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DISCUSSION PAPER No. 17

**Peasantry and Bureaucracy in
Decentralization in Bhutan**

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Abstract

Decentralization process became prominent in Bhutan since early 1980s. Starting with an account of historical precedents for decentralized authority, the paper gives theoretical perspectives and factual descriptions of this process. Limiting itself to a discussion of broader social and political issues, the paper interprets decentralization as an approach towards diversity and pluralism among different communities that is shaped as a dynamics between peasants and civil servants.

Keywords: autonomy, power, agency, participation, knowledge, Buddhist perspective.

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BUREAUCRACY AND PEASANTRY IN DECENTRALIZATION IN BHUTAN¹

*Karma Ura*²

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay is an attempt to provide mainly a detailed descriptive view of the various forces and views affecting decentralization in Bhutan. The issues are, however, more general and represents those faced in other countries as well. The essay gives both historical and structural backgrounds to decentralization. Emphasizing decentralization as a continuity, Section II sketches the state of non-centralized structure of Bhutan in pre-modern time while striving for its secure existence as an independent country. It is too obvious to state that Bhutan is different today, just as it became different with every evolution it went through, but the fundamental nature of a balanced relationship between the state and society that each generation seeks to strike is not new at all. Reading of past in this respect is not without lessons. Section III presents an overview of current national and international impetus for decentralization. It reviews the concept and practice of participation and decentralization in countries under various political systems, from communism to liberal democracies. It then elaborates His Majesty the King of Bhutan's remarkable strides towards devolution and decentralization in Bhutan that began quite early in comparison with similar initiatives in many developing countries. Section IV discusses the contested concepts of empowerment and autonomy in different theoretical traditions and what they imply when translated in actions for decentralization in the context of Bhutan. Section V, which is relatively short, considers the desirable balance in participation and representation in decision-making and decision legitimizations among different participating groups such as bureaucrats, political representatives and the people.

The purpose of decentralization is ultimately interpreted in terms of value pluralism that permits diversity³. However, diversity and value pluralism are not easy to be analysed comfortably within continuum of centralization and decentralization of authority. It seems that dichotomous concepts of centralisation and decentralization does not accommodate fully a discussion of value pluralism and diversity. Interspersed with theoretical digressions and personal observations of decentralization related events in Bhutan, it hopes to be a constructive debate about deeper issues for wider critical reflection that could turn decentralization towards diversity as its central value. The essay is not explicitly normative to offer practical financial, political and administrative programmatic recommendations. I intend, however, to prepare a separate attachment offering practical recommendations in line with the conceptual

¹ I am very grateful for their intellectual generosity to four individuals for their beneficial criticism and responsive comments on the draft of this essay, which made substantial differences to the final version. I would like to express my gratitude to Mayumi Murayama, Mark Mancall, Peter Hershock and John Ardussi for their painstakingly detailed suggestions. Not all of these suggestions could be synthesized and incorporated. In a separate publication, their critical commentaries that I have requested them to contribute will appear with the essay.

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³ Peter Hershock contrasts diversity with variety. Variety is to a zoo what diversity is to an ecological system. In a zoo, animals do not contribute to each other. They are merely present together in a close physical space. In an ecology, each member contributes to the other in a web of contributory relationship. An increase in variety does not lead to diversity which is a pattern of meaningful relationship. I am thankful for his contribution on this distinction.

suppositions in the essay for the consideration of those engaged in planning decentralization in Bhutan.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: LOCAL-CENTRE RELATIONS

This section is an attempt to draw historical argument for decentralization. Ahistorical arguments for decentralization are usually a type of universalist discourse relating to something as relevant everywhere at all times. When the theoretical structure of decentralization argument are strongly and exclusively based on frameworks written and espoused by international development institutions, such ahistorical justifications fail to relate to contingent and local thinking in which history, albeit selective consciousness of historical events, still guides imaginative possibilities of the future. The belief that sovereignty was centralised and unitary is only half-true. By offering an account of the decentralised nature of polity of Bhutanese government in the past, this section brings past pluralism (in many spheres such as customary law, organisations, civil service, economic production, associational life, religious orders and so forth) as a relevant image for today's effort at decentralization. Underneath all such pluralism is value pluralism. No single value seems to have been dominant except the progressively germinating Buddhist values, including those associated with respect for life ie., the value of flourishing of all life, not only human. It shows that the past Bhutan existed through a diversity of forms of life found in all kinds of communal variations, and that decentralization today can sustain and revive that heterogeneity, without weakening the country. The building of the unity of the country must look also to the past, when the country stood-united in the midst of pluralism and when there was far less common history, common language and common culture than today.

