Thimphu. Nyapchhi responded, 'Our border towns don't have Bhutanese names. They use the interchanging names from the bordering Indian villages'.

The King commanded Nyapchhi to find appropriate names for the towns, including Gelephu. Following discussion with locals, the storekeeper reported the King to name the central southern town as Gaylegphug, which means 'the sanctuary of virtue'.

Based on the King's order, the name was then announced through a wireless radio station located above the Dechencholing palace. The announcements were made daily with the help of an Indian man called 'wireless babu', who set up the station.

In earlier records, the name was spelled differently, with variations including Gaylegphug, Gelegphug, and Gelyephug. The current spelling of the name was standardised in 1996-97 when the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) changed hundreds of names in southern Bhutan in an attempt to erase the traces of Nepali settlements.

### **Pre-Gelephu Culture**

Gelephu has a rich cultural history that spans more than a century. The region's cultural landscape is characterised by a diverse array of religious and ethnic groups, each contributing to the town's unique cultural identity.

There is lack of written records or oral history about the pre-Gelephu culture making it challenging to reconstruct the region's early history. However, oral history from the local residents and folklores indicate that the region was inhabited as early as the 1850s. The region's unique climate and geography played a significant role in shaping the early settlers' way of life, fostering a connection to the land that continues to resonate in contemporary culture.

The district Sarpang, under which the proposed GMC is located, has enjoyed a long history of human settlement. The cultural history of the area was dominated by the Nepalis, who settled as early as 1880s encouraged initially by Raja Ugyen Dorji and then by his son. The Dorjis, based in Kalimpong (India) and who played crucial role in installing Wangchuk dynasty in Bhutan, were given responsibilities to administer southern Bhutan considering their closeness to Nepalis in India. The Nepali culture thrived in Gelephu as the population continued to grow under the Dorji family's supervision. People continued moving into the area until 1945 when government restricted further migration into the region.

The Nepali people brought their own distinct cultural practices, languages, and traditions, introducing their own customs, and festivals. The Nepalis also brought their own religious practices, including Hinduism and Buddhism, which became an integral part of the region's cultural landscape.

Until the mid of last century, there was little communication or cultural connection or exchanges between those in Gelephu and those in northern Bhutan. There are several factors for communication gap such as separate administration of the south by Dorjis, geographical barriers for southerners to travel north, northerners to travel south and the languages they speak.

The dominance of Nepali culture further expanded eastward to where present-day Gelephu is located and beyond in the early 1940s when new settlement lands were announced. As a result, newly established villages adopted Nepali names. However, this practice began fading out in 1980s when the northern Bhutanese were encouraged to migrate south to live alongside the Nepalis. This resulted in more mixed Hindu-Buddhist communities. This evolution

continued to make Buddhism a dominant religion following the resettlement of northern Bhutanese on the land left vacant from the exodus of Nepalis from the region in 1990s.

## **Hinduism**

Hinduism has a significant presence in Gelephu, with several Hindu temples scattered throughout the region. The Bhutanese government census does not collect population statistics based on ethnicity or religion, yet majority of the Gelephu residents are estimated to be Hindu followers. The Shivalaya Yagyaswar Mahadev Mandir, a replica of a temple by the same name in Samtse<sup>10</sup>, was constructed upon the command of the King Jigme Khesar in 2018 (The Bhutanese, 2023). The residents of Gelephu municipality and surrounding villages congregate here for religious gatherings. (Bhutan Luxury Tour, n.d., Heavenly Bhutan, n.d.). It is a notable example of Hindu architecture in the region. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is an important pilgrimage site for devotees, especially during Maha Shivaratri.

Gelephu Hindu Mandir and other Hindu temples within the proposed GMC are an important part of the region's rich cultural heritage and diversity. These temples serve not only as places of worship and devotion but also as cultural hubs where festivals, community events, and religious ceremonies can take place. As such, these temples are integral to the social fabric of Gelephu, fostering a sense of identity and continuity among the Hindu population.

Som other notable Hindu temples in the region include Mahamrityunjaya Temple, Sarpang Shir Hindu Temple, Shiva Mandir (Sarpang), Hindu Mandir, (Toribari or Chhokhorling) and Hindu Mandir Dandagaon (Chhuzagang).

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<sup>10</sup> Samtse is a new name of Samchi since late 1990s.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism has relatively more recent but nonetheless significant presence in Gelephu, with several monasteries scattered throughout the region. The Zangdopelri Monastery is a prominent example of Buddhist architecture, serving as a centre for meditation and spiritual learning. The monastery attracts Buddhist monks and lay practitioners from across Bhutan.

The Buddhist monasteries in Gelephu are an important part of the region's cultural heritage and identity, reflecting the region's rich cultural and religious diversity.

The Buddhist community began taking shape in late 1980s and cemented its presence in the early 2000s. Some of the other important monasteries in the region include Chorten Kora, Nimalung Monastery, Pema Yoedling Monastery, Jubrey Chorten, Pemaling Monastery. These Buddhist monasteries play a vital role in the community, providing spaces for meditation, education, and cultural preservation. They often host festivals that involve traditional dances, music, and rituals, showcasing the richness of Bhutanese Buddhist culture.

## **Christianity**

Christianity has a small but growing presence in Gelephu, with no open places of worship or established churches. Christianity is strictly discouraged (U.S. Department of State, 2022) through a ban on religious conversion and public congregation. There were reports of prosecution for practising the religion (Bhutan News Network, 2014). However, this is likely to change with the realisation of the GMC, which is expected to attract foreigners leading to the growth of the Christian community. While the country's constitution stipulates to have only Buddhism and Hinduism as the national religions, the

government may face increased challenges to their policy of discouragement for the growth of Christianity in the near future. The realisation of the GMC will be a litmus test for conservative Buddhist society in how they respond to the growing presence of Christianity in the country.

### **Cultural Artifacts**

Gelephu has a rich presence of religious and cultural artifacts that reflect its diverse cultural heritage. Notable artifacts include statues and icons, *thangkas*, and ritual implements. These artifacts serve as focal points for worship and devotion, and are an important part of the region's cultural identity. The statues and icons are often decorated with intricate carvings and paintings that reflect the values from two dominant religions – Buddhism and Hinduism. *Thangkas* are traditional Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings that depict religious scenes, teachings, and important figures in Buddhism. These artworks are not only visually stunning but also serve as educational tools for practitioners. The ritual implements in Gelephu include prayer flags, bells, and drums, which are used to enhance the spiritual atmosphere during rituals and celebrations.

### **People And Their Cultures**

Gelephu celebrates several festivals that highlight the region's cultural diversity. Events such as *Tshechus* (Buddhist religious festivals) often feature performances that showcase traditional music, dance, and attire from northern or eastern cultural backgrounds. *Tshechu* festivals are known for their masked dances, which tell stories from Buddhist mythology. As the predominantly original inhabitants of the region, the Hindu festivals of *Dashain* (Bhutan Today, 2023), *Deepawali* and *Holi* are celebrated by the residents of Gelephu. Some Shaiva followers also organise events



like *Bol Bam* (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2024), a celebration of devotion to the Shiva.

These festivals hold public significance considering the engagement of the people from all faiths during these festivals.

### *Cuisine*

The culinary landscape in Gelephu is diverse, influenced by the various ethnic groups residing in the area. Local cuisine includes a mix of staples, such as rice, meat, and vegetables, often prepared with distinct regional flavours and ingredients. The culinary variations are heavily influenced by north-east India but maintain the taste of Bhutanese identity. The blend of Indian, northern Bhutanese and Nepali cuisine has evolved to create a distinct taste of the region. Some of the popular cuisine of the region include *dal-bhat-tarkari*, red rice and roasted goat curry. Momo is increasingly becoming popular.

### *Language*

Multiple languages are spoken in Gelephu, including Dzongkha (the official language of Bhutan), Nepali, and several other local dialects. Migrants from across Bhutan have brought several dialects with them while the local Nepali community is already rich in linguistic diversity. This linguistic diversity is an important aspect of the town's cultural identity. However, the government of Bhutan forbids any enumeration of linguistics and ethnic dimensions of the region and the country in any official records. Bhutan has not officially said how many languages are spoken in the country, let alone in Gelephu.

### *Costume*

Traditional clothing in Gelephu follows the country's dress code. The men from northern Bhutanese community mostly wear a *gho*, a

knee-length robe fastened at the waist with a cloth belt called a *ker*a. The *gho* is often made from handwoven fabric, featuring intricate designs and patterns that are unique to different regions of Bhutan. The colours and motifs can vary, with earthy tones and vibrant hues being common, reflecting the natural surroundings and local culture.

Women wear a *kira*, a long, ankle-length dress that is made from colourful, patterned fabric. The *kira* is worn over a traditional long-sleeved blouse known as a *wonju*. The fabric used for the *kira* is often handwoven, locally. The patterns can range from simple to elaborate, often incorporating symbols and motifs that hold cultural significance. Accessories such as *rachu* (a ceremonial scarf) and jewellery made from silver and semi-precious stones are also popular, adding elegance and individuality to the attire.

The traditional dress for the original inhabitants, Nepalis, includes *Daura-Suruwal* for men. The *daura*, a long tunic, is usually made of cotton or a cotton-silk blend and may be white or colourful, depending on the occasion. *Suruwal* is trousers worn along with *Daura*. Women in the Nepali community traditionally wear a *gunyo cholo*, a two-piece garment consisting of a long, flowing blouse (*gunyo*) and a wrap-around skirt (*cholo*). The *gunyo* is often colourful and can be made from a variety of fabrics, including cotton and silk. However, the Indian attires like *saree* and blouse have replaced the *gunyo-cholo* in modern times. Women also wear accessorise of jewellery, which may include necklaces, earrings, and bangles made from gold, silver, or beads, often reflecting local craftsmanship.

However, the warm climate and modern influences have changed the public attire of the Gelephu residents. Younger generations often blend traditional pieces with western styles, reflecting a more

globalised fashion sense. This has led to a creative fusion of styles, where traditional garments are paired with modern accessories or worn in casual settings.

## **Conclusion**

Gelephu's cultural history is a rich and diverse tapestry, woven from the threads of various religious and ethnic groups. This study has explored the pre-Gelephu culture, the impact of the Nepali culture, the emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the role of religious artifacts, festivals, and traditions in shaping the region's cultural heritage. Gelephu's local identity is a unique blend of its diverse cultural influences. As the proposed GMC materialises, the cultural landscape of future Gelephu metropolis is expected to go through metamorphosis, creating a blend of regional and global cultures to create an even more unique identity. It is a matter of time if the regions holds on with its unique cultures or devolves to be guided by foreign influences.

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## **Demography Dynamics in Gelephu**

### **ABSTRACT**

As the third largest city<sup>11</sup> in Bhutan, Gelephu has the fastest growing population, which would be accelerated with the proposed Gelephu Special Administrative Region (GeSAR). However, there are restrictions already in place for land transactions in the district and people from the region are forced to seek land substitutions in other districts to make way for the city. Many of the demographic indicators of Gelephu are better compared to other districts in the country. This chapter examines the demographic indicators of the Sarpang district, within which the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is located, and do their comparative study.

**Keywords:** population, demography, census, settlement, eviction

### **Introduction**

Gelephu is the third largest city in Bhutan, after Thimphu (the capital) and Phuentsholing. Human settlement in the region, where proposed GMC sits today, was assumed to have been early last century – mostly Nepali speakers who were attracted to the region's fertile soil and abundant natural resources. Nepali speakers established themselves in the area and developed a thriving agricultural community. The region was allotted under the authority of the Paro Penlop during second half of the nineteenth century until the monarchy was established in 1907 but with no direct communication or visible presence of the authority. The demography of the region continued to evolve when the Dorji family, in charge of southern Bhutan's administration following the

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<sup>11</sup> Populations: Thimphu – 114,551, Phuentsholing – 27,658, Gelephu – 9858 as per 2017 census

installation of monarchy, encouraged migration from South-West Bhutan to Gelephu and surrounding regions. Dorjis, influenced by British India, played important role in shaping demographic landscapes of the region. British India encouraged mass migration out of Nepal to north-east region of current day India following the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816.

### **National Reflection**

Gelephu is a sub-set within the national population data manipulation by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB). Bhutan's population statistics are often interpreted by the royal regime to align with the interests of the Thimphu elites. Early records are sparse and estimates from different periods often conflict. The absence of a comprehensive, reliable historical dataset makes it challenging to analyse demographic trends of the region, and the country, accurately. This gap in knowledge has allowed the government to interpret population history in ways that align with its interests, sometimes at the expense of minority groups or to justify contentious policies.

The government emphasises quality over quantity to justify slow population growth (ADB, 2019) (1.3 per cent annually as per the 2017 census) and low urbanisation rates (Ura et al, 2012), framing these as successes of sustainable development. However, such narratives obscure underlying issues, including youth emigration, rural depopulation or forceful eviction. In recent years, the leaders have publicly acknowledged these policies were based on flawed data (BBS, 2019).

Historical data is selectively highlighted to reinforce the dominance of the Ngalop majority. Pre-1990 censuses, which included Nepali

speaking people, are rarely referenced, while post-expulsion<sup>12</sup> data is promoted to project ethnic homogeneity. This revisionism supports the state's cultural preservation agenda but erases Bhutan's multicultural history.

Even Bhutan's National Statistics Bureau has expressed doubts about its data, revising figures retroactively and acknowledging challenges in remote data collection. International bodies like the World Bank<sup>13</sup> have noted anomalies, such as improbably low fertility rates (1.39 in 2022) conflicting with high youth populations. Such inconsistencies hint at systemic underreporting or methodological flaws. Bhutan presented its national population to be over one million at its membership application with the UN in 1971, however this was later interpreted as being not accurate but exaggerated to gain membership. The Bhutanese government's approach to interpreting population history often seems to prioritise political stability and cultural homogeneity over acknowledging the complex realities of Bhutan's demographic profile.

Gelephu, being part of this population politics, has obscure evidence of this population history. The reliability of the government census is still questionable owing to its own historical practice to project inaccurate data to support the political narrative of the time.

### **Settlement Prior to 1960s**

Before the 1960s, Gelephu city and its neighbouring areas were primarily a small settlement with a sparse population. Gelephu was largely agricultural, and the community was composed mainly of Nepali speaking farmers. Historical records indicate that the population was small along the Mau River, which moved to present

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<sup>12</sup> Over 100,000 of the southern Bhutanese were evicted in early 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> [World Bank](#)

city area for expansion as part of the modernisation plans of the third King Jigme Dorji. The Mau River catchment population had approximately 400 households. The 1953 flood in the Mau River forced the inhabitants to move westward.

Gelephu (and Sarpang<sup>14</sup>) was included within Chirang<sup>15</sup> region in historical references. Gelephu did not have a separate administration. Sinha quoted Captain Morris that the population of Samchi (now Samtse) and Chirang was around 60,000 in 1933 who had been living there for more than 70 years. Most of this population was in Samchi and a smaller number in Chirang. However, the eastward migration continued thereafter, which significantly increased the population in Chirang and the present day Gelephu region.

Gelephu was within the Assam Duars (India), when Bhutan ruled the duars. Bhutan and expanding British colonial forces competed each other for control over the regions for several years. During the Anglo-Bhutan war 1864-65, one of the British commands (Central Right) attacked Bhutan through Gelephu region (Bishensing) on 17 December 1864, which faced countering Bhutanese forces on 25 January 1865. The region experienced frequent conflicts with India, indicating the economic importance of the regions and heavy presence of human settlement. There are no definitive records of the human casualties of the duar war, let alone in the Gelephu region.

### **Settlement After 1960s**

The 1960s heralded a transformative era for Gelephu, aligning with Bhutan's modernisation agenda of the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. This period saw the introduction of sweeping

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<sup>14</sup> Name of this district was previously spelled as Sarbhang

<sup>15</sup> RGOB changed the name to Tsirang in late 1990s



developmental policies, including infrastructure expansion, administrative reforms, and economic diversification. This collectively reshaped the socio-economic landscape of Bhutan – including Gelephu. A pivotal moment occurred in 1964, when the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) initiated settlement programs to decentralise population distribution and stimulate regional development in south central districts. These efforts catalysed Gelephu's growth, as migrants from other districts, more precisely from Tsirang and Samtse - began relocating to the newly opened lands.

Demographic records from this era, however, reveal inconsistencies that underscore the challenges of early data collection. H. N. Mishra (1988), citing RGOB sources, noted that Chirang District—which initially encompassed Gelephu—recorded a population of 60,000 in the 1969 census. Conflicting report suggests a higher figure of 80,357 (Rose, 1977), a discrepancy likely attributable to differing methodologies or the fluid boundaries of administrative zones. The 1969 census was the first of its kinds of exercise carried out in Bhutan for population enumeration. Regardless of precise numbers, the upward trajectory was unmistakable. The government actively promoted Gelephu as a commercial hub, leveraging its strategic location along the Indian border to attract entrepreneurs, labourers, and the government employees.