An archetype, political mythology in Bhutan⁴ found in some of the writings of major contemporary traditional authors (Pema Tshewang 1987, Nado 1986) evoke the well rehearsed successional stages in political evolution that we come across also in anthropological literature: existence of conflict, search for external leadership, miraculous appearance of heaven-linked child empowered to rule by predestination, exercise of political authority, rule for general benefit (Roscoe 1993). Centralisation of power is implicated in this schematised explanation as a means of controlling violence and conflict among a people who cannot resolve it internally among themselves. One can interpret this archetype as legitimisation of centralisation of power to limit social conflict produced by mutually opposing powers of oppression and resistance.⁵

For the establishment of the *Zhabdrung's* rule by unifying and centralising political power, prophetic revelations were seen as the key legitimation. Ardussi (2000:7) quotes Tsang Khan-chen, the biographer of *Zhabdrung*, for a prophecy by Guru Rinpoche.⁶ Likewise, in his *Lhoi Chojung*, Geshey Gedun Rinchen cites a prophecy that was based on earlier hagiographies (Gedun Rinchen 1972, ff. 213-214).⁷ He gives critical supernatural factor for unification and centralisation of power by the first *Zhabdrung* in terms of the

⁴ The earliest myth about which both Lama Nado and Lama Pemala have written is concerned with the descent of heavenly son as a king of Ura valley.

⁵ Social conflict is evidence that both forces are present, since neither oppression nor resistance on its own can generate conflict. It is also evidence of freedom in a way, for it implies space for change.

⁶ See Ardussi (2000:7). His excerpts of the prophecy from gTsang mKhan-chen's biography of *Zhabdrung* reads: "*Lho rong lho sgo bas mthar bsti gnas tshol // de ltar byas na bod yul mi lo bdun // bsgom bsgrub byas las gnas der zhag bdun sgrub thag nye //* (citing a gter-ma text called Gsang ba nor bu'i thig le'i rgyud.

⁷ See Gedun Rinchen (1972), pp 213-214. He cites several prophecies. The first one is attributed to Guru Rinpoche. The second one is a prophecy from bdud 'dul gter lung which foretold that a reincarnation of Naropa named Ngawang will rule *khazhi*. The third pre-destination, he cites, consists in the words and prophecies left by *Choje* Tsangpa Jarey, the founder of Durkpa Kagyu school of Buddhism. This can be traced to gTsang mKhanchen's biography of *Zhabdrung*.

implementation (*nyer len*) of offer of *Khazhi Lhoi Gyalkhab* (name for Bhutan in those days) as the field of taming (*gdul byai zhing du phul*) by his protector deity Yeshey Gonpo during the *Zhabdrung's* meditation. Usual meanings of the word *gdul*, which is bound to religious semantics, are training and conquering human mind towards peace. Thus the *Zhabdrung's* undertaking to unify Bhutan can be ultimately understood as a means of integrating the country into a scheme of training to control the unruliness of human mind that generates suffering and conflict. In an vitally important and wide-ranging article on the founding of the country in early 17th century, Ardussi (2000:5-6) points out that in 1625/26 when the *Zhabdrung* came out of his meditation, he chose the course of founding a new state as the Sakya 'Phag-pa did in Tibet to elaborate autonomy within Sakya-Mongol alliance, though Ardussi notes that the rule of *Zhabdrung* was also different from Sakya-Mongol relationship because the *Zhabdrung* was independent of an overlord. The lack of his success to find a way to regain Ra-lung's abbotical seat favoured this course, in addition to the visionary signs shown him by sacred image of Avalokitesvara and his then deceased father Tenpai Nyima.⁸ In what Ardussi (2000:11) calls "the Buddhist equivalent of a 'Social Contract', the practical justifications of founding of the state of Bhutan under the *Zhabdrung* was elaborated by his biographer Tsang Khan-chen as:

*"The happiness of sentient beings is dependent on the teachings of the Buddha, whereas the teachings of the Buddha, too, are dependent on the happiness of the world."*⁹

Rationalising the 1729 legal code, Desi Mipham Wangpo likewise relates the concept of laws, happiness of the sentient beings, and the state:

*"Sentient beings cannot obtain happiness without laws, and if there is no happiness, there is no purpose in holding the Choje Drukpa's two-fold laws."*¹⁰

In the case of holding power by hereditary kingship, prophecies as well as rational arguments were invoked. Only rational justification was invoked in the famous public document of consent addressed to *lugs gnyis khrims bdag Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck*, then technically Trongsa Penlop. The document sponsoring and pledging allegiance was signed by key individuals functioning in 1907 in the traditional tripartite system of the state, who were categorised as the monk body, the subjects and the high officials of various regions and the central government. In this document, which is the centrepiece of consensual procedure establishing the monarchy in Bhutan, centralisation of power in the monarch is presented as a necessity to control social conflict generating trouble and hardship (*dab sig*) for the Bhutanese people. Interestingly, Ugyen Wangchuck is addressed as *lugs gnyis khrims bdag*, a compound phrase that can be translated as lord of laws. It suggests that the holder of power is the source of law and social justice taking *khrims* in the widest sense of its meaning. Ardussi shows that

⁸ Ardussi bases his interpretations on gTsang mKhan-chen 'Jam-dbyangs dPal-ldan rGya-mtsho (c.1675). Dpal 'brug pa rin po che ngag dbang rnam rgyal gyi rnam par thar pa rgyas pa chos kyi sprin chen po'i dbyangs, in 5 parts (Ka Ca) and a supplement (Cha). Reprint by Topden Tshering entitled The Detailed Biography of the First zhab drung Rinpoche of Bhutan Ngag dbang rnam rgyal (Ngag-dbang-bdud-'joms-rdo rje) (Dolanji, 1974, from the Punakha woodblocks of ca. 1797 1802).

⁹ See Ardussi 2000 p.11 who quotes from gTsang mKhan-chen (Cha). 119.a: "*de nas yang sems can gyi bde skyid sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa la rag las pa dang / sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa'ang 'jig rten gyi bde skyid la rag la / de phyir lugs gnyis kyi khrims / byang chub sems dpa'i spyod yul gyi thabs kyi yul rnam par 'phrul pa bstan pa'i mdo dang / 'khor lo bcu brda sprod pa chen po'i mdo las 'byung ba ltar legs par bca' ba mdzad de /*

¹⁰ Legal Code dated 1729 (earth bird year) attributed to the 10th Desi Mipham Wangpo while serving on the Golden Throne of Bhutan, as representative of the Shabdrung Rinpoche. Extracted from Rje M Khan-po 10, Bstan 'dzin Chos rgyal, Lho'i chos 'byung bstan pa rin po che'i 'phro mthud 'jam mgon smon mtha'i 'phreng ba zhes bya ba. Written during the years 1755-59. The original text reads as "*khrims med na sems can la bde skyid mi 'byung / sems can la bde skyid med na chos rje 'brug pas lugs gnyis kyi bstan pa 'dzin pa'i don med cing /*"

the concept of *lugs gnyis* as royal laws (*rgyal khrim*s) and religious laws (*chos khrim*s) has its earliest source in a poem written by Nyang-ral Nyi-ma 'od-zer (late 12th century).¹¹

While these examples of investing power in an absolute sense in the body of a sovereign suggest that Bhutan was a centralised polity, actual centralised control could have been very limited for various reasons.

In liberal political system, the concept of tri-partite separation of power and federalism is designed to provide check and balance, and prevent centralisation of power in any single locus. In the separation of power through organizational check and balance, the excesses that may arise if power is invested within one centre is controlled externally by a conscious design in structures and functions. How could Bhutanese state where such constitutional design was absent historically avoid tyranny, if any? To answer this, we have to resort to a well-rooted concept in the local milieu that contrast with the tri-partite separation of power. The local concept depends on a realization of three capacities within individual leaders to avoid arising of despotism. This concept that may have been internalised by national leadership who rose out of monastic ranks most probably contributed to strivings for civilized rule and, circumstantially, made possible the harmonization or union of religious views and political views in governance. These are: (1) *khyen pai ye shes* (wisdom and compassion), (2) *brtse ba'i thugs rje* (immeasurable loving kindness), and (3) *nus pa'i stobs* (power of strength). Together, these three are popularly known as *mkhyen brtse nus gsum*. This triad of knowledge, loving kindness and power are classical Buddhist qualities perceived as necessary in any leader. Power exercised in isolation can easily be unconstrained without the other two. Balance radiates from such a developed leader because power element is restrained by loving kindness felt towards all sentient beings and is directed by the wisdom-knowledge. Exercise of any power (legislative, executive, judicial) in isolation of the two other elements of compassion and loving kindness (of the four immeasurables) will then be destabilizing.¹² Implicit in this combination of three classical qualities necessary in a leader is also a view that no external entity or agency can enforce balance and equilibrium in a society unless the individuals within the leadership strata, or every entity for that matter, acquires these three internal characteristics. I would argue that besides other constraints taken up below, state power was limited by these restraining values.

It can be argued that the traditional Bhutanese polity was highly centralised in placing its households into an elaborate hierarchy of tax and labour service performers, and in maintenance of security (foreign and defence policies) but decentralised in all other respects. Even defence and national security depended on decentralised coordination. Maintenance of national security was not based on centralized command and control of a standing army which would have resulted in even a greater degree of absorption of resources dependent on labour and in-kind taxation. Furthermore, it would seem from cursory reading of Bhutanese history that various competitors for power, like the *Zhabdrung* incarnates, *penlops* (regional governors), high state officials of the centres, and the central monastic body, *druk desis* (civil administrator-in-chief of the country), and well-known independent religious orders, left the country in a state of plural power centres, with intermittent negotiation and constant counter balance with each other. Evidence for such decentralized structure is also found in Tibet with whom Bhutan had wide intercultural, economic and political interactions. Samuel Geoffrey (1982) has argued that in the case of Tibetan state, only in central Tibet where sedentary agriculture was developed, political control was centralised. In other areas, central control

¹¹ Ardussi mentions that the referent text can be found on page 13 of *Law Code of Karma bsTan-skyong dBang-po* = Gtsang sde srid karma bstan skyong dbang pos bod la dbang sgyur byed skabs spel ser ba sgrig tu bcug pa'i khrim yig zhal lce bcu drug. Contained in Tshe-ring bDe-skyid, ed. (1987). Bod kyi dus rabs rim byung gi khrim yig phyogs bsdus dwangs byed ke ta ka. Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, pp. 13-76.