This momentum intensified in 1975<sup>16</sup> when Gelephu was designated the district headquarters of Sarpang<sup>17</sup>, consolidating its administrative significance. The relocation of government offices, courts, and public services spurred a secondary wave of migration, as families and professionals settled in the town to access

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<sup>16</sup> Sarpang [district website](#), accessed in January 2025

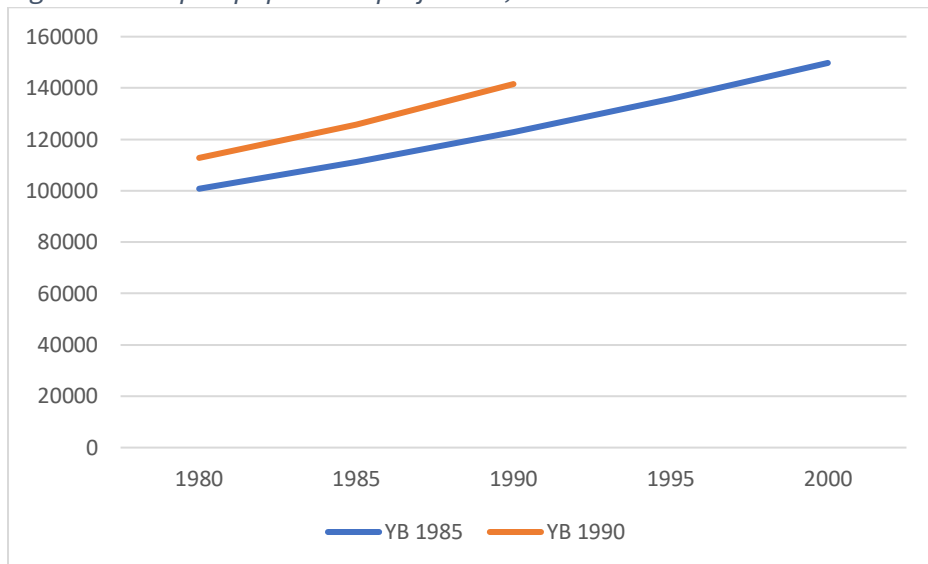
<sup>17</sup> Sarpang district was created in 1973 as part of decentralisation processes.

employment and business opportunities and education for children. By the 1980s, urbanisation had gained irreversible momentum. The RGOB's 1980 census projected Gelephu's population to reach 111,283 by 1985 and 149,765 by 2000 (Planning Commission, 1985), indicating a steady annual growth rate of 2.5–3%. These forecasts reflected both natural increase and in-migration. In many government records, Gelephu and Sarpang are used interchangeably. This aggregation arose from the Gelephu Municipality's jurisdictional framework, which incorporated surrounding rural areas into its administrative purview. Consequently, historical datasets frequently represent the district's demographics rather than the urban core alone, complicating granular analysis of the town's growth. However, as the proposed GMC basically covers the whole Sarpang district, the demographics of the district would truly represent the history of future city.

By mid-20th century Gelephu evolved from a quiet agrarian settlement into a bustling regional nexus. The interplay of state-led modernisation, strategic governance decisions, and cross-border economic currents propelled its demographic expansion, setting the stage for its contemporary role as a linchpin of Bhutan's southern economy.

Figure 1 summarises the population projections based on the [statistical year books](#) published by then Planning Commission.

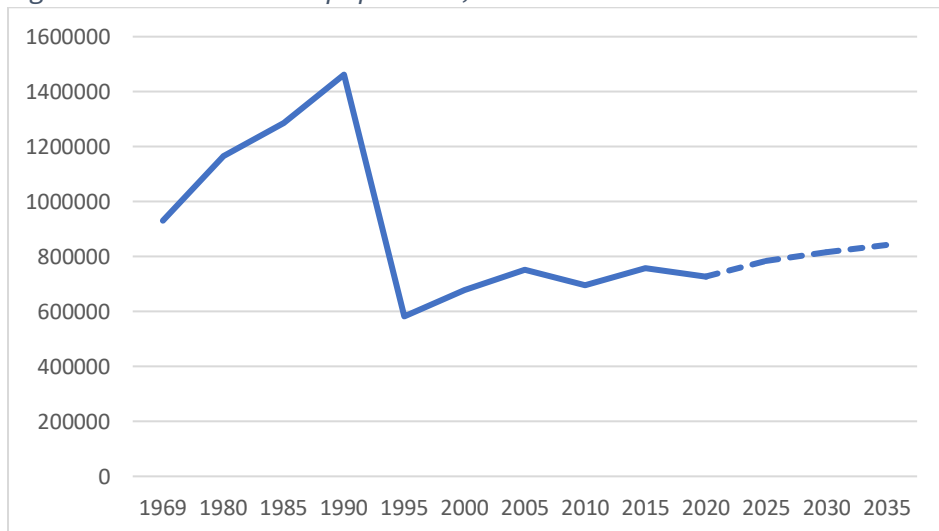
Figure 1: Gelephu population projection, 1980-2000



The district-level demographic data of Gelephu is not available between 1990 and 2005. The depopulation projects implemented in the south were expected to take foothold before number counting re-began.

Census data after 2005 shows the Gelephu population steadily rising. Some of the important demographic characteristics of Sarpang district are given below. Many of the indicators point to the fact that demographic dynamics in Sarpang district are changing for better. The population grew by 24 per cent between 2005 and 2017, child mortality rate has shown a dramatic progress between 1991 and 2017 and life expectancy show Bhutanese live much longer now.

**Figure 2: Bhutan national population, 1969-2035**



Sources: Based on information from Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, Ithaca, 1977, 41; and *Bhutan*, Planning Commission, Central Statistical Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan*, 1989.

**Table 1: Sarpang, distribution of population by sex, 2005 and 2017**

Year	Urban			Rural			Total		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
2005	6247	5571	11818	13085	12198	25283	19332	17769	37101
2017	6798	6212	13010	17220	15774	32994	24018	21986	46004

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

**Table 2: Sarpang, sex ration, average household size, 2005 and 2017**

Year	Sex ratio at birth (males/females)	Overall sex ratio	Avg household size	Total households
2005	97.0	108.8	4.7	7246
2017	99.6	109.2	4.0	10135

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

**Table 3: Sarpang, crude birth rate per 1000, 2005 and 2017**

Year	Crude Birth Rate			Crude Death Rate		
	Urban	Rural	Combined	Urban	Rural	Combined
2005	20.9	18.9	19.5	4.1	5.9	5.3

2017	13.8	13.1	13.3	6.1	6.5	6.4
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Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 4: Sarpang, Infant, child and under-five mortality rate

Year	IMR	CMR	U5MR
1991	78	50	125
1996	66.5	39.5	172.0
2000	56.0	30.5	85.5
2005	51.0	22.1	73.1
2017	14.7	18.0	32.7

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 5: Sarpang, lifetime migration

Year	Population	Out Migration	In migration	Net migration	
				No of persons	Proportion of Population %
2005	37101	15071	16460	1389	3.7
2017	46004	9939	16017	6078	13.2

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

Table 6: Sarpang, literacy rate percentage, 2005 and 2017

Year	Urban			Rural			Combined		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
2005	80	63.1	72.1	64	40.4	52.7	69.2	47.5	58.9
2017	86.6	78.0	82.5	75.4	60.5	68.3	78.6	65.5	72.4

Source: National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan

## Population Growth

Bhutan's demographic history remains shrouded in ambiguity, owing to the absence of systematic data collection until 2005. While the RGOB initiated formal, standardised population enumeration in 2005, these efforts focused primarily on basic metrics such as age, sex, and household size, omitting critical sociocultural details like linguistic diversity, religious affiliations, or ethnic composition. This paucity of granular data complicates efforts to reconstruct historical population trends, particularly in peripheral regions such as Gelephu.

Gelephu languished in administrative obscurity during the first five decades of Wangchuk rule (1907–1952), a period characterised by centralised governance and limited infrastructural development. As a result, no reliable demographic records specific to Gelephu exist from this era. Fragmentary insights emerge only in the latter half of the 20th century, with preliminary government reports, such as population projections by the Planning Commission, from the 1980s and 1990s indicating rapid population growth in the region. These documents, however, lack methodological rigor and were inconsistently published; notably, district-level statistics were entirely absent from public records between 1990 and 2005, creating a significant knowledge gap.

Analysts have attempted to extrapolate historical trends using Bhutan's national average annual population growth rate of 2.6%, calculated from the 1969 census baseline. Applying this rate to the Chirang region—which historically included Gelephu—theoretical projections suggest a population of 134,267 by 1989 and 289,995 by 2019. However, these figures starkly contrast with observed realities. The region's growth trajectory was abruptly disrupted in the early 1990s by the forced expulsion of a substantial portion of its population, predominantly ethnic Nepalis, amid state-led efforts to enforce cultural assimilation. This exodus, coupled with sporadic out-migration, precipitated a dramatic demographic contraction.

The dissonance between projections and reality is further illustrated by the RGOB's 1985 forecast, which anticipated Gelephu's population close to 150,000 by 2000. Yet, post-expulsion censuses revealed a starkly different picture: by the turn of the millennium, Sarpang district housed merely 46,000 residents (2017 Census). This discrepancy underscores the limitations of linear growth

models in contexts marked by political upheaval, forced displacement, and incomplete data. Moreover, it highlights the enduring challenges of studying Bhutan's demographic evolution, where gaps in archival records intersect with the legacies of state policies that prioritised national identity over demographic transparency.

### **Population Composition**

The linguistic and ethnic diversity of Gelephu reflects its historical role as a crossroads of trade and migration, though precise data remains limited due to Bhutan's historical reluctance to publish granular sociocultural statistics.

The population of Gelephu is ethnically diverse, comprising various groups, including the Ngalops, Sharchops, and Nepalis. This diversity is a product of historical migration patterns and government resettlement policies that encouraged Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan.

#### *Ethnic Diversity*

**Nepalis:** Historically, Gelephu and southern Bhutan has had a significant Nepali population. Before the 1990s expulsion, Nepali communities likely constituted over 80 per cent of southern Bhutan's population, including Gelephu. Following state-led expulsions and resettlement of northern Bhutanese on the vacated lands, the Nepali presence in Gelephu sharply declined, local resident<sup>18</sup> estimate, to be less than 20 per cent.

**Ngalops:** The Ngalop, associated with Bhutan's western regions and Tibetan cultural roots, have migrated southward since the 1980s as part of government-led resettlement programs. They now form a

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<sup>18</sup> Source identity is not disclosed for security reasons

growing share of Gelephu's population, estimated at over 50 per cent.

**Sharchops:** Indigenous to eastern Bhutan, Sharchop communities have migrated to Gelephu for employment and land grants. Their migration was in search for better opportunities or land replacement offer made by the government in late 1990s. Their population estimated at 10-15 per cent.

**Other Groups:** Temporary or seasonal workers from Assam, West Bengal, and other Indian states contribute to Gelephu's diversity, particularly in trade and construction. There are also small numbers of other ethnic groups such as Khengs or Lepchas.

### **Linguistic Diversity**

Bhutan has not officially noted the number of languages spoken in the country nor the population based on linguistic diversity. This translates the absence of documented evidence about the linguistic diversity in Gelephu.

**Dzongkha:** Spoken by over 50 percent of Gelephu residents. This is a second language based on historical records for Gelephu population. Dzongkha is dominantly used in government offices, educational institutions, and other formal settings.

**Nepali:** Historically the lingua franca of southern Bhutan, Nepali remains widely spoken by Nepali communities, Indian migrants and by migrants from northern districts too.

**Tsangla:** Spoken by a small number of migrants from eastern Bhutan. Without written scripts, the language is likely to face extinction at the



domination of Dzongkha and Nepali speaking population in Gelephu.

*Minority Languages:* Other languages used in the region include Kheng, Assamese, Hindi and increasingly English.

### **Prepare The Future**

The GMC is a big jump for a conservative Bhutanese society and adoption of an international metropolis culture will prove challenging. Bhutan's future policies must prioritise inclusivity by learning from historical exclusions, redefining migrants as assets, embracing its multicultural heritage, and addressing conservative resistance to change. By fostering linguistic and ethnic diversity, Bhutan can ensure sustainable development while safeguarding its cultural identity.

### *Reforming Exclusionary Policies*

Bhutan's demographic history is marred by the exclusion of ethnic minorities. These policies, rooted in fears of cultural homogenisation, contradicted Bhutan's Buddhist ethos of compassion. Contemporary policies, though less overt, still reflect residual biases, such as stringent citizenship requirements that disproportionately affect marginalised groups. To build an equitable future, GMC could prepare laws to ensure equal rights, drawing lessons from nations like Canada or Australia, which transitioned from exclusionary practices to multiculturalism. Legal reforms could include transparent naturalisation processes and reparative measures for displaced communities, aligning with the GNH principles.

### *Shifting The Narrative on Migrants*

The perception of migrants as economic burdens persists globally, often fuelled by xenophobia. However, empirical studies demonstrate that migrants contribute to workforce diversification, entrepreneurship, and cultural exchange (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). For Bhutan, which faces a declining youth population and labour shortages, skilled migrants could bolster sectors like healthcare and education. The GMC, envisioned as a hub for sustainable industries, will require foreign expertise and labour. Bhutan can emulate Singapore's model, where migrants constitute 40 per cent of the workforce, driving innovation without eroding national identity. Public campaigns highlighting migrant success stories, alongside inclusive labour policies, can reshape societal attitudes in Gelephu.

### *Accept Bhutan's Migrant Heritage*

Bhutan's identity as a land of migrants is often overlooked. Historically, Tibetan Buddhists, Nepali agriculturists, and indigenous tribes like the Monpa migrated to Bhutan, enriching its cultural tapestry. The Ngalop majority itself descends from Tibetan settlers. Recognising this legacy dismantles the myth of homogeneity and legitimises diversity as intrinsic to Bhutanese history. Education emphasising migration narratives can foster pride in pluralism, countering ethnonationalist rhetoric. For instance, Australia's inclusion of migration history in schools has strengthened social cohesion; Bhutan can adopt similar strategies to reconcile past and present.

### *Navigating Conservative Resistance*

The GMC project, integral to Bhutan's economic modernisation, will likely face resistance from conservatives fearing cultural erosion – even though it may not publicly manifest. Bhutanese conservatives

argue that foreign influence could dilute traditions (Ueda, 2003), akin to debates over UNESCO World Heritage sites commodifying culture (Tuyen, 2023). However, cultural preservation need not preclude adaptation. [Cool Japan](#) initiative balances tradition with global engagement, enhancing soft power without sacrificing identity (Walker, 2023). Bhutan can similarly position the GMC as a platform for sharing Buddhist and Hindu values globally, ensuring that development projects incorporate local artisans and monastic input. Engaging conservative leaders through dialogues and showcasing the GMC's alignment with the GNH principles will be crucial to mitigating resistance.

### *Bridging Tradition And Modernity*

Bhutanese diaspora members, exposed to Western lifestyles and individuality, may face challenges reintegrating into the Bhutanese society prioritising collective values. However, returnees bring technical skills and global perspectives vital for sectors like technology and tourism. India's [‘Reverse Brain Drain’](#) initiative, offering incentives for expatriates, have spurred innovation. Cultural friction can be mitigated through ‘re-acculturation’ workshops that foster mutual understanding between returnees and local communities. By valuing their hybrid identities, Bhutan can transform potential discord into synergy.

### **Conclusion**

Gelephu faces dynamic demographic shifts driven by its proposed metropolis and historical state policies. Historically, the region attracted Nepali-speaking communities due to fertile land, with migration further encouraged by Bhutan's Dorji elites under British influence that changed course post 1960s modernisation efforts and demise of the Dorjis. In shaping the Gelephu's future, there must be acknowledgement of the past.

The ethnic composition of Gelephu shifted post-1990s and will shift again under proposed GMC. The lack of data and official documentation on linguistic and ethnic diversity remains problematic. Census gaps (1990–2005) and methodological flaws, noted even by Bhutan’s National Statistics Bureau, continue to hinder accurate analysis.

The GMC project faces challenges balancing future ambitions with cultural preservation. Legal reforms for equitable citizenship and transparent data practices are critical to addressing historical exclusions and ensuring sustainable development. Without reconciling its multicultural past with future ambitions, Bhutan risks perpetuating demographic inequities amidst GMC’s transformative potential.

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## **Gelephu: Bhutan's Emerging Trade Powerhouse**

### **ABSTRACT**

Gelephu is a significant trade hub. Historically, Gelephu has played a major role in the country's trade, showing resilience through economic fluctuations and political upheavals. Its proximity to India is boon for both import and customers from across the border. Its potential as a business hub to connect South and South-East Asia will be tested over time. This article covers trade barriers, legal obstacles and other potential problems that might hinder the realisation of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) as a regional trading hub connecting Bhutan and South Asia with South-East Asia.

**Keywords:** trade, commerce, import, export, business, economy

### **Introduction**

For years, Gelephu has been a major trade hub. It has seen ups and downs but always maintained the potential to be fulcrum of economic growth for more than a century. Because of its economic successes, those in Bhutan's capital city Thimphu feared the potential political power of Gelephu, concerned that its growth might eventuate in a challenge for power. The city is strategically located near the Indian border and is increasingly recognised for its potential as a business hub connecting South and South-East Asia. The establishment of the GMC aims to boost economic activities, enhance infrastructure, and create employment opportunities.

Gelephu is already a primary import-export route for Bhutan. Products such as boulders, cardamom, iron scrap, ply wood, saw dust and oranges are exported using Gelephu route while rice, bricks, petroleum products, wheat flour are imported through this route.

## **Current Economic Landscape**

In 2005, Gelephu's economy is predominantly agrarian, with 38.2 per cent employed in agriculture, 23.5 per cent in services and 12.9 per cent in manufacturing. The share of employment in agriculture is declining while service industries are increasingly becoming the preferred employment sector in recent years (see Table 1). Services are fast becoming the dominant industry of employment opportunities at the national level too (Wangda, 2024). The pace of urbanisation has increased since 2005, with the urban population rising from 11,818 to 13,010 by 2017. As the urban population rises and land becomes increasingly limited in Gelephu, service industry expansion will continue. However, Gelephu has limited lands suitable for expansion of the bigger manufacturing or service industry capable of catering to the vision of a mega city. Male-dominated migration (sex ratio: 109.2 in 2017) and declining birth rates (13.3 in 2017) signals shifting labour dynamics (NSB, 2020). The expanding city is expecting declining youth population and that are mostly males, which would impact the industries that may require more youth population or females.