¹² Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that compassion needs to be raised at two levels: "that of individual psychology and institutional design." See Eynde Maria Vanden for a discussion of Nussbaum's Work on Compassion from a Buddhist Perspective on <http://jde.gold.ac.uk>

left autonomy to local political structures. The central government of Tibet granted fiscal concessions to local powers consisting of local aristocrats and monasteries, but these concessions, he writes, did not amount to political centralization as in Europe in medieval times.

But the issues of taxation and social differentiations, and security and leadership competition are not the direct focus here; I am interested here only to suggest that beyond the realm of material extraction, through labour services and in-kind taxation, conditioned of course by wider ideologies that shape the relationship between state and the individuals it encompasses, the presence of state in other domains of life was far less. Of course, there is a big unanswered question of to what degree the burden of material appropriations displace 'immaterial' freedoms. The reach of Bhutanese state into various sectors of life seems to have been faint in all other times except when realizing heavy obligations of transporting and delivering a miscellany of in-kind taxes through a vast array of labour services by every fiscal unit (usually those defined as tax paying household). Rural cash taxes have been lowered to a nominal level by the present His Majesty the King to enable generation of a higher disposable income for the peasantry. The issue of labour services, whether one calls it project-beneficiary contributions, *zhaptolemi* or *woola*¹³, however, has still a great deal of contemporary resonance in *gewogs*. It is not so in urban areas where such contributions do not exist, thus making urban areas free from such institutional arrangements of labour mobilisation, an important theme I will take up in an forthcoming research paper. Interviews of old villagers and government officials also suggest that the bureaucratic apparatus in peaceful times functioned primarily to coordinate, collect and maintain the regularity of delivery of in-kind taxes to various centres of their shares in the tax revenues. Aristocratic centres of powers and the monastic institutions owned agricultural land on which the peasantry not only worked to cultivate on sharecropping, but also processed the harvest, and transported the output over long distances.¹⁴ There was no effective check on the tax collectors; oral interviews generally confirm that they added to the volume of tax collected so that a portion could be appropriated as theirs. These type of additions ranged from money to textiles to bullocks. The unauthorized extraction of resources and labour seem to have taken place in spite of the prohibition on an extensive list of things written into a legal code as early as 1729¹⁵.

But political centralisation for fiscal mobilisation (labour and material) did not go entirely unchallenged or resisted. Relocation and transfer of allegiance from one power centre to another through *suma-shi*¹⁶ for example, made political centralisation difficult. Burden of taxation that reduced communities to mere subsistence led many sections of communities in different parts of the country to relocate themselves in more removed locations of the country to escape taxation. In this respect, being mobile, nomadic, or on the margin of agriculture as *pam-people*¹⁷ left individuals more free from exactitude of labour and in kind taxes. Oral interviews confirm that many villages¹⁸ were founded by those who desisted taxation and

¹³ *Zhaptolemi* and *woola* means practically the same. The term *zhaptolemi* was coined in the 1960s to mean contribution of labour to local infrastructure constructions such as schools, dispensaries and water supply schemes. *Woola* is an ancient term of labour requisition.

¹⁴ Tambiah, based on work on Sri Lankan Buddhism prevalent in the precolonial period, has qualified that such monastic landlordism was a material necessity rather than wealth seeking and generation (Tambiah 1973, 5).

¹⁵ See Rje Mkhon-po 10, Bstan 'dzin Chos rgyal, Lho'i chos 'byung bstan pa rin po che'i 'phro mthud 'jam mgon smon mtha'i 'phreng ba zhes bya ba. Written during the years 1755-59. I am thankful to John Ardussi for sending me the extract on 1729 legal code.

¹⁶ *Suma* refers to fiscal household status which obliged the household to pay tax, often some cash and goods, directly to aristocratic families of either Wangdicholing or Lama Gonpa who issued writs confirming this status. They ceased to pay tax to the state. Households who paid taxes to the state often transferred their fiscal allegiance to these aristocratic families who rose to power in the 19th century.

¹⁷ Farmers who start opening new agriculture land by converting forest into cultivatable land. They are often permanent settlers in-the-making.

¹⁸ Leuchugang in Linjay in Kurtoe, a rich rice-growing area was abandoned. Its inhabitants left to evade taxation. Meritsemo community was founded by those who left Paga when the *Zhabdrung's* new administration

went to live in new sites. Interestingly, enclaves and sanctuaries of monasteries provided a means of escape from labour services and many people took to living around monasteries in their respective districts. The burden of labour service resulted also in subversive ecological acts such as blocking sources of spa so that the people in the neighbourhoods would not be troubled by official decrees to convey goods of official-visitors to the spas.