*Table 1: Employment by Sector in percentage*

Years	Agriculture	Industry	Services
2017	55.3	11.4	33.2
2019	52.4	14.7	32.9
2020	52.3	18.1	35.2
2021	53.8	11.1	35.1
2022	54.7	14	34.6

*Source: NSB, Labour Force Surveys (collated from several survey reports)*

## **Business Opportunities**

### *Manufacturing*

According to the 2024 industry census, there are 31 licenses issued in Gelephu and 90 in Sarpang district for production and

manufacturing industries. Over 90 per cent of the output from these industries are consumed within the country (MOICE, 2024). Gelephu region has the highest number of registered businesses in service industries for the whole country. As commercial activities grow, there are concerns about the pollution it creates (Wangdi, 2022), with inadequate plans for waste management.

Over the last 15 years, the textile (Yuden, 2024) industry was promoted (How Bhutan symbolises..., 2023) to be the primary sector of employment in the country, aligned with national goals. Women's employment increased as a result of this national initiative. However, the industry did not see significant increases in Gelephu. While the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) pushes for promoting the textile industry, this does not appear to have created any business opportunity in Gelephu due to the fact that consumers of the traditional textiles are limited to those living within the country only, which is gradually changing with influences of the western fashions. Further, the thick traditional garment is not suitable for warm tropical climate in southern belts.

Strategic investments in technology and skill development, coupled with GMC's infrastructure, could position Gelephu as a cornerstone of Bhutan's sustainable manufacturing ambitions. Gelephu's strategic location along the Indian border and GMC's infrastructure investments position it as a manufacturing hub. However, limited access to advanced machinery and skilled labour could prove challenging for further growth.

### *Agriculture*

Gelephu's fertile lands support organic agriculture. Farmers are trained (Farmers in Samtse..., 2021) and encouraged not to use chemicals. Chemical fertiliser imports were banned (Confino, 2014)



in the country. Bhutan claims to be the champion for organic farming (Department of Agriculture, 2006), with the produce attracting large buyers in India. Bhutan's major exports are cash crops such as oranges, cardamom while food crops are limited for domestic consumption (Lorenzen, 2018). Gelephu produces food crops such as rice, maize, wheat and seasonal vegetables. Attempts were made to increase production and commercialise the agriculture with limited success (Farmers in Barshong..., 2017) due to absence of coordinated effort to find markets, unavailability of commercial agricultural equipment and cheaper production costs in India by use of chemical fertilisers. The future success of Gelephu's commercial farming will be measured by its ability to supply processed and green groceries within Bhutan and neighbouring Indian towns.

Bhutan's commitment to 100 per cent organic certification by 2035 (Dema, 2020) positions Gelephu as a leader in sustainable agribusiness primarily due to the availability of larger flat lands, suitable climate, growing market within and beyond borders and transport infrastructure being planned in Gelephu and India connecting Bhutan. Yet, nearly two decades after declaring the 100 per cent organic goal, there appears to have been near zero progress based on the parameter of certified organic agriculture (Paull, 2023).

The organic movement in Bhutan may get some attention from the GMC project with enhanced logistics, linking farmers to global markets via India's Assam corridor. However, challenges like certification and fragmented landholdings hinder scalability. Strategic investments in cooperative farming and certification subsidies could unlock Gelephu's potential as a hub for premium organic exports.

### *Tourism*

Southern Bhutan, including Gelephu, was not a typical destination for domestic or foreign travellers. That created a Bhutanese image of being a Buddhist country, people with northern Bhutanese dresses like *Gho* and *Kira* and a country of Tibetan descendants. However, domestic tourism to Gelephu started following the resettlement of northern Bhutanese in the land vacated after the eviction in 1990s.

Tourist in Bhutan has grown over the years and contributed US\$26m to the economy in 2024 (Dolkar, 2024), including from more than 100,000 foreign travellers. Majority of these tourists visit the northern parts of the country. Gelephu and other southern region of the country are not opened for tourists by design. Gelephu's proximity to Manas National Park (the only cross-border wildlife park in the world) and Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary offers untapped potential for tourism. The GMC is proposed to have separate visa regime for foreign travellers, which could boost tourism in the area. Currently, non-SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) citizens need to pay US\$200 a day for tourist visa, which deters budget travellers.

Eco- and agri-tourism, blending agricultural experiences with cultural immersion, is gaining traction in Gelephu. Region's fertile lands provide a robust foundation for agri-tourism ventures. The proposed GMC aims to integrate eco-conscious tourism, including farm stays, organic workshops, and harvest festivals, to diversify rural livelihoods.

The agri-tourism industry in Gelephu is in its infancy but holds potential. The Dhumra Farm Resort is one such example of the kinds of success that can be replicated in Gelephu. The district's organic farming practices are on the rise and has the potential to attract a

larger volume of eco-conscious travellers looking for organic food and a serene lifestyle, away from the metro hustle.

However, limited infrastructure such as transport and scarce lodging facilities pose challenges. Seasonal monsoons further disrupt tourism activities between June and September. There have been a few instances of hospitality training for farmers, including by Helvatas Bhutan (2024), which has provided limited training for engagement in tourism-related services.

### **Licensing Regime**

The Government records show small-scale industries are the most prevalent accounting for 71 per cent of the total industries, followed by cottage-scale at 25 per cent, medium-scale at 3 per cent, and large-scale industries at 2. per cent. Service industries dominate across all scales of industry accounting for 85 per cent, followed by Production & Manufacturing with 10 per cent and Contract with 5 per cent of the total licenses (MOICE, 2024).

The distribution of industry by ownership is dominated by sole proprietorship which constitutes 96 per cent of the total industries, followed by private limited companies at 2 per cent and partnerships at 1 per cent.

Of these, Sarpang district has the third largest number of trade licenses issued accounting for 8 per cent (1,141) of the total licence issued nationally. Of these, 458 were issued by Gelephu municipality alone.

Though the licensing regime at the national level has improved over time, this has yet to be replicated for the GMC. The city has proposed its own licensing regime, which is expected to be better and more

streamlined than the national regime. However, with the GMC focusing on foreign investments to accelerate its economic presence in the region, there is long way to go. Since the announcement of the plan in 2023, very few foreign companies have expressed interest to invest in Gelephu. The city has not finalised any of its legal instruments (which is discussed in separate article) leading to confusion over how trade licences are issued.

Bhutan still ranks 89<sup>th</sup> on the Ease of Doing Business index (World Bank, 2020), citing delays in multi-agency approval. Foreign joint ventures face difficulties in gaining licences. Unless this situation improves, only small and local companies will be able to join the GMC vision.

### **Taxation**

To promote eco-friendly ventures, taxation benefits are provided. At the national level, corporate tax stands at 30 per cent, but Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and eco-friendly ventures enjoy reduced rates (15–25 per cent) depending on their size and sector. Priority sectors, like hydropower and organic farming, receive tax holiday of up to 10 years. Hydropower is the biggest contributor to the national exchequer – approximately 14 per cent of the total revenue. Gelephu is unlikely to facilitate large hydropower projects but the Mau river provides opportunities for small scale hydro plants.

The Value Added Tax (VAT) is levied at 7 per cent, with a registration threshold of Nu 2.5 million (approximately AUD\$30,000). This exempts 70 per cent of SMEs, as reported by the Bhutan Revenue and Customs Authority (BRCA) in 2023. Customs duties, averaging 10–15 per cent, apply to imported goods, though critical sectors like healthcare and education enjoy exemptions. Excise taxes target

non-essential goods, with rates as high as 100 per cent on alcohol and tobacco, reflecting Bhutan's health-conscious policies.

If the GMC intends to attract bigger international companies, corporate taxation would require revision to compete with other cities that provide substantial tax reductions for corporate world. Along with promulgation of laws for the GMC, the multilayer taxation system would need revision. While it's hard to forecast the future of the GMC based on national experience, it is likely to be assured not a paramount shift in the taxation system for Gelephu noting it's the same regime in Thimphu to approve these changes. Compliance costs remain high for SMEs due to complex filing processes, with only 35 per cent of businesses fully adhering to tax regulations. This would not be desirable for the GMC.

### **Trade financing**

Gelephu's trade ecosystem is dominated by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). These enterprises primarily depend on formal banking institutions like the Bhutan National Bank (BNBL) and the Bhutan Development Bank Limited (BDBL) for trade loans. In 2022, BDBL disbursed Nu 1.2 billion (≈AUD\$14.5 million) in loans to Gelephu-based businesses, focusing primarily on agriculture (BDBL, 2022). However, collateral requirements—often set at 150 per cent of loan values—exclude many small traders from accessing credit (Royal Monetary Authority, 2022).

The GMC aims to attract Nu 10 billion (≈AUD\$120 million) in investments by 2030, with a focus on improving trade infrastructure and financing access (Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment, 2023). This initiative includes plans for dedicated trade financing windows through partnerships with international development agencies like the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Gelephu's traders face systemic challenges, including high collateral demands, limited financial literacy, and bureaucratic delays in loan processing. Nationally, 35 per cent of MSMEs report difficulties in securing formal credit (RMA, 2022). To address this, the RMA established a Credit Information Bureau (CIB) in 2020 to streamline risk assessments, improving loan approval rates by 22 per cent by 2023 (RMA, 2023). Some subsidies in the form of collateral free loans (Lazon, K. & Dorji, S., 2024) on business loans provide relief to Bhutanese businesses, but it is too little to attract larger investments.

The GMC has established its own bank – ORO<sup>19</sup>. The bank is a replica of many fintechs seen germinating in developed countries in recent years. The bank is primarily controlled by Royal Family through Digital Kidu (DK) Limited, established during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the financial institutions in the country. It has been in the public domain for a few years now but has not made public how the company is financed.

## **Investments**

Bhutan has effectively discouraged local investments in the GMC until recently (Zangpo, 2025, May 2). During several overseas tours, the King and the promoters of the city encouraged Bhutanese diaspora to open saving accounts with the ORO bank. The investment return rates (saving accounts, fixed term deposits) are generally higher than other local banks, potentially diverting majority of remittances from overseas Bhutan to their portfolio.

The town was initially announced as a Special Economic Zone. It facilitated to attract some local business. However, it did not attract

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<sup>19</sup> ORO is not an abbreviation.

enough foreign direct investment (FDI), despite increases in FDI in the region since the SEZ's inception (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2022). The RGOB actively promotes FDI through incentives such as tax exemptions and streamlined business regulations.

There is growing interest among the Indian business community to invest in GMC (Gyaltshen, 2024). With the region's lack of capacity to hold large industrial bases, the GMC is likely to attract investments in service industries, on a small scale. Bhutan's priority for FDI includes industries such as IT, wellness, agriculture and forestry. Except IT, the other industries are likely to attract attention from medium size investors considering Bhutan footprints in sustainable forestry, organic agriculture and happiness economy. Owing to lack of adequate local human resources to meet the IT industry demand, FDI in IT would be a challenging task. According to the GMC, its target would be to invite investments in Education, Finance, Green IT, Crypto mining, Health & wellness, Buddhism (Vajrayana Buddhism) and Agri-tech and forestry. Education and Finance would also face challenge to prove its authenticity and efficiency.

The RGOB seeks to amend its FDI policy to facilitate more foreign investments (Bold FDI changes coming, 2024).

Gelephu's geographical positioning enhances its role in cross-border trade, particularly with India. The Bhutan-India trade relationship is strong, supported by treaties that facilitate the movement of goods and services.

## **Conclusion**

Gelephu is poised to become a significant trading hub. This gateway to Bhutan offers increased potential for bilateral trade and

commerce. The development of an international airport, enhancement of road networks, and changing the governing regime and status of a Special Economic Zone are clear indicators of Gelephu's future as a thriving trading centre.

Gelephu's proximity to India, one of the world's fastest-growing economies, provides it with a unique advantage for furthering its market aspirations for agricultural products, minerals, timber, and handicrafts. Gelephu's developing infrastructure and scenic beauty make it an attractive destination for Indian tourists, further boosting local businesses and enhancing cultural exchange.

The GMC's vision to integrate itself into the global economy to realise Bhutan's vision of sustainable development aligns perfectly with Gelephu's growth trajectory, ensuring that economic progress does not come at the cost of environmental degradation. Investments in renewable energy, waste management, and eco-friendly practices would be central to Gelephu's future. The new regime must work on simplifying the process for trade licencing, financing, local infrastructures and connectivity to reap the opportunity.

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## **Health Landscape of Gelephu**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article provides a comprehensive review of the evolution of healthcare services in Gelephu and Sarpang, focusing on the historical development, current challenges, and future prospects. Significant progress has been made in healthcare delivery, particularly in the areas of infectious disease control, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and traditional medicine. There are also several challenges faced by the healthcare system, including infrastructure issues, increased NCDs, and the integration of traditional and modern medicine. The article concludes with recommendations for improving healthcare services in the region, emphasising the need for evidence-based practices, infrastructure development, and sustainable healthcare policies.

**Keywords:** healthcare, traditional medicine, non-communicable diseases, public health, universal healthcare

### **Introduction**

The healthcare system in Gelephu and Sarpang began to take shape in the 1960s with the establishment of basic healthcare facilities. The first hospital in Sarpang was established in 1964, with only one doctor, one nurse, and a few support staff. During this period, the focus was on controlling infectious diseases, particularly malaria, which was endemic in the region. The malaria eradication program played a crucial role in reducing the disease burden in the region (Dorji & Melgaard, 2012).

By 1970s, healthcare services in the region had expanded significantly. The establishment of Basic Health Units (BHUs) and the introduction of mobile health units improved access to

healthcare in rural areas. The Gelephu Hospital was started as a small dispensary, which was upgraded to a regional referral hospital in 2005, increasing its bed capacity to 60. The hospital also introduced advanced diagnostic services, including X-ray and ultrasound facilities, enhancing its capacity to handle complex medical cases (Dorji & Melgaard, 2012).

## **Current Healthcare Services**

### *Infectious Disease Control*

The control of infectious diseases remains a priority in Gelephu. The Vector-Borne Disease Control Programme, which evolved from the malaria eradication program, continues to operate from Gelephu. The program has been successful in reducing the incidence of malaria, with only one death reported in 2013 compared to 63 in 1993 (Dorji & Melgaard, 2012). However, the region still faces challenges from emerging infectious diseases such as dengue fever and multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB). Like the rest of Bhutan, Gelephu faces challenges related to communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS. The country has made some progress in their control. For instance, Bhutan achieved malaria elimination status in 2018 (WHO, 2018), and the TB incidence rate has declined from 182 per 100,000 population in 2000 to 108 per 100,000 population in 2019 (WHO, 2020).

Gelephu has high prevalence of rabies. There have been reports of frequent outbreaks in the past (Tenzin & Ward, 2011). There have been four human deaths due to rabies reported in Gelephu during the period from 2008 to May 2011 (Palden, 2009 & Rai, 2011).

### *Rise of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)*

The NCDs are the leading cause of death and premature mortality in Bhutan, accounting for 69 per cent and 71 per cent of all deaths in

2014 and 2019, respectively (Ministry of Health). Bhutan has the highest age-standardised death rates for NCD per 100 000 population (WHO, 2011) among the World Health Organisation (WHO) Southeast Asia Region member countries.

The predominant physical activity in the country is work-related, involving the rural agricultural population. Bhutan, however, is going through rapid urbanisation, and by 2040, only about 23 per cent of the Bhutanese population is projected to live in rural areas (Yoshikama et al, 2019). This changing lifestyle is also based on the changing economic activities of the population, particularly the young who move away from manual-based jobs.

Outdoor open-air gym equipment has been installed in public areas in all 20 districts and 4 major municipalities in the country to encourage people to engage in physical activities (Ministry of Health, 2019). The resame report shows 57 per cent of respondents had never used open-air gym facilities and just a third of the 19 per cent who used them did so more than once a month.

NCDs, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases, are emerging as significant health challenges in Bhutan, including Gelephu. The prevalence of NCD risk factors, such as tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and harmful use of alcohol, is increasing (Ministry of Health, 2019). Gelephu's healthcare facilities are actively involved in promoting healthy lifestyles and providing NCD prevention and management services.

The epidemiological transition from infectious diseases to NCDs is a significant challenge for the healthcare system in Gelephu. The STEPS survey shows, 33 per cent of the population in Bhutan is

overweight, 42 per cent consume alcohol, and 28 per cent have high blood pressure. The Central Regional Referral Hospital (CRRH) in Gelephu has established NCD clinics to address the growing burden of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. However, the lack of awareness and preventive measures remains a major challenge.

The rise of NCDs is a major challenge for the healthcare system in Gelephu. The lack of awareness and preventive measures, coupled with changing lifestyles, has contributed to the increasing burden of diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. The government has implemented several initiatives, including the National Policy and Strategic Framework on Prevention and Control of NCDs, to address this issue. However, more needs to be done to promote healthy lifestyles and preventive measures (Ministry of Health, 2019).

### **Healthcare Infrastructure**

The healthcare infrastructure in Gelephu has not improved to cater to the demands. The CRRH in Gelephu, inaugurated in 2018 was supposed to be a state-of-the-art facility with advanced diagnostic and treatment capabilities. However, the hospital has faced several issues, including design flaws, construction quality, and maintenance problems. The collapse of ceilings, cracks in walls, and leaks have raised concerns about the safety and sustainability of the facility. The hospital's CT scan machine has been non-functional due to rat infestations, highlighting the need for better infrastructure management (The Bhutanese, 2019).