A rigorous system of taxation and labour services could have been enforced only in two ways: either by coercion or by consent conditioned by a wider notion of social hierarchy. The view that it was not coercive can be partly based on the knowledge of who and how many had to pay taxes. Tax paying households were precisely defined and documented for such collection purposes. There were far fewer taxpayers than we assume today. In contemporary discussions, a simple but highly erroneous extrapolation is made from the present number of households to the past number of tax paying households. In traditional polity, the number of in-kind tax paying households were just a portion of the total number of households. Thus, the impression of tax bases was narrower than it actually was. Labour taxes could be performed as there were more households than those declared as tax paying household. But this was not so true in terms of land based taxes as tax was tied to the pre-determined averaged output of the land. Each tax payer seemed to have held large areas of lands suggesting of course concentration of land ownership. Tax-paying household units further leased land to non-tax paying households. The other way in which one could understand the acceptance of a high level of taxation is by an analogy with Buddhist societies which achieved the extraction of surplus from peasantry. This can be done by projecting a Buddhist polity in terms of Buddhist moral hierarchy (Vandergest 1993, 884 citing Tambiah 1976).¹⁹ In the Buddhist cosmology, the state is regarded as the patron of the monastic community. Aristocracy, officials and monks subsisting on peasantry support were regarded as exemplars of moral conduct who produced merit for the society as a whole due to the material support it provided to them. Tambiah suggest that this discourse helped in the construction of the Buddhist state, or helped in the use of this discourse for material transfer. It does seem to explain to a degree political evolution also of Bhutan towards centralisation of a particular kind, and of social economic differentiation and status differentiation.

However, the fact that the Bhutanese society was pedestrian (dependent on walking) meant that the state officials were physically limited from penetrating deeply into social as well as physical spaces. The constraint of travelling on foot by officials, who cost the state money to employ by way of their entitlements (*thob*), made centralisation less feasible. And there was a clear consciousness that state official needed to be curbed on inflation of their entitlements, as indicated by proscriptions contained in 1729 legal code. Pedestrianism meant far lesser scope of interaction of state with the people. The other side of the coin is that geographical circumscription also trapped the communities in their mountain fastness from where it was difficult to break out, if they wished to. But it also offered virgin sites in jungles and hidden valleys for new settlements who lived beyond the fiscal yoke for some time, until such settlements got registered on the official map. This suggests that technology of communication and transport, other things being same, contributes to political centralisation and control, and is not neutral.²⁰

tried to integrate into a more rigorous tax system. There are many other villages whose settlement history attests to such causes.

¹⁹ Quoting James Scott (1990), Vandergest remarks, however, that “it is impossible to separate the ideas and symbolism of subordination from a process of material exploitation.”

²⁰ The relationship between political decentralization and technology of transport and communication constraints has been a theme under practice theory in anthropology. Roscoe (1993) building on the ideas of Bourdieu, Carneiro and Giddens developed a complex relationship between nucleation and density of settlement and political centralisation by institutionalisation of power through hierarchical structure of dominance. The key concept he pointed out is that “the more they (*leaders*) can devote to political activity and the less time they need to spend on its associated travel, the greater the effect of this and/or extent of their control, and vice versa (italics

Given the pedestrian distance that imposed a limit on the frequency and extent of interaction between the state and the communities, intense control and regulation by the state in Bhutan was infeasible, and this led to a substantial degree of de facto decentralization and community autonomy. Customary law, or legal pluralism in today's vocabulary, prevailed. The administrative apparatus of the government was not geared or organised to create government-led local political structures or edifices as it is today. The centre did not have frequent centrally decreed activities to be regularly communicated to districts and *gewogs*. Neither the local units of administration and associations have locally decided programmes to seek funding from the centre nor did it have issues to be addressed to the centre about promulgation of nationally binding laws and policies.

The hierarchical progression of the state officials was from the local towards the centre, usually not the other way round. This implies that local officials did not bring a culture of centralisation to the locality on their own. The administrative history of Bhutan, as far as one can make out from the rolls of positions of *dzongpons* and *penlops*, show a linear rise of the district officials to the central posts. By what criteria of performance such personages from local levels rose to assume more centralised and wide-ranging entitlements at the centre and regional positions is still unknown. One can assume to some degree that forceful local leaders were accommodated in higher positions.

Communities were loosely managed by local power groups composed of lineage-network of local elites. Only above the position of *dungpa*²¹ were appointments outside the hold of local population. But an important distinction is that district officials such as *dzongpon* and *dungpa* had local roots. The route to the rise of officials to apex power has changed between the traditional polity and modern bureaucracy. Whereas there was ascension to levers of state power such as *dzongpons* and *penlops* by rise from the geographically peripheral posts, the career patterns in the four decades of development history would show that the key positions of powers were essentially held by past and current stratum of ministerial-leaders who did not stay in the district posts. They were able to land in Thimphu-based posts on the basis of educational or technical qualification combined with political attributes, with some of them replenishing centralistic domestic experience with foreign postings or extensive travels abroad.

The notion of citizenship (as in the membership of a place like city where this notion first emerged) in Bhutan was essentially situated in the institutional setting that is local or *gewog*. That is not to say that individuals were not aware about the power and authority of the state that was forcefully and regularly impressed upon through labour service system. But an individual as a political or social being was embedded more deeply in the community and materialised in the community rather than the state. The state in Bhutan did not constitutionalize citizenship with formal or legal rights in the sense of citizenship in European polities or modern state.²² Local citizens speaking a babble of their tongues, unlike the growing power of English and Dzongkha intended to be new languages of mass communication today, conceived and communicated realities of the local world in their own

mine)... In oral, pedestrian societies, in sum, *population density* and *nucleation* fundamentally decreased the potential for political centralisation."

²¹ A *dungpa* is the civil servant heading the administrative territory called *dungkhag*. In 1746, for example, the country was divided into 126 *dungkhags*, a territorial layer between *gewogs* and *dzongkhags*. Most of the *dungkhags* were done away with by the second King. A dozen of these still exists, in large districts. See Ardussi and Ura (2000) for 1746 count of spatial units of administration.

²² At this stage, we must define community for the sake of clarity of discussion. Following Summers (1986), community can be defined as an interactional field. A community is essentially based on systematic interconnections between its parts. The fact that the members of a community live within proximal physical environment leads them to shared understanding of their predicaments and collective action by either the whole community or by parts of the community. "... unified and single public interest collective actions is not a defining characteristic of a community but rather a variable attribute,..." (Summers 1986, 353). Of course, this definition suffers from leaving out the community as an ethnical and cultural group. Summers definition of the community is more political.

dialects. The importance of every other language than their local dialects was deflated at the border of the community, and hence the power of concepts and artifacts inherent in other language was also diminished, which implies to a certain degree that the framework of ones decision are ones own.

One may add that in Bhutan there was even a legal dimension to the membership in a community because cases were settled by the local notables including *gups* without referring to any national legal procedures or standards, that may or may not have existed (no evidence has emerged so far to conclude in favour of their existence). Institutions for local associations, cooperation and jural settlements were loosely controlled by local lineage-based authority with regional affinal networks, and by people who were respected for their ability to listen to others and understand the issues facing the local society. The notion of what is a fair decision between the litigants was articulated by *barmi* (literally middle-person, which can be understood functionally as a mediator) and *jabmi* (literally backer, which can be understood functionally as an advocate). The participation in the civic activities of a community in fact provides individuals with local citizenship identities. It would seem that no household, and the individuals belonging to a household, could claim membership of a community without participation in its civic activities. Notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy of a membership revolves around the perception of effective participation by a household. In fact, conflicts in a community are often matters of free rider households who evade the obligations for civic activities while trying to maintain a trustworthy public image of being part and belonging to the community.

The most vivid form of pluralism was the diversification of religious orders that speaks clearly about the pluralism of Bhutan in a country that professed certain Buddhist religious order as state religion. However, one must be cautious about interpreting what we today call state religion meant in the past, when the state did not have a centralised body of clerics and its Council as it does today, and when there was no means of effecting mass communications of any dominant religious order's institutional perspective.

Buddhist teachings were institutionalized on a permanent organizational basis, or it was organized flexibly around a noted figure attracting grand-disciples and disciples on an ad hoc basis for specific practices. Both forms of knowledge transmission complemented each other in the recreation and deepening of Buddhist knowledge and teachings.²³ Which curriculum mix an initiate exactly studies and ultimately practices depends on the particular school of Buddhism subscribed to by his institution. More often than not, a practitioner will become syncretic in course of receiving teachings and practices from different religious personages of different schools of Buddhism. In fact, versatile relevance of a practitioner is often connected to his knowledge and techniques to perform rituals of different schools or traditions of Buddhism for different clients. For most Bhutanese, all lamas and teachings, no matter what school they belong, are the same. This open attitude could have been shaped by the variety of traditions accessible to them. The variegated cultural and religious heritage of Bhutan indeed encompassed, and encompasses, the enriching influences of numerous supreme masters of different schools of Buddhism. Bhutan has been a place where *Sakya*, *Bon*, *Dzogchen*, *Peling*, *Dorling*, *Neynyingpa*, *Lhapa*, *Drigung*, *Shingtawa*, *Katerpa*, and *Kardrupa*, *Gaylugpa*, *Chagzampa* and so forth left their marks (Tenzin Choegyel, 10th Je Khenpo cited in Mynak Trulku 1997).²⁴ As always, cross cultural exchanges and interactions between Bhutan and

²³ For dynamics of traditional knowledge diffusion based on two different systems of transmission, see Fredrik Barth (1990).

²⁴ There is evidence that some schools of Buddhism were discouraged at the time of founding of the state. For example, the heads of five schools of Buddhism were defeated. Whether the defeat extended beyond reduction of their political influences to curtailment of religious freedoms are still not clear. However, the existence of establishments of various schools of Buddhism to this day would suggest that multiple schools of Buddhism continued. For example, Ardussi (1999) cites the expulsion of Choje Barawa in 1634. Yet his establishment such as Paro Dranggye Gompa was revived.