The CRRH is the primary healthcare facility in the region, serving not only the residents of Gelephu but also patients from neighbouring districts. The hospital provides a wide range of services, including

general medicine, surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, dentistry, and emergency care (Gelephu CRRH, n.d.).

There are Basic Health Units (BHUs) and Outreach Clinics (ORCs) in the surrounding areas, which offer primary healthcare services to the local population.

### **Traditional Medicine**

Traditional medicine has always been an integral part of the Bhutanese healthcare. The National Traditional Medicine Hospital in Thimphu serves as the referral centre for traditional medicine units across the country, including the one in Gelephu. In 1993, Gelephu Hospital established its own Traditional Medicine Unit, offering services such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and massage therapy. These treatments are widely used, particularly for chronic conditions such as arthritis, migraine, and gastric disorders (Wangchuk & Tobgay, 2015). Although the sustainability of medicinal plants and the need for evidence-based practices remain significant challenges, the integration of traditional and modern medicine is a key feature of Bhutan's healthcare system, providing patients with a holistic approach to treatment (Wangchuk & Tobgay, 2015).

The government established Menjong Sorig Pharmaceuticals Corporation to promote the sustainable use of medicinal plants (Wangchuk & Tobgay, 2015).

### **Human Resources for Health**

The healthcare workforce in Gelephu comprises doctors, nurses, technicians, and support staff. As of 2021, Gelephu CRRH had a total of 42 doctors, 119 nurses, and 39 allied health professionals, including pharmacists, laboratory technicians, and radiographers (Gelephu CRRH, 2021). The hospital services to patients from five

districts (Tamang, et al, 2024) – Sarpang, Tsirang, Dagana, Zhemgang and Pemagatshel. The total population of the five districts is over 135,000 (Census 2017) bringing the doctor-patient ratio of 1: 3,200. This is well below the WHO standards of 1:1000 doctor-patient ratio. The region faces shortages of healthcare professionals, particularly specialists and skilled nurses. The brain drain phenomenon seen in the last decade has encouraged many skilled health professionals leave the country.

As the future city prepared for population boom, the health professionals are unlikely to meet the growing demands. The healthcare system in Gelephu faces several challenges, including infrastructure issues, resource constraints, and a shortage of healthcare professionals.

### **Health Indicators**

To evaluate the effectiveness of Gelephu's healthcare system, it is essential to examine key health indicators, such as life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality rates, and the prevalence of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

*Life expectancy:* Bhutan's life expectancy at birth has increased over the past few decades, reaching 71.8 years in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). While specific data for Gelephu is not available, it is reasonable to assume that the town's life expectancy mirrors the national trend, given the region's access to healthcare services.

*Infant and maternal mortality rates:* Bhutan has made progress in reducing infant and maternal mortality rates. In 2019, the infant mortality rate was 21.6 per 1,000 live births, and the maternal mortality ratio was 89 per 100,000 live births (World Health Organisation, 2021). Gelephu's healthcare facilities, especially the



CRRH, have contributed to these improvements by providing quality maternal and child health services.

## **Challenges And Future Prospects**

### *Health Information Systems*

Gelephu, like the rest of Bhutan, needs to strengthen its health information systems to improve data collection, analysis, and utilisation for evidence-based decision-making. Robust health information systems will enable healthcare providers and policymakers to monitor health trends, evaluate interventions, and allocate resources effectively.

Bhutan has a rich tradition of indigenous medicine, known as ‘Sowa Rigpa’. Integrating traditional and modern medicine can help Gelephu's healthcare system provide comprehensive and culturally sensitive care to its population. The government would invest in research and capacity-building initiatives to promote the integration of these healthcare systems.

### *Climate Change And health*

Bhutan is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, which can affect the health landscape of Gelephu. The region may experience increased incidences of vector-borne diseases, waterborne diseases, and respiratory illnesses due to climate change-induced events such as floods, landslides, and temperature fluctuations. Gelephu's healthcare system needs to develop climate-resilient health strategies to address these emerging health challenges.

### *Mental Health And Psychosocial Support*

Mental health remains a neglected area in Bhutan's healthcare system, including in Gelephu. The region needs to strengthen mental

health services, promote awareness, and reduce stigma associated with mental health issues. Training healthcare providers in mental health and psychosocial support and establishing dedicated mental health facilities can help address this gap.

### *Health Promotion And Education*

Gelephu's healthcare system should prioritise health promotion and education to empower individuals and communities to take charge of their health. This includes raising awareness about healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and available healthcare services. Collaborating with schools, community organisations, and media can help disseminate health information effectively.

### **Recommendations**

To address the challenges faced by the healthcare system in Gelephu, the following recommendations are proposed:

- *Infrastructure development:* Invest in the development and maintenance of healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Address design flaws and construction quality issues in existing facilities.
- *Preventive measures:* Promote healthy lifestyles and preventive measures to address the rising burden of NCDs. Implement community-based health promotion programs and increase awareness about the risks of unhealthy behaviours.
- *Evidence-based practices:* Promote evidence-based practices in traditional medicine. Conduct high-quality research to validate the efficacy and safety of traditional therapies.
- *Sustainable use of medicinal plants:* Implement sustainable practices for the cultivation and harvesting of medicinal

plants. Establish protected areas for the conservation of endangered plant species.

- *Capacity building*: Invest in the training and development of healthcare professionals. Address the shortage of healthcare workers.

## **Conclusion**

The healthcare system in Gelephu has made progress over the years but needs further improvements to prepare itself for a mega city. Several challenges remain, including infrastructure issues, the rise of NCDs, and the need for evidence-based practices in traditional medicine. The new government in GMC require a concerted effort to address these challenges. By investing in infrastructure, promoting preventive measures, and supporting evidence-based practices, the healthcare system in Gelephu can continue to improve and meet the needs of the population.

Additionally, addressing climate change impacts on health, strengthening mental health services, and promoting health education can contribute to the overall well-being of Gelephu's future residents.

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## **GMC And The Challenges of Geography**

### **ABSTRACT**

Gelephu sits on widest flat land of the country yet Bhutan's mountain terrain mean the uneven geography is the challenge for any infrastructure development that are necessary for a thriving commercial hub. Bhutan's commitments to ecology conservation is internationally recognised. On top of that Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) requires enormous investments to build infrastructure in the terrain, for which the country lack adequate capital. Attempts for foreign investments in the past did not yield desired outcome. Under such circumstances, GMC leadership's task requires fine tuned marketing skills to win the trust of investors that GMC guarantees return on investments.

**Keywords:** Climate, weather, flora and fauna, vegetation, conservation

### **Location**

Gelephu is located at the foothills of the eastern Himalayas, at an altitude of approximately 300 metres in average (about 984 feet) above sea level. The town is located at 26:50 degree north latitude and 90:30 degree east longitude. This low elevation compared to much of Bhutan, filled with high mountains and rugged terrain, places Gelephu in a unique ecological zone that supports a diverse range of flora and fauna. The town lies near the border with India, making it an important gateway for trade and cultural exchange. The city also lies along the banks of the Mau river, fed generally by mountain floods, which becomes uncontrollable during monsoon seasons.

Elephants also inhabit the surrounding areas and still cause problems for the city, occasionally. Close proximity to two big conservation areas (Manas National Park and Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary) provides both opportunities and challenges for the proposed mega city. The region has tropical hot summer influenced by the weather of the Indian plains but has cooler, frosty and dry winter. Despite being small area, climatic condition at the border and northern part of the Sarpang district vary substantially.

Southern border has narrow flat land whereas northern part of the district has high mountains and deep valleys.

### **Flora and Fauna**

Gelephu has rich and diverse vegetation that reflects the region's varied topography. As of 2020, 61 per cent of the land cover in Gelephu region is natural forest, though the total area of land cover decreased by 12 per cent since 2016. The area's unique position at the confluence of the Himalayan foothills and the Indian plains allows for a wide range of plant species to thrive. The major vegetation types found in Gelephu are mixed hard wood forests, paddy fields, wetlands and marsh land vegetation.

The vegetation primarily consists of subtropical broadleaf forests, which are dense and verdant, providing a lush green canopy. These forests are home to numerous tree species, including sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Himalayan cypress (*Cupressus Torulosa*), two dominant species that are of significant ecological and economic importance. Sal forests provide habitat for various wildlife species and are also a source of timber and non-timber forest products for local communities.

Other species in the area include teak (*Tectona grandis*), bamboo, and various types of fig trees, such as the banyan and peepal. These trees offer fruits and leaves that serve as food sources for both wildlife and humans, fostering a symbiotic relationship between the flora and fauna of Gelephu.

The undergrowth in these forests is equally diverse, comprising shrubs, herbs, and grasses that contribute to the ecosystem's complexity. Many medicinal plants are found in this undergrowth, which are traditionally used by local communities for their healing properties. The rich plant diversity supports a wide array of animal life, including birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects, making Gelephu a haven for biodiversity.

## **Land Uses**

### *Forestland Vegetation*

Forests are the prime natural resource of the country, supporting a variety of flora and fauna. Forest vegetation protects the hill slopes from erosion, landslides and plays a major role in regulating the climatic condition of the region. Forests are the dominant land cover of the country occupying about 70 per cent of the total area of Bhutan.

Gelephu is surrounded by lush forests that are an integral part of its geography. The forests in this region are primarily composed of subtropical species, including broadleaf deciduous trees and various coniferous species.

The high rainfall in this area fosters the growth of hardwood trees and supports the cultivation of cash crops such as areca nut. Notably, the dense teak vegetation found along the Gelephu-Sarpang corridor, the Gelephu-Trongsa Highway, and near Setikhare river



exemplifies the lower terrace forest vegetation prevalent in this region. Within the Gelephu area, the forest cover plays a pivotal role in protecting the steep slopes of the mountains that border the town. This protective forest cover is instrumental in mitigating siltation in the southern plains.

Both natural and human-made forests exist. The natural forests are crucial for maintaining ecological balance, providing habitats for wildlife, and supporting the local climate. In contrast, human-made forests, often established for timber production and conservation purposes, contribute to the local economy while also serving to protect against soil erosion and promote biodiversity. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has afforestation programmes aimed at increasing forest cover and enhancing the ecological landscape of the region.

### *Paddy fields*

Gelephu and its surrounding region have large paddy fields, which represent a form of irrigated agricultural land. These fields not only contribute to the area's agricultural productivity but also play a role in environmental conservation. By serving as a buffer against soil erosion, they aid in the protection and management of lower river terraces, which are vital for maintaining groundwater resources. A notable concentration of these paddy field wetlands is found along and across the Mau river. During the summer months, the eastern villages across the city are primarily distinguished by their extensive paddy fields, while in winter, these fields are often cultivated with wheat or maize.

### *Marshland Vegetation*

Marshlands, a type of wetland ecosystem, serve as natural water management systems. They support diverse plant and bird species,

and perform essential ecological functions such as groundwater and surface water maintenance, sediment trapping, erosion control, and pollution mitigation. In the Sarpang district, riverbed wetlands encompass an expansive area of 59 square kilometres, making them as the most extensive wetlands in Bhutan. In Gelephu, marshlands are predominantly located along river courses, particularly at confluences where tributaries join the Mau river. Additional marshlands are situated along the Mau River, to the east of the town, extending beyond the municipal boundaries. Some marshlands near the Indo-Bhutan border have been transformed into paddy fields, indicating a shift in land use. These marshlands serve as habitats for winter migratory birds in the region, highlighting their ecological significance.

### **Fauna and Avifauna Reserves**

The diversity of flora and fauna in the Gelephu region can be primarily attributed to its varied climatic conditions and topographical features. According to a survey conducted by the RGOB in 2024, this region is home to an extensive array of flowering plants, comprising over 129 families, 428 genera, and approximately 637 species of Phanerogams. Among these, dicots account for 109 families, encompassing 384 genera and 528 species, while monocots are represented by 20 families, including 80 genera and 109 species. This rich botanical diversity encompasses 180 tree species, 155 shrub species, 72 climber species, and 130 herbaceous plant species. The floral composition of Sarpang district exhibits notable similarities with the plant life found in the Assam plains and North Bengal regions of India. Dominant plant communities in the area include species from the genera *Acacia*, *Dalbergia*, *Zizyphus*, *Terminalia*, *Shorea*, *Lagerstroemia*, and *Tectona*, among others.

The fauna of Sarpang is equally diverse, featuring a wide range of large herbivores such as Asiatic elephants, Gaur, Sambar deer, Chital, buffalo, barking deer, and wild boar. The carnivorous species include leopards, wild dogs, and various other mammals characteristic of the Indo-Malayan and Himalayan regions. There are over 150 bird species documented. The region hosts 14 species of reptiles, further contributing to its ecological richness<sup>20</sup>. Animals like elephants, peacocks, wild boar and monkeys are common fauna present in the region.

The history of Gelephu provides references to the existence of these animals in the region. The process of urbanisation and conversion of forest lands to agricultural purposes and intense human interference, has resulted in the extradition of these animals from the town and its immediate vicinity. There also exist a few bird habitats in the region.

The Mau river and its tributaries like the Setikhare, the Dhaula, Aipole comprise of the hydrological structure of Gelephu. The Mau river has its watershed higher in the mountains to the north. The Gole river, the Gong river, and the Khar river are some of the major tributaries of these rivers in its initial course apart from the small mountain tributaries and rivulets. These major streams are fed by their own network of numerous minor streams and rivulets through the gullies running down the hill slopes. These streams originate from natural springs, lakes and surface runoffs at higher altitudes.

### **Land Formation**

The land formation in and around Gelephu is predominantly flat, with gentle rolling hills and valleys to the north. This geographical feature allows for a mix of both highland and lowland ecosystems, creating

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<sup>20</sup> [https://biodiversity.bt/group/Sarpang\\_Forest\\_Division](https://biodiversity.bt/group/Sarpang_Forest_Division)

a rich biodiversity in the area. The region's soil is fertile, supporting various agricultural practices that contribute to the local economy.

Damaging flood in the flat region is common in Himalayan basin. Gelephu, a part of this basin, is no exception. The town has already shifted its location twice as a result of flooding of the Mau river. Soil erosion in the higher hill slopes and the resultant siltation in the region is one of the main causes for flooding of rivers. Because of the constant susceptibility to flooding, suitable measures must be taken towards flood protection for Gelephu and the surrounding areas.

### **Conservation efforts**

Despite rich forest resources, Gelephu faces significant deforestation challenges. The pressures of agricultural expansion, urbanisation, and illegal logging have led to a decline in forest cover. Conservation efforts are critical in addressing these issues. The government, along with non-governmental organisations, has implemented policies aimed at sustainable forest management and reforestation. Awareness campaigns educate local communities about the importance of forests for biodiversity and climate regulation, and initiatives are in place to engage locals in conservation practices.

As discussed above, Gelephu is home to various species of birds, mammals, and reptiles, some of which are endemic to Bhutan. Notable wildlife includes the Bengal tiger, Indian elephant, and several species of deer. Conservation efforts are focused on protecting these species and their habitats. Initiatives such as the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries and protected areas aim to safeguard biodiversity.

## **Climate and Weather**

Gelephu's subtropical climate is heavily influenced by its geographical conditions, including warm temperatures, high humidity, and high rainfall. As a result, Gelephu has distinct wet and dry seasons. The monsoon season, which typically spans from June to September, brings heavy rainfall to the region. This period is crucial for agriculture, as the abundant rainfall supports the cultivation of rice and similar other crops that are essential to the local economy. The average annual rainfall in Gelephu is substantial, often exceeding 5000 millimetres, which contributes to the lush vegetation and fertile soils in the area.

Temperature variations in Gelephu are relatively moderate compared to other parts of Bhutan, due to its lower elevation and proximity to the Indian plains. The average annual temperature ranges between 15°C and 30°C, with the warmest months being May to September. During this period, temperatures can rise to around 35°C, accompanied by high humidity levels. Conversely, cooler months from November to February see temperatures drop to around 15°C. This period is generally considered the most pleasant time of the year, attracting visitors who seek to explore the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage.

The weather in Gelephu is not only defined by its temperature and rainfall patterns but also by the occasional occurrence of extreme weather events. Floods, landslides, and heavy storms are common, especially during the monsoon season, and can pose significant challenges to local communities. Unlike in the other regions, rainfall is heavy that causes streams and rivers to swell bringing destruction to land, infrastructures and other facilities. Transport and communication services are often disrupted and crops battered to ground. These events highlight the vulnerability of the region to

climate change impacts, underscoring the need for adaptive measures to enhance resilience.

The effects of climate change are becoming increasingly apparent in Gelephu. Changes in rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and more frequent extreme weather events have been observed, affecting agricultural productivity, water availability, and the overall ecosystem. Recognising these challenges, the RGOB has implemented climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Efforts include promoting sustainable agricultural practices, enhancing water resource management, and investing in infrastructure that can withstand the impacts of changing weather patterns.

Table 1: Maximum temperature in Celsius

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Feb	21.5	23	23	24.4	23.4
May	28.4	29	27	28.0	28.2
Aug	30.3	31	29	29.0	31.2
Nov	23.4	27	25	24.8	27.4
Annual Avg	26.2		26	26.9	27.3

Table 2: Minimum Temperature in Celsius

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Feb	16.7	14	14	16.4	13.9
May	24.2	21	21	24.1	22.3
Aug	25.6	24	23	25.4	24.8
Nov	13.3	18	19	26.9	18.7
Annual Avg	20.3		19	20.7	20.2

Table 3: Rainfall (MM)

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Feb	25.4	33.7	7	00	11.5
May	568.4	901.9	321	318.5	467.2
Aug	999.1	543.0	531	00	1904.1
Nov	24.5	9.1	12	00	3.0
Annual	4806.9	6081.6	2911	1891.7	5024.8

Source: NSB, collated from multiple years reports

## Conclusion

Bhutan's journey reflects a profound commitment to environmental stewardship. The mission for a mega city must not erode this stewardship. The ecological balance is important to any urban development and economic prosperity. The GMC mission is a prosperity vision. It should not come at the expense of Gelephu's biodiversity and ecological serenity. The metropolis vision must walk the balance between conservation efforts and developmental goals.

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## **Lack of Infrastructure Blurs Mega City Vision**

### **ABSTRACT**

Gelephu faces significant infrastructure challenges, hindering its transformation into a major commercial hub. Despite its flat terrain, which is conducive to development, the town has repeatedly failed to evolve due to inadequate infrastructure. A notable issue is water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change and poor management. Other primary infrastructures such as sanitation, waste management, housing, educational facilities, health amenities and transport are not well planned to cater to the need of a futuristic city. This article traces the challenges of Gelephu in attaining these basic infrastructures that are fundamental to building a mega city.

**Keywords:** Infrastructure, Hospitals, Sanitation, Road Network, Universities, Banks

### **Introduction**

Gelephu has a flat terrain that supports building infrastructures essential for a growing population. The town was repeatedly proposed for conversion into bigger commercial hub of Bhutan but has so far failed at every attempt. The primary reasons for those failures were absence of adequate infrastructure for the metropolis to take off and the ability of the government to attract investment for these infrastructure.

### **Sanitation And Water Supply**

#### *Water Supply*

Bhutan has the highest water availability per capita value. But water scarcity continues. Bhutan has poor water resources management (Hagg et al., 2021).



Gelephu, rich in rivers during the monsoon, experiences water shortages in peak winter, lacking a consistent and reliable drinking water source. The situation is expected to worsen as existing sources continue to dry up due to climate change. The region is not a home to any of the major river system of the country, raising concerns about future water availability for domestic and agricultural uses.

The domestic water supply infrastructure in Gelephu was last renovated in the early 1990s with funding by Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Mau river is the major source for drinking water supplies while Passang river north of the city, supplements the drinking water during summer. Water is treated at the Mau River Infiltration Gallery and the Pelrithang Treatment Plant which is then stored in a reservoir and supplied to the town through a combination of gravity flow (25 per cent) and pumping (75 per cent). There is a separate raw water supply line from Pelrithang to the Royal Guest House, a residential place for royal family members and their guests during visits to the region.

However, water shortages occur frequently (Wangdi, 2018), primarily due to unreliable power supply - the gravity-fed system traverses landslide-prone areas, necessitating regular maintenance.

A new Gelephu Landmark Water Project inaugurated in 2023 (Wangdi, 2024) is expected to address the problem. However, this source is not expected to cater the future metropolis. The project has the capacity of treating 12million litres per day. It can cater to 83,500 individuals – 143 litres of water per person per day which is slightly lower than the international average of 170 litres. This future city is likely to have more than 100,000 people. The per capita daily water consumption is approximately 148 litres in Thimphu (Dorji, 2016).

The local rivers are unlikely to supply additional water in winter. Though the supply may be improved during summer, it is likely to face challenges in filtration considering the amount of gravel and soil it carries from the mountain, generated by mudslides. A government report in 2024 pointed out that most of the natural water sources in and around Sarpang have dried up due to either lack of proposal water management system in place or climate change impact.

Sarpang's population in 2023 was estimated to be 50,000. One projection for GMC population is 83,000 while others put over 100,000. Bhutan may plan for controlled population growth, in which case the economic growth of the city will be literally shattered.

Residents outside the municipality also face intermittent water shortage (Wangdi, 2018). The proposed city incorporates the whole of Sarpang district that does not have robust drinking water supply infrastructure in place or plan to put in place immediately.

In a separate plan by the government to convert the current Gelephu city into a Special Economic Zone, the projected water need was 2.6 million litres per day for domestic purposes and 2.3 million litres per day for commercial establishment.

The current water supply network does not cover the entire area of the municipality, let alone the satellite settlements. The existing settlements in the extended areas are scattered in small numbers. Some of the extended areas are covered by Rural Water Supply Schemes, which do not have basic water treatment mechanisms, as a part of their network. This has resulted in a situation where the quality of water supplied throughout the town is not uniform due to the inherent differences in the kinds of networks in use.

In the absence of any metering system in certain areas of the town and villages, billing for the services being provided poses difficulties. Strengthening the existing networks in some other areas might prove to be difficult, owing to the lack of sufficient capacity in the existing infrastructure to be upgraded to a network covering villages outside the current central business district in Gelephu.

Currently, about half of the households with municipal water connections have water metres; the rest pay a flat rate of around Nu. 50 per month.

### *Storm Water Drainage*

Gelephu's storm water drainage relies on a combination of an unconstructed natural system and constructed open drains, which handle stormwater, sullage, and septic tank overflow. The drainage system, built along natural drainage pathways, features rectangular and trapezoidal main drains with slopes of one to four percent. Much of the town core is served by lateral open drains, although many covers are missing or damaged. Utilising the terrain, runoff is directed to the town's outskirts, where it is dumped into natural drains along the Mau river, creating potential health risks. The open drain system is public safety hazard and ideal place for mosquito breeding. Frequent blockages in the stormwater system are common, attributed to improper disposal of household waste, the absence of drainage screens, and inadequate regular maintenance.

### *Sewerage Management*

Gelephu, and the whole Sarpang district, lacks a proper sewerage system. Most buildings rely on septic tanks or soak pits. Apartment complexes typically use a shared septic tank. Gelephu city residential buildings generate approximately 1,865 cubic meters of sewage daily, alongside an equivalent amount of industrial waste.

Without proper sewerage system, septic tank overflow often drains into natural water course, posing significant hygiene risks. Many septic tanks and soak pits are seldom cleaned.

Not all buildings in Gelephu have required level toilet facilities either. The commercial and business hub require additional facilities to support as people flock during the day. There are only two public toilets in the Gelephu municipality and many commercial areas have no public toilets (Wangdi, 2021).

There is an urgent need to rethink Gelephu's sewerage infrastructure by establishing sewer lines and a treatment plant, with [DANIDA](#) already proposing improvements to sanitation and public health.

### *Solid Waste Management*

Gelephu municipality generates about six tons of solid waste daily (Kuensel 2024 March 15). Daily domestic waste collection amounts to approximately 4.96 tons, while commercial establishments and hospitals generate about 0.3 tons and 0.06 tons, respectively. Community bins are provided for roughly half the population, while those without access often resort to dumping waste in vacant areas. Individual houses have no waste bins supplied even though the municipality collects waste daily from the residential area in town centre and once a week outside the town centre. Commercial establishments are supplied with individual bins. However, waste is often disposed of in open fields along Aipole river and burned. This contributes to air pollution.

There is no formal mechanism in place for solid waste disposal in the town. Some schools and institutions incinerate their waste in open areas. A frequent issue is the overflow of solid waste from open bins, which poses a risk to the town's hygiene.

The town facing the challenge is the absence of an effective solid waste disposal area. The current approach does not prioritise reducing the waste load sent to disposal sites by failing to implement source segregation of solid waste. This oversight necessitates larger disposal facilities and increases transportation costs. Approximately 25 per cent of the total solid waste consists of plastics, bottles, papers, cardboard, tin, aluminium products, and bamboo baskets. By segregating these materials at the source, they can be recycled and reused, thereby decreasing the overall volume of waste transported to disposal sites.

Other substantial components of the solid waste stream include organic waste, which can be managed through composting methods. Innovative natural treatment processes can be employed to break down biodegradable waste, further reducing the volume that needs to be transported for disposal.

Waste generated from construction sites should be carefully separated and disposed of appropriately. The existing open concrete litter bins in residential areas have contributed to littering, as waste is often scattered by stray dogs.

The current waste disposal system requires re-evaluation, focusing on alternative disposal methods and efficient collection strategies. It is essential to ensure that waste is collected from all locations to maintain a clean and healthy environment in Gelephu.

### **Road and Transport Network**

As of 2020, Bhutan's road network has a total road length of roughly 18,000 kilometres, of which 61 per cent are farm roads, around 15 per cent are national highways, and about 11 per cent are the district

roads (ADB, 2023). Sarpang district has a total road network of approximately 250 kilometres. Most road networks are vertical – connecting northern cities with border towns.

The GMC region has poor road network and lack sealed road that cater to the need of a metropolis. There are two highways (one lane) connecting Gelephu with Trongsa and Punakha. Gelephu has no highways connecting the other southern plains of the country or other major business hub in India that facilitates the easy movement of commercial goods and services. Several attempts were made in the past to improve the road network within the core Gelephu and its satellite area but ended without action.

In 2009, the Department of Urban Development proposed Sibsudaim National Highway (SDNH) as a key transportation route connecting urban centres in the south - Sibsudaim, Samtse, Phuentsholing, Sarpang, Gelephu, and Daim. This highway was envisioned to open acceleration commercial activities in southern region. The GMC leadership has not clarified if this road network is still on table to connect the commercial hub with other satellite cities in southern region.

The robust road network connecting the GMC is required not just within the Bhutan to help ferry Bhutanese products to and from Gelephu but also beyond Bhutan's borders to ensure the Bhutanese produce reach the international market within stipulated time. While the mountain terrain and frequent landslides in the country are challenges to build reliable road network, gaining confidence from the Indian governments is equally challenging to build road infrastructure to facilitate Bhutanese exports.

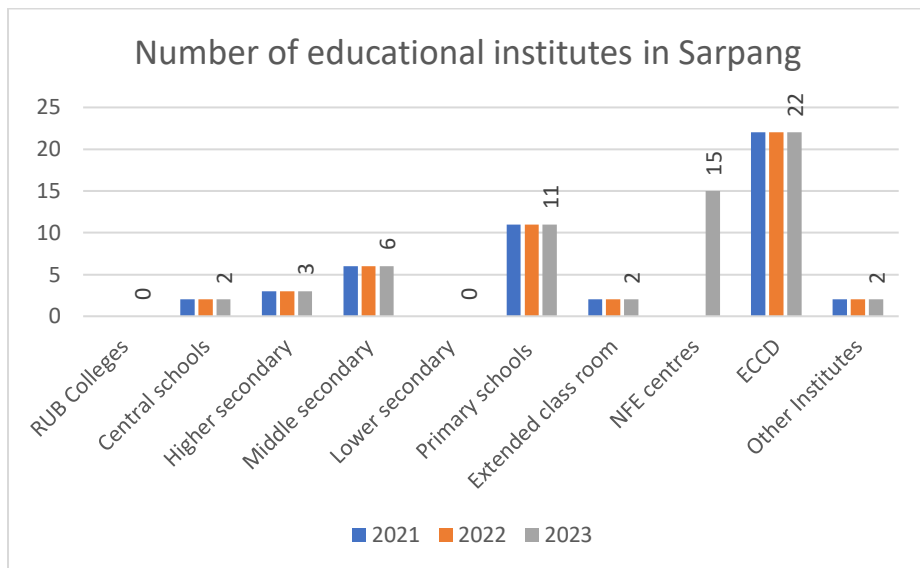
### *Indian Rail*

Commercial success of Gelephu heavily depend on the road network in India. Indian government has prioritised its road infrastructure investments in key strategic location. Roads in India linking Bhutanese town is not a priority for India which will hinder the vision of the GMC.

Rail line linking Gelephu with Kokrajhar has been in discussion since 2017. Two countries have so far agreed for survey for location of the route (Mishra, 2023) which will, if agreed, follow a feasibility studies and other formalities. The process is at initial stage (Brij, 2025). The rail network connects Gelephu with India but plans are to extend these network to Bangladesh which does not serve the purpose of Bhutan being connecting point for India and South East Asia. India does not have adequate freight and passenger train services to north east region that will eventually connects Gelephu to South East Asia.

### **Education Infrastructure**

The GMC's vision is to have world class education and wellness centre. The vision requires adequate education infrastructure and skilled human capital. Today Bhutan was two universities – Royal University of Bhutan (estd 2003) and Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (estd 2015). The former has 11 colleges while latter has two. Sarpang does not have a single college under these universities that provides tertiary education. Students interested in university education either have to travel northern districts or India. The education destination in recent year have rather opened up in overseas such as Australia (Stachel, 2023) and Canada (Namgyal, 2024). Sarpang district provides education up to higher secondary.



Source: Statistics collated from district reports and National Statistics Bureau.

The Sarpang Central School was the first educational institution established in the district in 1962 which then provided education up to year six. The number of schools in the district has increased to 22 by 2024 but they remain institutions for basic education. While the country had its first university in 2003, Gelephu is far away from presenting itself as the education and knowledge hub.

A metropolis aiming to offer world-class education must fulfill several basic requirements. It needs a robust infrastructure consisting of sufficient schools and learning institutions that can accommodate the existing and prospective population. These facilities should be equipped with modern amenities, including libraries, playgrounds, laboratories, and computer labs. Ensuring spaces conducive to learning is essential.



The metropolis should have a substantial and well-qualified teaching workforce. Teachers should possess not only educational expertise but also the skills to engage students in the learning process. At the time country facing brain drain and new generation unwilling to pursue teaching as their preferred profession, the country has yet to answer how the skilled workforce can be sourced. Adequate training and continuous professional development opportunities are key to maintaining their competence and motivation. Furthermore, competitive salaries and benefits are necessary to attract and retain top teaching talent.

Other essential requirement is the implementation of a comprehensive curriculum that is both challenging and adaptive to the evolving needs of the global job market. This curriculum should include not only core subjects like mathematics, science, and literature but also critical thinking, problem-solving, and 21st-century skills. Integrating technology and promoting digital literacy is crucial in today's digital age.

Funding is another critical element. Sufficient public and private investment is required to maintain the educational infrastructure, compensate the teaching staff, and procure necessary resources. The metropolis must allocate a significant portion of its budget to education and seek additional resources through grants, partnerships, and philanthropic efforts.

Moreover, inclusive education policies that ensure accessibility and equity are vital. Measures should be in place to provide equal educational opportunities to all children irrespective of their socio-economic background, gender, or physical abilities. This may involve subsidising or providing free education for underprivileged children, ensuring transportation facilities, and employing special educators.

There are questions whether Bhutan and particularly Gelephu is ready to adopt and adapt to these basic requirements to realise its core objective to be the centre of education and knowledge. Barely being educational centre for Bhutanese students may not materialise the vision to be called mega city.

<b>Name of School</b>	<b>Gewog</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Support Staff</b>	<b>Estd</b>
Chokhorling MSS	Dekidling	364	328	692	40	17	2013
Chuzagang PS	Chhuzanggang	107	129	236	14	16	1998
Dechenperli PS	Samtenling	67	89	156	10	7	2005
Dekiling MSS	Dekiling	185	201	386	28	17	1999
Gakiling PS	Jigmechoeling	41	39	80	6	3	1983
Jangchubling MSS	Chhudzom	171	178	349	21	12	2008
Jigmecholing MSS	Jigmechoeling	213	237	450	27	16	1997
Jigmeling PS	Dekidling	97	88	185	10	10	1991
Lharing PS	Gakidling	59	58	117	8	7	2008
Lhayul PS	Chhudzom	55	49	104	8	8	2009
Norbuling CS	Serzhong	427	471	898	58	28	1976
Pelrithang HSS	Gelegphu	429	434	863	56	20	1981
Retey PS	Jigmechoeling	22	19	41	2	3	2002
Samkhara ECR	Jigmechoeling	19	16	35	2	0	2010
Samtenling PS	Samtenling	147	141	288	18	12	2008
Sarpang CS	Shompangkha	216	257	473	35	20	1962
Sarpang MSS	Shompangkha	455	470	925	57	21	2001
Serzhong PS	Serzhong	62	53	115	9	5	1978
Singye PS	Sengye	80	95	175	7	10	2010
Tareythang PS	Tareythang	53	44	97	7	4	2010
Umling MSS	Umling	146	185	331	24	16	1998
Losel Gyatsho Academy	Gelephu	307	254	561	34	11	2013
<b>Total</b>		<b>3722</b>	<b>3835</b>	<b>7557</b>	<b>481</b>	<b>263</b>	

## **Health Facilities**

There are only three hospitals in Sarpang district and none of these have facilities to meet the needs of a mega city residents. Key health amenities in the region include the Central Regional Referral Hospital, the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) office and the Veterinary Hospital.

Central Referral Hospital in Gelephu is a 150-bedded hospital. It was established in mid-1960s as dispensary. The NMCP office was established in 1964 with an ambition to eradicate malaria from the country. Although the NMCP started as a separate program, it is now integrated into general health services. The Veterinary Hospital is located north of the town along the Gelephu-Trongsa highway.

If Gelephu aspires to be a mega city, it requires a comprehensive health infrastructure. At the forefront of this infrastructure are primary healthcare centres that serve as the first point of contact for individuals. These centres should be equipped with basic diagnostic tools, pharmacies, and staffed with general practitioners, nurses, and healthcare technicians to handle common ailments and provide preventive care.

In a mega city, the provision of basic health infrastructure is a complex yet crucial endeavour for ensuring the well-being of the urban populace. According to the World Health Organisation, a well-functioning health system consists of six building blocks: service delivery, health workforce, information, medical products, vaccines, and technologies, financing, and leadership and governance (WHO, 2018). These blocks form the backbone of healthcare infrastructure in a densely populated urban setting.

To meet the demands of a mega city, primary healthcare centres must be widely accessible, providing essential services such as vaccination, prenatal and postnatal care, and management of common diseases (WHO, 2018). Secondary healthcare facilities, such as district hospitals, should offer diagnostic and treatment services for more complex conditions. Tertiary healthcare facilities, including specialised hospitals and academic medical centres, are essential for advanced care, including intensive care units, organ transplants, and specialised surgeries (Barnett et al., 2015).