Tibet has led to such celebrated diversity and richness. And such positive interactions were part of value pluralism which must continue even more than through the future.

Beyond the communities, the members of a *gewog* had certain rights and obligations defined within the context of a *gewog* in cultural and economic spheres. The members of neighbouring *gewogs* could not get rights to valuable common property resources found within the territory of a *gewog*. Access to those resources beyond ones *gewog* could be had either with sanction from higher powers or authorities, or with customary rights. Like the city polity in medieval Europe where the concept of citizenship historically originated (Sassen 2002), a *gewog* was the main identifiable polity in Bhutan, where there was a clear customary relationship between the individual, polity and resources. This seems to have arisen also because the *gewogs* were political entities as principalities on their own before Bhutan was unified in the first half of the 17th century, as a country. In that sense, one could say that the community as organisations existed prior to Bhutan as a state, and the workings of a community has essentially continued till modern times. In traditional polity in Bhutan, individuals developed *in* a community²⁵. There was no external-intervention for the development *of* a community, which is now one of the main goals of decentralization in the development era.

The existence of community is crucially important for the development of an individual as a relational entity. It is only within an appropriate scale of community that an individual can contribute to and from others, just as members of different species do in an ecological system (Hershock forthcoming book. Ch. 5). Any institutional structure that diverts its members away from interdependence could damage the community, perhaps leading to atomistic existence. Decentralization as diversity can affirm the integrity of communities and interdependence of all individuals and things within a community. At the same time, persons developing in a community, particularly Buddhist, will not see herself or himself as an autonomous self in the standard liberal sense. Rather, as Mancall (2004) says, we can “recognise the self as a created object,” as identity constituted by a more or less common psychology of a community at one level and as lacking inherent self at another level. Instead of developing the community from an external interventionist point of view, an ideal community creates conditions for growth of developed compassionate human beings, who are capable of seeing everything as interdependent and as lacking essential identity in themselves, and thus able to relate fully to others.

III. INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND EARLY INITIATIVES IN BHUTAN

Tocqueville, writing in 1830s, favoured decentralization over “the constitutional non-centralisation of American federalism” (Kincaid 1999) because what he called ‘local liberty’ based on local communal institutions could be better preserved through decentralization. He pointed out that even modern democratic nations could gravitate towards centralisation, atomize individuals, and threaten local liberty, especially in the drive towards equality and mass society. Although certain social and political realities have changed since Tocqueville’s times, the main thrust of his concern is still relevant.

Beginning with the use of decentralization as an instrument of prolonging colonial rule (Samoff 1990), decentralization is often recommended institutional strategy for developing countries, although its contents and forms differ both in time and place. There are countries where decentralization has been used not for delegating decision-making, but exactly for the

²⁵ Summers (1986) cites the concept of development of the community as stated by Wilkinson (1972, 1979, 1986) in contrast to the concept of development in the community. But meanings I attach to the development in and of the community here are not the same as those given by Summer.

opposite purpose – depoliticization of the population and deflection of popular pressure towards the local institutional level.²⁶

Often missing in the literature of decentralization is the experience of local representative institutions in communist states, where, ideologically, participation of the people (working class) in the administration of a socialist country is imperative. Daniel Nelson (1979), studying the local-centre relationships among the communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe when they were still in power, wrote that "As it stands, there are no communist regimes which fail to speak the language of local autonomy, local initiatives, and local development. The demand of Marxist-Leninist ideology for a link to the people as well as several practical requirements of ruling a nation-state, communist leaders continue to place a great deal of time and effort in fostering the image of local authority while cultivating the utility of sub-national institutions for centre power."²⁷ Yugoslavia under Tito permitted substantial local administrative autonomy. Nelson's broad conclusion, however, is that the communist states used the local organisations primarily for three purposes. Firstly, the local political institutions were used for communication functions, ie., to suffuse them with messages of what were expected of them by the political cadres. This was particularly necessary within the context of a weak communication infrastructure. Secondly, the local political institutions were used for socialisation functions, to disseminate new values and create the so called 'new socialist man' or 'socialist consciousness'. Thirdly, Nelson mentions that the local political institutions were generally used as a recruiting and training grounds for party members. The local organisations where they learnt how to execute a central decision locally and to carry out window dressing in self defence while reporting their not-so-successful implementation. The local organisations became a stepping stone for the local leaders to advance to national organisations although they were also exceptions to the movement from local to centre.

If the mixture of centralised planning and bottom up participation have been found to be challenging in the former communist countries, the enthusiastic diffusion of wider participatory development approaches, not least by the donors, has produced mixed successes. Decentralization and participatory approach to development have been subject of many recent studies (Brett 2003, Blair 2000, Tordoff 1994, Willis et al 1999). Although they affirm participation as important, Brett in particular has given plausible reasons for sobering results that have surfaced in the evaluation of decentralization in several countries carried out by others. He believes participatory approaches works for small scale projects but cautions that "those who claim that these participatory methodologies can fundamentally alter the nature of the power structures that sustain complex societies are simply ignoring the well-established insights of modern social science" (Brett 2000).