Emergency medical services (EMS) are critical, ensuring timely responses to medical emergencies. The Institute of Medicine (2007) emphasised the importance of integrating EMS with hospitals to improve patient outcomes. This integration facilitates smooth handovers and continuity of care during critical moments.

Mental health facilities are another indispensable component. According to the WHO (2014), mental health services should be integrated into primary care systems to ensure accessibility. This integration can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and encourage early treatment.

Public health institutions play a pivotal role in monitoring health trends, implementing preventive measures, and guiding policy. These institutions are vital for outbreak management and devising strategies to combat emerging health threats (CDC, 2018).

The World Bank (2019) highlighted the significance of pharmaceutical infrastructure, ensuring that urban populations have access to affordable, quality medicines. Community health education programs, as advocated by the WHO (2018), are also necessary to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent diseases.

Health information technology (HIT), according to the American Health Information Management Association (2017), streamlines healthcare delivery, improves patient outcomes, and reduces costs. HIT includes electronic health records, patient portals, and telemedicine services.

## **Finance**

The GMC aspires to be a financial services hub, especially in wealth management, pointing to the opportunity created by two big economies – India and China. While a new fintech Oro Bank is designated to be the official bank of the proposed city, there are 11 branches of seven banks in operation in the Sarpang district currently. In recent years, the traditional banks of the country increased their dependency on remittances from overseas Bhutanese. However, with the Oro bank joining the foray has become popular among overseas Bhutanese for sending remittances making it harder for other banks to expand their services further. The obvious questions now is whether one bank is sufficient to cater the financial need for a future metropolis.

Financial infrastructure is a critical component that facilitates economic growth and development. Drawing on from international practices, a robust financial infrastructure include banking institutions, capital markets, microfinance, insurance, and efficient payment systems. These elements are vital for supporting business activities, encouraging investment, and providing financial services to both individuals and corporations.

According to the World Bank (2019), a well-developed banking system is fundamental for stimulating economic activities. This includes commercial banks, development banks, and specialised

banks that offer a variety of financial products such as deposits, loans, and credit facilities. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS, 2018) emphasises the importance of banking regulation and supervision to ensure financial stability and consumer protection.

Capital markets, including stock and bond markets, help in channelling savings to investments, thereby spurring economic growth. The International Organisation of Securities Commissions (IOSCO, 2017) advocates for well-regulated capital markets that protect investors and ensure market transparency. Evidence from developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom shows that efficient capital markets contribute to economic dynamism (Levine, 2005).

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) provide financial services to low-income individuals and small businesses. The work of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh exemplifies the transformative power of microfinance in alleviating poverty (Yunus & Jolis, 1998). The Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP, 2018) highlights the need for regulatory frameworks that support sustainable and inclusive microfinance services.

Insurance markets mitigate risks associated with unforeseen events, contributing to economic stability. The adoption of solvency standards, such as the Solvency II directive in the European Union, ensures insurers have adequate capital to meet obligations (European Commission, 2016).

Payment systems facilitate the smooth flow of financial transactions. The adoption of digital payment systems, as seen in countries like China with Alipay and WeChat Pay, has significantly enhanced economic efficiency and financial inclusion (IMF, 2018).

Gelephu is far away from setting up all these amenities to meet the standards of a metropolis. The lone official bank, Oro, is unlikely to meet the needs of all the future businesses and consumers. The monopoly of Oro bank would rather erode the competitive advantage required in a financial services industry.

### **Current Industrial State**

Today Gelephu has poor industrial base. There are hardly any Bhutanese products ready for exports, except hydropower. Bhutanese consumers are depended on imports – mostly from India. The existing industrial estate in Gelephu was conceptualised in 1970s and 80s. Some 12 hectares of land was acquired for the purpose in 1980s. The ‘1986-2000 Urban Development Plan for Gelephu’ took advantage of this land and proposed an industrial estate to the west of the national highway to Trongsa. About 35 per cent of the total urban land, equivalent to the land reserved for residential development, was allocated for industrial development in the town. But the project were later abandoned.

Gelephu's industrial sector is primarily dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) focused on agriculture, food processing, and handicrafts. The region is known for its fertile land, making agro-based industries a significant contributor to the local economy. For instance, Gelephu is home to several rice mills, fruit processing units, and dairy farms that cater to both domestic and regional markets (NSB, 2022). The GMC aims to attract foreign investment in other industries such as renewable energy, information technology, and eco-tourism (Kuensel, 2023).

Army Welfare Project is the major industry in the town. It manufactures liquors – for domestic consumption and exports.

There are other small services and timber based industries like Namcha Automobiles, Tenzin Automobiles, Gyeltshen Sawmill and Lhaki Wood Industry.

Shortage of manpower, raw materials (Wangdi, 2023 June 26), lack of progress in building industrial estates (Dorji, 2021) and government interventions (Wangdi, 2024 October 28) impact the continued growth of the industries in Gelephu. Newly established industrial estates lack tenants, posing threat to their survival (Pelden, 2023 August 3).

## **Housing**

Housing has always been a major concern for urban planners in Bhutan (Tenzin, 2021) and overseas (Quinn, 2023). The need for housing is ever increasing on account of growing rural-urban migration. Gelephu had 932 housing units with an average occupancy of 4.69 people per unit in 1986 (1986-2000, Urban Development Plan for Gelephu. Gelephu municipality had focused on increasing housing stock (Wangdi, 2024 March 9) to ease the crunch (Wangdi, 2020 May 29) in the last decade, which though is not sufficient to meet the population of future metropolis.

As per the National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan (2022), the population of Gelephu has been growing at an annual rate of approximately 2.5 per cent, driven by rural-urban migration and economic opportunities. This growth has intensified the need for affordable housing, particularly for low- and middle-income families. However, the current housing supply is insufficient to meet this demand, with only a few government-led housing projects and private developments in progress. For instance, the Gelephu municipality has initiated the construction of 200 low-cost housing units under the Sustainable Urban Development Project, funded by



the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2021). Despite these efforts, the supply gap remains significant.

The private sector has begun to respond to the housing demand, with several real estate developers launching residential projects. However, these are often targeted at higher-income groups, leaving a substantial portion of the population underserved. The average cost of a residential plot in Gelephu has risen by 15 per cent over the past two years, reflecting the growing demand and limited availability of land (Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan, 2023).

To address these challenges, the Royal government of Bhutan (RGOB) has prioritised housing development in its 13th Five-Year Plan (2024-2029), with a focus on affordable housing and sustainable urban planning. Locally, the GMC aims to integrate housing solutions into its broader economic and infrastructure development plans (Kuensel, 2023).

### **Challenges of Mau River**

Mau river forms the eastern bed of the town while Setikhare river, the first irrigation channel and the vehicular corridor connecting Gelephu and Sarpang, form the northern, western and southern edges respectively.

Relatively young Mau river has a history of often changing its course, resulting in its banks getting wider and shallower day by day, bringing in huge amounts of silt deposits. As such the town often faces great risks of floods.

The river's unpredictable water levels have historically caused damage to infrastructure, disrupted transportation, and threatened settlements, making flood management a critical concern for urban

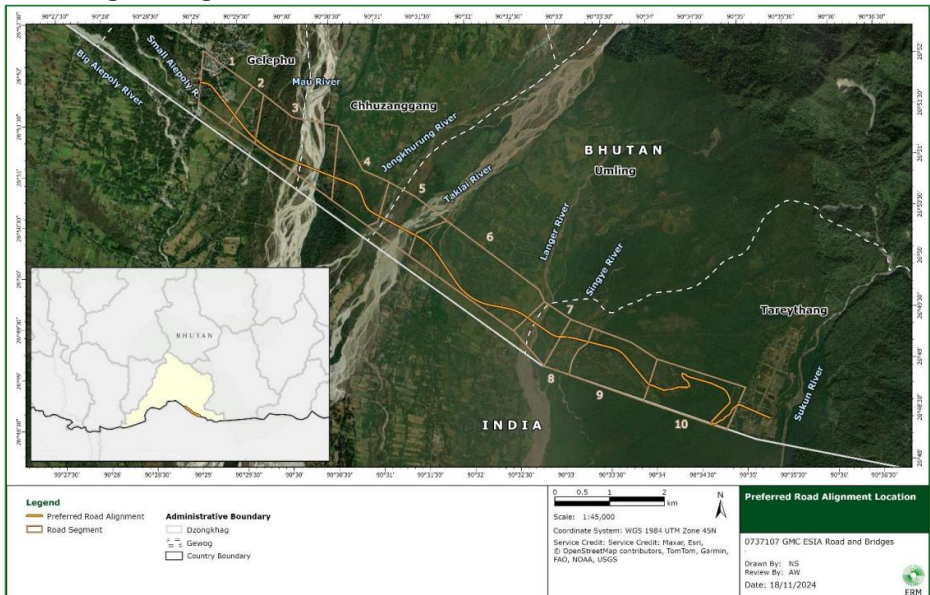
planners (NCHM, 2022). Developing flood-resistant infrastructure and early warning systems is essential but costly and technically demanding.

Another major challenge is the environmental impact of urbanisation along the banks of the Mau river. Rapid industrial and residential development could lead to water pollution, affecting both ecosystems and the local communities that rely on the river for irrigation and drinking water (Department of Environment, 2023). Sustainable development practices are necessary to mitigate these risks, but they require careful planning and enforcement.

The Mau river also limits the availability of land for large-scale development, as its presence restricts expansion in certain areas. This necessitates innovative solutions such as land reclamation or elevated construction, which are expensive and complex to implement (Gelephu Thromde, 2023). The river complicates transportation network development, requiring the construction of bridges and flood-resistant roads to ensure connectivity.

The river divides Gelephu from its eastern villages. There has been several attempts to build a bridge over the river. The promises to build a bridge (Tshering & Dolkar, 2020 January 21) are solid for political parties during the election campaign and gets subsided until next election. People are forced to use temporary bridge during monsoon season to travel for shopping in Gelephu. Finally, funding has been sourced from World Bank to construct a nearly one kilometre bridge over the river (Namgyal, 2025 March 15). The inability of the government in building a bridge was the nature of the river. The river bed is unstable which helps river to change its main course. The river requires a 2km bridge at its widest section to cover

the whole of the riverbed within which river is most likely to change coursing during monsoon.



## Conclusion

Gelephu faces significant challenges in balancing rapid urban growth with sustainable development and environmental preservation. The projected population growth and increasing demand for affordable housing underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive urban planning. While government initiatives and private sector investments are making strides, the current supply remains insufficient, particularly for low- and middle-income families.

Preparing sustainable infrastructures for a metropolis and sustaining continued investment would be a herculean task for the GMC government and leadership.

Ultimately, addressing these intertwined issues requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates housing, infrastructure, and environmental strategies. The city requires big investments to prepare the infrastructure ready to invite the investors. The dilemma would be how these initial investors are convinced and guaranteed return on their investment even before the vision of the GMC takes shape.

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## **Legal Basis For GeSAR**

### **ABSTRACT**

The Gelephu Special Administrative Region (GeSAR) represents a groundbreaking initiative with executive, legal, and policy autonomy. Established by a Royal Charter issued in February 2024, the GMC SAR operates under a unique legal framework. While Bhutan's Constitution does not explicitly provide for SARs, Article 2, Section 16e grants the King prerogatives for actions not covered by existing laws, legitimising the SAR's creation to some extent. The Local Government Act 2009, which governs local administrations, does not envision an SAR, suggesting the GMC operates outside current legal structures. Parliamentary approval was bypassed and national referendum was not deemed appropriate. This article shall look into constitutional, legal and other operational hurdles in the GMC realisation.

**Keywords:** Special Administrative Region, Royal Charter, Bhutan Constitution, Autonomy, Local Governance

### **Introduction**

King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk during his 2023 National Day address in Gelephu announced that “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” (Wangchuk, 2023 December 17). The SAR is the first of its kind in Bhutan and no one had the idea how legal parameters of the SAR would be developed or administered.

On February 10, 2024 a royal charter was issued (The Bhutanese, 2024 February 17) at a special ceremony held in Machen Lhakhang

in Punaka Dzong formally establishing GMC SAR and subsequently first law for administering the area was unveiled too.

### **Constitutional Provision**

The royal charter is not yet publicly available. Royal Charters in Bhutan are basically the mini constitution for operationalising any newly established institution. The Bhutanese constitution does stipulate any provision of Royal Charters but past examples show they are issued for specific purpose to strengthen the enforcement or realisation of certain provisions of the constitution.

The constitution has provided authority to the King for any actions not covered by constitutional provisions. Article 2, Section 16e of the constitution says ‘the king shall have the prerogatives to exercise powers relating to matters which are not provided for under this constitution or other laws’ (Constitution of Bhutan 2008). Because Section 15 of the same article makes the King sacrosanct and is not answerable for his actions, there are no questions raised about his missions. Historically, his actions are deemed constitutional in Bhutan. While monarch being not answerable in court is general provision for many monarchies globally, peculiar to Bhutanese monarchy is that his action cannot be challenged at the court and the court has no authority to overrule his decisions.

Article 22 of the constitution provided for existence of local governments in the country. Section 1 of the article authorises the decentralisation of executive power through provision of local government but such decentralisation is limited by Section 2 of the article.

Section 2 of the article says, ‘Bhutan shall have Local Governments in each of the twenty Dzongkhags comprising the Dzongkhag

Tshogdu, Gewog Tshogde and Thromde Tshogde (Constitution of Bhutan 2008).’ The constitution does not imagine a different kind of local governments outside of the 20 districts or presence of regional government such as SAR.

Creation of a SAR is a groundbreaking initiative in Bhutan and is a subject of national importance. The constitution mandates for a national referendum on such issue of national importance. SAR declared without a national referendum means the subject has not been treated to be of national importance which may undermines its success.

### **Local Government Act**

Bhutan’s decentralisation history dates back to 1981 when district councils or Dzongkhag Yargay Tshochungs were established. These were further expanded to block councils called Gewog Yargay Tshochungs in 1991. The Local Government Act 2009 was unveiled in line with the new constitution promulgated in 2008. The Act stipulates the provision of local governments in 20 districts – Dzongkhag Tshogdu at district level, Gewog Tshogdue at block level and Thromde Tshogde at municipality level. While district and block councils were continuation of the previous practices, municipalities were created in urban centres – a provision for the new form of local governments to cater for urbanisation. Creation of municipal administrative blocks is the prerogative of the parliament and they are determined based on the local needs.

The Act does not articulate or imagine any other form of local governments. It may be argued SAR is not part of the local government structures. However, it is a form of power devolution from Thimphu and as the constitution provision provides basis for

only two level of governments in Bhutan, SAR should definitely be categorised under local government in the Bhutanese legal context.

### **Parliamentary Approval**

The GMC is not a project approved through parliamentary process but a proposal from the palace. This is not the single project developed outside the purview of the parliamentary approval in Bhutan. While some argue, institution of monarchy is being described as one arm of the parliament, he has the authority to make laws and decision. While Article 10, Section 1 of the constitution says ‘parliament consists of king, national assembly and national council’, section 3 of the same article contradicts this provision. Section 3 includes the provision of election for members of the parliament, which cannot be implemented if king forms an arm of the parliament. This implies the legislative powers under the Bhutanese constitution are vested with the National Assembly and the National Council.

Article 20, section 2 of the constitution provides executive power to the council of minister, not the king. As constitutional monarch, King was to act on the advice of the council of ministers and seek advice from the parliament if he sees the subject in question is sensitive. King does not have authority to override the decision of the cabinet. However, Bhutan has several other examples where the King has overstepped this authority to announce several projects. Two recent examples were the Gyalsung and De-suung. The parliament approved related laws, with no amendments to the submission, few year after the projects were implemented. The draft of the legislations relating to Gyalsung and De-suung were proposed by a non-parliamentarian – outside the traditional practice in a Westminster system.

A law governing the GMC has already been unveiled, though the government is yet to make decision on the GMC and parliament is yet to see a legislation relating to establishment of a SAR in the country.

The process has set the precedent that Bhutanese parliament has lost its authenticity as the ultimate body to formulate laws and the elected government has lost its executive authority as the final decision maker of the country. The process has proved the status of a Bhutanese nation to be an active monarchy.

### **The New Law For GMC**

Gelephu has been given green signal for self-rule. This requires a legislative procedures to formulate laws and need a structured bureaucracy to operationalise the future legislation. The proposal has so far been concentrated in inviting investors but lacked far behind in creating legal, constitutional and bureaucratic environment to smoothen the process when investors come in.

The GMC Law No. 1 (Lamsang, 2024 December 28) was announced in December 2024 (The Bhutan Live, 2024 December 28). In a parliamentary process, the laws are drafted and debated at parliament before being approved and received royal ascent. While GMC SAR is expected to have its own legislative, executive and judiciary independence, it received its first law without the due process. It remains to see if the future legislative and executive of the city will revisit this law.

The concept designer of the whole project BIG become the first company to register in the SAR under the new law.

The new law integrates Singapore's common law and Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) regulations to govern company incorporation, employment, taxation, and financial services within the GMC. The law projects for quicker commercial success of the SAR and provides financial autonomy to the region. If the legislative, judiciary and executive formations are delayed, there are chances the SAR would evolve into a corporate structure, ruled by self-appointed individuals. The concept of 'GMC Founding member' (Northeast Live, 2024 December 12) providing shares and dividend as benefits to the investors also give some direction for us to understand that the GMC is rather headed towards a corporate structure.

### **Othe Legal Hurdles for GMC**

The region has been proposed to have independence from adopting Bhutan's laws. However, in absence of the any laws and legislative process, it is still unclear whether the SAR adopts the national regulation on several of its development fronts or follow the direction from king ad its governor Dr Lotay Tshering. One latest example shows the GMC will continue following the national law (Quendren, 2025). The challenges listed below are on assumptions that the SAR operates under current Bhutanese legal provisions until it receives all required laws.

### *Land Acquisition And Environmental Concerns*

Land acquisition for large-scale projects like the GMC may face challenges under Bhutan's strict land laws, which prioritise environmental conservation over commercial activities. Even though Land Act requires payment of compensation to landowners and approval from the National Land Commission (NLC) prior to acquiring public or private land, the SAR idea might overrule the requirement of NLC approval for the GMC.

The process has already begun with residents around the proposal Gelephu Airport are told to vacate the land with no opportunity to buy any land within the district. While SAR expects population growth, it is asking the local residents to leave the region, reducing the consumer population in a future metropolis.

While the GMC awaits its environmental law, current process might attract Bhutan's Environmental Assessment Act (2000) which mandates environmental impact assessments (EIAs) for large projects. The GMC is yet to complete the EIA to ensure it aligns with Bhutan's commitment to maintaining at least 60 per cent forest cover and protecting biodiversity.

Environmental Protection Act (2007) and Biodiversity Act (2003) impose strict regulations on projects that could impact ecosystems, wildlife, and natural resources.

### *Zoning And Urban Planning*

The GMC requires reassessment of the land use, new building codes, re-zoning and development control regulations. It needs to comply with the Land Act 2007 to ensure fair redistribution of land to affected landowners. Urbanisation mandates a rapid growth in infrastructures and other facilities which require heavy investments. Bhutan does not have adequate capital to invest in infrastructure, which would discourage the investors and businesses to move to the proposed city.

### *Culture Preservation*

Bhutan has some of the strictest laws on cultural preservation. For decades the country promoted being vulnerable to foreign cultural swamp over its endangered Drukpa Buddhism. Bhutan has invested heavily in protecting its cultural fabric through dress codes, cultural

events and heritage sites. Bhutan's Heritage Act (2015) protects cultural and historical sites. If the GMC project area includes such sites, it may face restrictions or require special permissions for development.

Driglam Namzha or the national dress code was compulsory. The social media and internet access has influenced for changes in such stricter dress codes in Bhutan too. In recent years, the King has ignored this rule to imply that Drukpa dress code is required only for formal setting.

The GMC project aligns with Bhutan's GNH framework, which emphasises sustainable development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation and happiness of its residents. Any perceived deviation from these GNH principles could lead to public criticism. But, globalisation, urbanisation, generational shift, social media influences and disruptors can pose significant challenges in cultural preservation doctrine of the Drukpa Buddhist.

### *Foreign Investment And Labour Laws*

The project involves foreign investments. Bhutan hardly has foreign investments. The disincentives for foreign direct investment in Bhutan are attributable to its geographic location, market size, regulatory hurdles, lack of economic diversification and cultural priorities over economic advantages. The SAR would have complete independence on national FDI policy. However, other factors would still pose hurdles in attracting foreign investments. Foreign workers and investors involved in the project would need to comply with Bhutan's strict Immigration Act, which regulates visas, work permits, and residency until SAR gets its own migration laws



### ***Public Participation And Transparency***

The project should have engaged public in decision-making, as mandated by the Local Government Act (Article 145 & 146). This includes consultations with local communities and stakeholders. Transparency in planning, budgeting, and implementation is required to gain public trust too. Despite such provisions, there has not been any events of public consultation in the GMC in its preparation for a mega city. The streamlined public participation is missing without its elected legislative body.

### **Conclusion**

The GMC represents a groundbreaking initiative with executive, legal, and policy autonomy. Despite this, the King overstepping the legislative authority of the parliament means the democratic process and mandate of the adult franchise are at risk in Bhutan. Formulation of laws for SAR without instituting its legislative arm raise concern if the future city would operate democratically. The real democracy would see the people's representative take the lead and public participation is guaranteed. A new governance structure not imagined by any laws in Bhutan should have been treated as the matter of national importance which should have been decided through a national referendum.

The challenges of the GMC heading to a corporate structure are real. This would fundamentally damage the Bhutanese environmental serenity and acclaimed happiness parameters.

During his National Day address in 2024, king pointed out that the establishment of a SAR under the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" is a bold initiative, admired globally. While the concept is sound and carefully thought out, the risk lies in inadequate execution, which could undermine its success. One country, two

systems principle is applied only in China. Bhutan adopting this principle suggests the direction to Bhutan is poised to follow.

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## **Political Representation in GMC**

### **ABSTRACT**

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is established as an independent entity with executive, legislative and judiciary independence. The city is unlikely to have political independence though. The 'one country, two systems' which is rarely practiced around the world except for the case of Hong Kong and Macau when they were returned to China from colonial powers. While these two territories were returning to their homeland from foreign rule, the GMC proposition is the other way round – Bhutan wants to separate Gelephu from its conservative rule and give some autonomy. In Hong Kong and Macau, the civil society had practiced the democratic exercise and enjoyed civil liberties which were essential to maintain the social fabric upon their return to China. In Gelephu, residents have not lived to adopt liberal thoughts or nurture the culture of democracy. This basic difference will determine the success of a 'one country, two system' test in Bhutan.

**Keywords:** one country two systems, democracy, liberty, freedom, independence

### **Political History of Gelephu**

There are no definitive records of when Gelephu came under the influence of Bhutanese rulers. It is most likely the administrative control over the southern region affirmed following the war with British India in 1864-65 and signing a treaty at Sinchula. However, there were no affirmative leadership taking charge of the region for several centuries prior to inauguration of Wangchuk House in Bhutan.

Even after the inauguration of monarchy, Thimphu did not pay attention to the southern belt. The first two kings mostly spent their times consolidating powers and eliminating potential threats to their dynastical continuity. The region was demarcated under the authority of Paro Penlop until the institution of Chichap (regional governorship) system in 1955. Lhotsam Chichab was established in 1955 and Shompangkha was selected as the administrative centre. Later the Chichab system was reorganised to create Sarbhang district with the appointment of/alteration of the term Chichab to Dzongdag in 1973.

In 1975, the district administration was shifted to Gelephu where the old Dungkhag (sub-district) office now stands. However, following requests from Shompangkha residents, the administrative centre was relocated back to Shompangkha and a Dungkhag Administration was created for Gelephu. The Dungkhag Administration was moved to Umling (Lalai) in 2019 while Gelephu metropolis remains the commercial hub.

### *Jai Gorkha and Bhutan State Congress*

The political activism in southern Bhutan reached its height in 1950s with separate but overlapping activism by Jai Gorkha members and Bhutan State Congress (BSC) (Hutt, 2011). These uprising were primarily concentrated in Sarpang district, with some impact seen in south-west Samtse. Both these uprising was the result of political consciousness among the Nepali community.

The Jai Gorkha movement of the 1950s marks a significant chapter in the political history of Bhutan, Sarpang district in particular, where the GMC locates. This movement, driven by the aspirations of the Nepali-speaking community in southern Bhutan, sought greater socio-cultural freedom and better representation in Thimphu. This

period saw series of political demonstrations and demands that were reflective of the broader socio-political changes occurring in Bhutan and in neighbouring countries such as India and Nepal, at the time.

The Jai Gorkha and BSC movement emerged from the socio-political context of southern Bhutan led by Nepali speaking population, who had then identified as Gorkhas. Nepalis had settled in Bhutan for several generations and played a crucial role in the region's agriculture and local economy. Despite their significant presence, they faced various socio-political challenges, including limited representation in the central governance structure and restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression.

The movement's leaders organised protests and rallies, calling for:

- *Greater Political Representation:* The Gorkha (*sic*) community demanded more significant representation in the government, both at the local and national levels. They sought to have their voices heard in the decision-making processes that affected their lives and communities.
- *Protection of Cultural Rights:* The movement emphasised the need to preserve and promote the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Gorkhas. This included the right to education in the Nepali language and the freedom to practice their cultural traditions.
- *Land and Economic Rights:* The Gorkhas also sought guarantees for their land rights and economic opportunities. Many members of the community were involved in agriculture, and land ownership was a critical issue for their livelihood and stability.

The movement forced Thimphu to modernise its governance frameworks. Several political reforms were introduced following this, even though the changes introduced thereafter did not fully address the concerns raised by the Nepali community.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB)'s response to the Jai Gorkha movement was multifaceted. While there were efforts to address some of the community's concerns through policy adjustments and increased dialogue, the government took measures to suppress the movement. This included arrests of key leaders, dispersal of protests, and restrictions on political activities.

The suppression of the movement had significant consequences for the Nepali community. Many faced increased scrutiny and pressure, leading to a sense of disenfranchisement and alienation. Thousands of southern Bhutanese were forcibly exiled and never returned. The Jai Gorkha and BSC movement of the 1950s left a lasting impact on Bhutan's political history. It brought to the forefront issues of minority rights, cultural preservation, and political representation that would continue to shape the country's socio-political discourse in the years to come.

The movement underscored the need for inclusive governance and the recognition of diverse cultural identities within the national fabric. In subsequent decades, Bhutan has made efforts to address some of these challenges through various reforms and policies aimed at promoting social cohesion and equitable development.

Looking to the future, the legacy of the Jai Gorkha and BSC movement serves as a reminder of the importance of dialogue, inclusivity, and respect for cultural diversity in building a harmonious and prosperous nation. The continued evolution of Bhutan's political

structure, including discussions around political autonomy and local governance, reflects an ongoing commitment to balancing national unity with the aspirations of its diverse communities.

### *Call For Reforms in 1990s*

Gelephu remained at the forefront of political consciousness in southern Bhutan. Gelephu remained the one of the major locations that king regularly travelled and gave his speech on National Day celebrations. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk used Gelephu as the base to propagate his agenda in southern Bhutan.

The city was the major centre of demonstrations in 1990s that called for equitable and fairer treatment of southern Bhutanese and reform of the governance. Large population of Gelephu and its neighbouring regions were forcibly exiled as Bhutan government responded to suppress the voices, turning the business hub into a ghost city.

For more than 75 years since that political upheaval, Gelephu stands as the testament of the cultural and political conflict for greater influences. Despite that Gelephu remains the hope and aspiration of the Bhutanese citizens and the king for economic, political and social transformation.

### **Local Governments**

Gelephu was declared Class A municipality in 2011 with six Demkhongs (cluster of villages) with the population of 12,072 in 2,847 households (Thromde Survey 2020) covering 11.52 sqkm. The municipality operations are divided into eight sectors - Development Regulatory Division, Infrastructure Division, Urban Planning Division, Environment Division, Land Record and Survey Division, Finance Division, Education Sector, and Secretariats Services. This structure ensures comprehensive governance and

service delivery. Sarpang district has 12 Gewogs or blocks of villages – Chhuzagang, Chhudzom, Dekiling, Gakiling, Gelephu, Jigmechhoeling, Samtenling, Senghe, Serzhong, Shompangkha, Tareythang and Umling. Local government at block level is elected periodically, at every 5 years, and are called Gewog Tshogde. After the introduction of parliamentary government in 2008, Dzongkhag Tshogdu or district assembly was instituted.

Dzongkhag Tshogdu, as a highest decision making body in the district, comprises of a Gup (Mandal) and Mangmi (Karbari) as a representative from each gewog and one elected member from Dzongkhag Thromde (Class A municipality) and Dzongkhag Yenla Thromdes (Class B municipality). At the local level, Gelephu Gewog has its own elected representatives, including a Gup and members of the Gewog Tshogde. These representatives are responsible for addressing local issues, facilitating development projects, and voicing the concerns of their constituents. The elected local government members are apolitical and are subject to renounce party membership at least a year before the election nomination are filed.

Sarpang district is represented by two members in the National Assembly and one member in the apolitical upper house National Council. These representatives serve as the connection between voters and the government.

The GMC was created through a royal decree. Traditionally, such administrative restructuring and evolution of power regionalisation in Bhutan had always been through royal orders. The GMC is continuation of the tradition. Its legal and constitutional framework and royal authorities were discussed in other article.



The Special Administrative Region (SAR) includes area that currently operate under local government prescribed by the national constitution. These local governments are still operating despite the formation of SAR. It has not been clear how these local governments would be culminated under SAR or whether they would continue operating under national framework. The current structure of the local government and its representation in the central parliament/government require an overhaul.

### **Future Political Structure**

The GMC is envision to receive legislative, executive and judiciary separation from the national framework. While the current focus is concentrated on economic development, the political and judicial structure of the SAR is barely discussed.

The King's vision of 'one country, two system' is barely known in the Bhutanese context. The practice is noted only in the case of Hong Kong and Macau. The examples are testimony of opportunities for economic growth as well as political instability. These two autonomous regions in China are ruled with laws that are fundamentally different to that of the mainland China. Bhutan is unlikely to see such contrasting differences between Thimphu and Gelephu. Some of the challenges of 'one country, two system' are:

*Legal and Political Differences:* The fundamental differences between the legal and political systems of the mainland and the autonomous regions can create conflicts. Balancing these differences while upholding 'one country, two systems' can lead to legal ambiguities and disputes.

*Economic Challenges:* Bhutan cannot imagine the replication of the capitalist model of Hong Kong and Macau and socialist China.

However, the economic conflict would arise from whether an economically stronger Gelephu likes to contribute for the greater good of weaker Bhutan. While the GMC is independent on its legislative, judiciary and executive authorities, Thimphu has remained silent on its economic independence. This would lead to conflict if an independent legislative and executive of Gelephu decides not to economically contribute for Bhutan's overall development. Maintaining separate economic systems while integrating them under a single national framework can lead to economic disparities, policy conflicts, and potential financial instabilities.

*Civil Liberties And Human Rights:* Bhutan does not have a good records of human rights. Bhutanese leadership and society in general are not attuned to liberal policies. Political and social hierarchy prevalent in the country take opposition or criticism being threat to their survival. The GMC is more likely to get liberal, considering its exposure to liberal societies, the same level of liberties are unlikely to be maintained in other part of Bhutan.

*Socio-Cultural Challenges:* Divergent social norms, values, and cultural identities between the mainland and the autonomous regions can lead to social tensions. The fear of cultural assimilation or dilution can fuel unrest and resistance among the local populations. Are liberal residents of Gelephu eager and ready to accept the stricter social and political control while travelling to other parts of Bhutan?

*Trust And Perceived Autonomy:* Maintaining the trust of the local population in the 'one country, two systems' framework requires clear demonstration of autonomy from the mainland. Any perceived

erosion of autonomy can lead to widespread protests and political unrest, as seen in the 2019–20 Hong Kong protests.

*International Relations:* The implementation and perception of ‘one country, two systems’ can influence international relations. Is Bhutan ready to let the GMC have its own representations in international bodies like World Trade Organisations, International Olympic and other regional organisations? These autonomy may create fear in Thimphu of its eventual independence.

*Implementation And Interpretation:* The interpretation of ‘one country, two systems’ can be subjective and change over time. This can lead to inconsistencies in policy application and enforcement, as well as different interpretations by different stakeholders, including the local governments, the central government, and the international community.

The vision for GMC is to be a self-governing entity. Current focus is finding investors. Publicly available documents do not discuss anything about the political structure of the future city.

If the vision is materialised, the region is likely to attract migration from other districts in Bhutan and neighbouring countries, thereby increasing its permanent population to approximately 200,000 (Quendren, 2025 March 22) by 2045. This will be the biggest concentration of Bhutanese population for a country which projects to have less than 900,000 by then (NSB, 2019). Precedence set by the country does not guarantee that these people will not be forcefully evicted from the country in future citing security and other reasons.

Appointment of a governor indicates the GMC being treated as a state of the Bhutanese nation. Hong Kong and Macau, where one country two systems are practised, Chief Executive is equivalent to the governor but is elected by local electoral college, unlike in GMC where governor was appointed by King, who is discussed being the charman (The Bhutanese, 2024 May 10) of the city. The executive, legislative and judiciary are yet to be determined – structures, elections and their authorities.

It is uncertain whether the parliament in Thimphu or the palace will chart out the future power devolution process. If the parliament in Thimphu is bypassed by the GMC, there are fundamental complexities to resolve for the two governments – whether the GMC will be represented at the central parliament through periodic elections on currently delimited constituencies. If the GMC's representation in Thimphu is abolished, there's requirement for structural overhaul of the electoral constituency in Sarpang and allocating the seat to other districts. In such circumstance, it will be matter of discussion whether the existence of Sarpang district hold any significance.

The question of political autonomy for region like Gelephu is complex and intertwined with broader national considerations. Bhutan has historically maintained a strong central government, but there is a growing recognition of the need for regional representation and autonomy in addressing local challenges. The strength of the Bhutanese nationhood would be tested, if the GMC remains within the fabric of the Bhutanese identity without any economic and political conflict with Thimphu.

As Bhutan navigates its development goals, the balance between national unity and local autonomy will be crucial. It will be important

for policymakers to consider the aspirations of local populations while maintaining the integrity of the nation as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

The political structure of the future city is very fluid, complex and conflicting. The power devolution reflects the changing dynamics of governance in Bhutan. It had strong historical significance, poised to maintain that stature, building its economic might, primary location for administration of southern districts Gelephu serves as a microcosm of the broader political landscape in the country. As Bhutan continues to evolve on its democratic tests, the prospects for enhanced local governance and potential political autonomy will play a critical role in shaping the future of Gelephu and its citizens.

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## **Gelephu Beats Inside Bhutanese in Exile**

### **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese in exile, particularly the Nepali speaking community, is a complex narrative shaped by socio-political movements, demographic shifts, and state policies. This paper examines key historical events, including the political awakening in 1950, 1990s, the king's visits and assurances, the mass exodus of Nepalis, and the subsequent resettlement of northern Bhutanese in Gelephu. Through an analysis of these events, this study highlights the enduring emotional and cultural ties between Gelephu and the exiled Bhutanese, as well as the broader implications for identity, citizenship, and national unity in Bhutan.

**Keywords:** Lhotsampa, Nepalis, relations, connections, Bhutanese diaspora

### **Introduction**

Gelephu has been a focal point of significant historical events affecting the Nepali-speaking community. The dynamics of migration, resistance, and resettlement in Gelephu are tangled with broader national narratives about identity, citizenship, and belonging in Bhutan. Gelephu is one of the primary locus of political awakening in the southern Bhutan. Despite Samtse being the earliest settlement of Nepalis in southern Bhutan, Gelephu became the prime location for steering many changes that shaped the identity of Nepalis, also called Lhotsampas, in the country.

The term Lhotsampa was coined sometime in mid of last century. The growing connection of Nepali speaking Bhutanese citizens with those in Nepal and India created fear in Thimphu, culminating in a

hoax theory of Greater Nepal (Verma, 2020; Dixit, 1993). The merger of Sikkim into India, where Nepali speaking population allegedly played a major role, heightened this fear among the rulers in Bhutan. The Bhutanese authorities were seeking ways to disconnect Nepal with its citizens in southern districts. That's when the term Lhotsampa – or the residents of southern region – was coined. It was an attempt to create new identity, distinct from those in India and Nepal<sup>21</sup> and to this day, RGOB official documents refers the southern Bhutanese to be Lhotsampas, not Nepalis.

### **Political Awakening**

The Jai Gorkha and Bhutan State Congress movement emerged in the 1950s as a response to ethnic and political grievances. These movements sought greater recognition and rights for the Nepalis, who felt marginalised in a predominantly Drukpa society. Gelephu, being a significant settlement area for Nepalis, became a centre for organising and mobilising support for the movement. The movement laid the groundwork for future political activism, highlighting the community's aspirations and discontent with the central government.

Gelephu was the epicenter of the pro-democracy movement and resistance against the government's policies in 1990s too. City's strategic position as a border town with India played a discreet yet vital role in the movement. The demonstrations in Gelephu were peaceful, with participants demanding political reforms and cultural rights. The town served as a rallying point for the local Nepali community, who came together to voice their grievances against the government's policies that were perceived as discriminatory. Despite the lack of violent incidents, the government responded with

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<sup>21</sup> Jigme Singye Wangchuk speech in Gelephu delivered on the National Day celebration in 1974

measures that included the arrest of activists and the imposition of curfews in the area.

The government's crackdown on these demonstrations further escalated tensions, leading to a national crisis that would result in significant demographic changes.

The dissident leadership failed to mobilise local residents and achieve moral support from the Indian government. Activists were banished from the country. Few activists of 1950s returned many years later while others decided not to. Both these movements resulted in introduction of some political changes in the country (Sebastian, 2015) with restrictive representation from most regions.

### **Connection with Thimphu**

The Gelephu region remained volatile and point of distraction for Thimphu due to its growing politically conscious population. As the business hub expanded, the local residents had frequent contacts with people across the border who were more free and liberal. The political changes in Nepal and neighbouring Indian states with high Nepali-population had fuelled the rise of the Gelephu's political consciousness.

The region became point of attention after the annexation of Sikkim into India. During this tumultuous period, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck made several visits to Gelephu. His visits were aimed at reassuring the Lhotsampa community of the monarchy's commitment to national unity and the protection of their rights. The king emphasised the importance of harmony among all ethnic groups in Bhutan and promised to address their concerns. However, these assurances came amid growing dissatisfaction and



scepticism from the Nepali community, who felt that their rights were still not being adequately acknowledged.

### **Mass Exodus and its aftermath**

The mass exodus of Nepalis from Gelephu in the early 1990s exemplifies state-enforced demographic displacement, a phenomenon Hutt (2003) describes as "ethnic cleansing under bureaucratic guise" (p. 127). Bhutan's actions—including arbitrary arrests, property confiscations, and coercion into signing Voluntary Migration Forms (VMFs)—precipitated a population collapse. By 1993, UNHCR reported that over 100,000 Nepalis had fled Bhutan, with Gelephu's population plummeting from approximately 110,000 (pre-1990) to under 10,000. The evicted population dispersed to Nepal, refugee camps and several Indian states.

The VMF policy, though framed as a legal process, functionally stripped citizenship of the Nepalis. As documented by Human Rights Watch (2007), many Nepalis signed under duress, with soldiers threatening violence if they refused. Habitat International Coalition's 2001 report verified cases like Dilli Ram Bhattarai (cited in the original document), whose land was seized immediately after signing. These tactics align with Adelman's (2008) analysis of "paper violence," where administrative tools weaponise statelessness (p. 412).

The exodus crippled Gelephu's agrarian economy. Pre-1990, Nepalis cultivated over 70 per cent of Sarpang district's staple crops (FAO, 1989). By 1995, Bhutan's Annual Agricultural Report noted a 45 per cent decline in paddy production in Sarpang, attributing it to "labour shortages" (MoA, 1996, p. 34)—a euphemism for Nepali expulsion. While news outlets did not explicitly report this drop, RGOB archives

confirm the resettlement of northern Bhutanese was partly justified to "revive fallow land" (National Assembly Proceedings, 1995).

The demographic shift also altered Gelephu's cultural landscape. Refugee testimonies recorded by Evans (2013) describe the demolition of Nepali identity. This parallels Hutt's (2005) observation that post-exodus policies sought to "Drukpa-ize" southern Bhutan (p. 211). Gelephu is not just a city of birth for many Bhutanese in exile, it's a point of contact and expressions of emotion. While entry to Bhutan for these exiled citizens was strictly monitored, many of them sneaked through Gelephu to see the land they were born and meet their relatives in villages. These silent interaction was partially distracted following the resettlement of northerners in the vacated land in Gelephu but post political reforms in 2008 has opened the interactions again.

### **Reoccupation by Northerners**

Beginning 1996, RGOB initiated coercive operation to force northerners move to the south, including in Gelephu to occupy land vacated after the forceful eviction. Several factors played role for this initiative. There were several discussions held in National Assembly sessions in the preceding years.

Gelephu was a one of the primary source of income for the country. Business had flourished. Following eviction, the region turned into a ghost city and business activities had completely shut. Many individuals running business in the town had left for elsewhere.

The region holds the major flatland suitable for agriculture. It was a source of agricultural stockpile for the country. Food Corporation of Bhutan's offices in the region collected these produce to supply to

Thimphu and other major commercial hub in the north were agricultural activities were not possible.

The thin population following exodus left the region prone to security threats from across the border. There were increasing cases of theft, burglary and kidnapping. Further, Bhutan was aware of the presence of Indian militants taking shelters inside Bhutan. The growth of jungle in these vacant lands means better shelter for these militants and greater threat to the country.

Considering the increasing economic and security threat created by exodus, RGOB forced many northerners to move to Gelephu. The new residents took years to adjust to the warm weather, tropical climate and compulsory requirements to work in the farm.

There were two categories of citizens resettled in these lands. People from the north being given land in *kasho* or gift because the king is pleased with them. These are usually well-off people and worked in public service. Others were landless northern Bhutanese. Resettlers in Lalai village were both landless (80 per cent) and retired army people. There were around 200 families resettled in Umling (Lalai) Gewog only. The resettlers in Umling and Chuzagang (Danabari) gewogs were given a lot of facilities as incentives for resettling there (Habitat International Coalition, 2001).

To clear the jungles for the northern Bhutanese resettlers, about 1,000-1,500 Indian labourers from Baghmara were employed between 1997-98.

In the 1995 National Assembly proceedings, “the representatives said that although it had been requested in the earlier sessions of the National Assembly that the landless people and people with

insufficient land should be rehabilitated on the land left behind by the Lhotsampas who had taken *kidu soilra* and emigrated, this has still not been done. As a result while these vacant lands were turning into jungle, the people with little or no land were facing great hardship...leaving these fertile agriculture land in the south unattended year after year only increases the hopes of the *ngolops* in Nepal to return”.

The Secretary of survey informed members of the National Assembly “that in 1997, 1,500 families had applied for resettlement and after a thorough investigation of their cases, 750 families were resettled. Last year (1998) 1,500 applications were received, out of which 1,159 families were resettled<sup>22</sup>.”

“Submissions were also made by the people’s representative from Sarpang on behalf of the people of Bhur, Serzhong, Gelephu, Danabhari and Kalikhola gewogs (blocks) in Sarpang Dzongkhag (Sarbhong District) that landless people should be resettled on vacant land in their Dzongkhag. The vacant land, overgrown with forests, was providing a haven for terrorists and also for wild animals. ....The people’s representatives from Pemagatshel also reiterated the repeated requests made by the people from her Dzongkhag for early resettlement of landless people and *tseri* cultivators on land available in any part of the country...”

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<sup>22</sup> National Assembly proceedings of 1999

**Announcement in Kuensel March 27, 1999**

Sarpang Dzongkhag  
Sardzong/Re-settlement- 9/98-99/2630

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

All the Shi- Sarps (Re-Settlers) of phase one and two from different Dzongkhags should report to their respective areas under Sarpang Dzongkhag within April 1999. Failure to report within the above dateline, this Dzongkhag Administration would consider the lands to have been surrendered by the Shi- sarps ( Re-settlers) to the Government. The concerned Dzongkhags are also requested to kindly inform their respective Shi- sarps (Re-rettlers), to report within the above dateline. For convenience of the Dzongkhag the list of Shi-sarps will be faxed to the individual Dzongkhag within the week.

Dzongdag

**Announcement in Kuensel, March 20, 1999**

DZONGKHAG ADMINISTRATION  
Tsirang  
DAT/ADM-27/98-99/  
Announcement

Landless people from other Dzongkhag who got land allotment in Tsirang Dzongkhag who got land allotment in Tsirang Dzongkhag under resettlement programme have failed to report despite repeated request of the Dzongkhag. Therefore, Tsirang Dzogkhag administration, once again requests them to report immediately as the cultivation season is already set in. Non-compliance shall be viewed very seriously and Dzongkhag administration shall not be held responsible if any complication arises in future on the matter.

Dzongdag

### **Exploration by Habitat International Coalition**

Habitat International Coalition embarked a fact-finding team (FFT) from 23 September to 1 October 2001 to verify the claims of resettlement in Gelephu. The two- member mission consisted of Mr Minar Pimple, social scientist and housing rights expert, and Ms Seema Misra, a human rights activist. The mission interviewed 17 refugee families and visited lands of seven of these family back in Gelephu, Lodrai and Lalai villages in Sarpang district.

Here are some abstracts from the report.

**Case 1:** *Hari Prasad Adhikari, Village: Satikharay; Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang; Tham No: 350; 460; 515. Camp: Khudunabari B3/84*

Hari Prasad Adhikari was a member of the National Assembly. He had a house in Gaylegphug and land in Surey. He had sold half of it to D.B. Subedi who was also a member of the National Assembly. He owned a hotel in the city called Ashoka Hotel. All properties were seized on 4 or 5 April 1991 after which his family was forced to leave the country. A person by the name of Dilliram Neopane lives in the portion of the house that he sold to D. B. Subedi while the government has taken over the other half. Adhikari had no idea who owns the Hotel, which was sold in auction by the government, but FFT then identified it was renamed Druk Hotel.

On 25 September, the FFT crossed over to Gaylegphug town in Bhutan from Hatisar village in Assam. From the Gaylegphug market, FFT travelled in a car accompanied by a resident of the town named A. The FFT saw Hari Adhikari's house, which was as he had mentioned about 3 km from the Bhutan-India border. It was easy to

identify from a supplied photo. FFT also verified his properties through three local residents.

**Case 2:** *Dilli Ram Bhatarai (son of Padam Lal Bhatarai), Village: Lodrai; Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang; Tham No : 137, House No LR-83. Camp: Goldhap, D1/51*

Bhatarai family had 8.50 acres of land in the village, out of which 2 acres was wetland and two-storied mud house with tile roofing. In 1991, he was forced to sign the Voluntary Migration Form (VMF) and was given Nu 34,000/ as compensation by the government for 8 acres of land and asked to leave Bhutan. He arrived Nepal camp in August 1992.

In 2000, a resident from his village travelled to Nepal to tell him that a former Dungpa (Sub-Divisional Officer ) Oko Tshering from Chirang district had occupied his land. His house in the village was demolished. His Father and grandfather were born in Bhutan and his father is 60 years old now. He used to work for the municipal corporation. His two brothers were still in Bhutan but not in the village.

On 25 September the FFT visited Gaylegphug to verify their houses in Gaylegphug and Lodrai. Bhatarai's house was broken (*sic*) and a new built next to it. Dili Ram Bhatarai's house was seen on the same day as Hari Adhikari's. Lodarai village is on the main road about 5 minutes beyond the Gaylegphug municipality.

**Case 3:** *Kul Bahadur Karki (brother of Chandra Karki), Village : Lodarai, Block: Gaylegphug; District: Sarbhang. Tham No. 104, Camp: Goldhap C4/78*

The land record was in Chandra Karki's name – included 3.85 acres of wet land; 6.60 acres of dry land and 10 decimal house plot. The Dungpa of Gaylegphug took over the land which was converted into a storehouse for cement poles. Jungle has overgrown in parts of the land.

Kul was jailed between 6/8//91 to 26/12/94 but his family had left Bhutan in 1992. On 25 September the FFT identified Karki's house in Lodrai.

**Case 4.** *Rabi Lal Timsina, Village : Lalai, Block : Lalai; District : Sarbhang; Tham No : 111; House No : 56. Camp: Goldhap B2 / 8*

His family had 7 acres of land. The army burnt his parent's house in 1990 for their participation in rally. Rabi was working in Thimpu as an electrician in a hospital. He rebuilt his house and lived there for one and a half years. He was then told to follow his other family members to Nepal. His citizenship card was confiscated. He left Bhutan for Nepal in 1992.

On 26 September, the FFT visited Lalai. The FFT walked a distance of about 6 kms from Hatisar. The FFT was accompanied by two refugees Chandra Karki and Bhakta Ghimirey.

A resident from Baghmara in India helped the team travel to Timsina's house and lands – about 15-minute walk from the Indo-Bhutan border. Paddy was being grown in the fields and the northern Bhutanese had occupied three houses - one on Rabi's father and two on his own land. All the houses had Buddhist prayer flags. FFT met three of the 7 families occupying the properties.



**Case 5.** *Ganga Ram Bhandari, Village: Lalai; Block : Lalai; District : Sarbhang; Thram No. 60, House No: LL-47. Camp: Beldangi II, A3/97*

Bhandari had about 19 acres of land, divided for farming (12 acres) and cash crops (7 acres) such as betel nut, coconut and lemon trees. He had a three storied house. He ran a grocery shop from home. On 4 November 1990, his family left the country after army cordoned off this house on allegation of storing 'dangerous terrorist weapons'. The house was partially burnt after seven days.

The FFT identified the house with the help of Chandra Karki. It was unoccupied and lying vacant with grass and shrubs growing. An army camp was built on the land where Bhandari had cash crops orchard.

### **Emotional Attachment**

Gelephu represents a poignant symbol of transition—a last glimpse of home before the long journey into an uncertain future for Nepali speaking Bhutanese. For some, Gelephu might have been the last place where they experienced Bhutanese soil, culture, and community before the vast expanse of unfamiliar lands and uncertain refugee camps in Nepal and beyond.

Post-exile, the relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese diaspora has evolved into one of longing and nostalgia for the land they once called home. Among the exiled Bhutanese, there is a shared cultural and historical connection which continue to evoke memories of a homeland lost. Many of the exiled Bhutanese have since resettled in various countries around the world, but the stories of Gelephu and other towns in Bhutan remain alive through oral histories, personal narratives, and community gatherings.

The Bhutanese diaspora has, over time, developed a dual identity—one rooted in the Bhutanese heritage and another shaped by their new environments. Cultural organisations and community groups among the exiled Bhutanese often organise events and celebrations that pay homage to their Bhutanese roots, including Gelephu that hold significance in their past history. These events serve as a reminder of their past and a celebration of their enduring cultural identity.

Gelephu's significance extends beyond its physical borders; it serves as a memento of a time when Bhutanese society was undergoing profound changes. The town's relation with the Bhutanese in exile is one characterised by the complexities of memory, displacement, and the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice. As the exile community continues to navigate their identity and advocate for their rights, Gelephu remains symbolic of a home that many still yearn to return to, embodying the hopes and dreams of a community dispersed across the globe.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between Gelephu and the Bhutanese in exile reflects the broader complexities of Bhutan's socio-political history. The struggles of the Nepali community against marginalisation, the state's policies, and the subsequent mass exodus have left an indelible mark on both the region and the diaspora. Gelephu's significance extends beyond its physical borders, serving as a symbol of displacement, memory, and cultural identity for the exiled Bhutanese.

Gelephu played crucial role in shaping the Nepalis history, history of resistance and acceptance, and lead the path to political, cultural,

social and economic evolution of the country as a whole. Heartbeat of the Bhutanese in exiled still tell the tales of Gelephu and its soil.

Understanding this history is crucial in building a futuristic city in Gelephu. Future research should explore the long-term psychosocial impacts of displacement and the potential for dialogue between the GMC authority and the exiled community. Ethical investors would question the legitimacy of a mega city dream while the original owners of the land suffer from social, cultural and emotional disconnection to the land.

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