Writing from an American perspective in 1945, Selznick elaborated decentralization as operative at three levels, which are repeated in guises in current approaches. Selznick's first level requires the administrative control to be based or located in the area of operation or within reasonable physical distance of the implementation area. This will decongest the far removed centre where there are often relatively more administrative, technical and financial resources in comparison to local operation areas.

The administrative structure of Bhutan still display increasing accretion of trained manpower and office automation resources in the capital city compared to the administrative centres in districts. In 2003, over 50% of the total civil service strength was based in Thimphu

²⁶ There are many cases of where decentralization was intended to achieve centralisation. Samoff mentions South Africa under apartheid system. He also mentions some local governments in the United States which acted against the disadvantaged groups who sought the rule of the centre to break such discrimination of minorities to get access to public schools.

²⁷ Nelson tells us, quoting several communist leaders their own words, that the vocabulary and ethos of mass participation were clearly present way back. For example, Lenin said that he "could not imagine democracy, even proletarian democracy"... without representative institutions," (Lenin 1968 cited by Nelson).

in addition to control the centre had on most of the field posts with respect to the transfers and promotion of those field staff. Selznick's second level requires "the execution of operations with and through already organised institutions in the area of operation." The third level requires the participation of local people. Writing in 1960s from perspective allied with Tennessee Valley Authority, James Fesler (1965) defined the concept of decentralization as the "transfer of power from a central government to an areally or functionally specialised authority of distinct legal personality." He distinguished two decentralization concepts: (1) the transfer of authority between levels of administration, ie., from a central government to lower levels of administration, and (2) the transfer of authority from a central government to sub-national democratic governments.

Blair (2000) present a causal relationship linking participation, through a chain of possible achievements, to participation. The causal linkages he drew moves from participation => representation => empowerment => benefits for all => poverty alleviation. In this causal relationship for decentralization, participation is not an end in itself as an egalitarian or democratic practice. Decentralization and participation are equally desired for increasing economic growth and reducing poverty. The hypothesized linkage between decentralization and the local poverty alleviation is a micro-version of the linkage between democracy and economic growth. This casual relationship is a debated issue.²⁸

Decentralization, which would lead to formation of democratic local governance, was promoted as a key objective of development assistance in the 1990s. The USAID supported 60 local government activities and the UNDP 250 such initiatives around the world (Blair 2000). Participatory development was endorsed by the OECD in 1997. In its new incarnation, decentralization is political, whereas the older concept of decentralization advocated since the 1950s was more oriented towards decentralization of public administration. The old version of decentralization was administrative and technocratic, and therefore, limitations on its success was inherent in the concept itself (Samoff 79, 53). The new incarnation of decentralization also involves structural requirements such as formation of sub-national local government institutions. It is argued that if democracy has to deepen as close to the communities as possible, institutional arrangements must exist at the local level.²⁹

The decentralization initiatives taken in Bhutan in 1980s effectively precedes decentralization efforts in most developing countries, which proliferated in the 1990s, although some African Nations like Tanzania and Kenya started decentralization in 1972 (Picard 1980; Chege Michael & Barkan Joel D. 1989). Exceptions are India's *Phachayati Raj* programme that began in 1959 (Narain 1965³⁰, Berett 2003). One of the reasons for the early decentralization in Bhutan was that the country had been traditionally run along decentralized lines with a great deal of self-help initiatives by local associations carried out within the local environment of gewogs and villages. Bhutan had never been centralised to the degree most developing countries under their colonial experiences that favoured the emergence of a professionalized bureaucracies which contributed to centralization of decision-making.

As I have explained elsewhere in detail (Ura 1995), there was major political restructuring during the Third King's reign with many new laws that had the effect of increasing political participation on the one hand and centralisation to strengthen the state on

²⁸ Similar dual purposes of decentralization were promoted in Africa. For example, see Samoff Joel. (Jan., 1979).

²⁹ This also follows from the Schumpeterian definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquired the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's votes." (Schumpeter 1950, 250 cited in Lipset 1994, 1). Schumpeter also viewed "modern democracy as a product of the capitalist process."

³⁰ Narain Iqbal has interpreted Jaya Prakash Narayan concept of the *Pachayati Raj* that came down from Gandhi through Vinobhavi as an alternative form of political system to parliamentary system. He contrasts this concept with that of democratic decentralization in India as formulated by the Balvantray Mehta team which said that "*Pachayati Raj* institutions should primarily serve as a development mechanism rather than as power mechanism." See Narain Iqbal 1965.

the other. The Third King became the true giver of the first comprehensive set of laws for Bhutan, contrary to statements that Bhutanese laws issue from the period of first *Zhabdrung*.³¹ There is also little truth in statements that the latest legislation, sponsored by various ministries, reflect Bhutanese traditions instead of Western Anglo-Saxon laws which began setting foot rather firmly after the Company Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan was passed. As mentioned earlier, until the Third King's reign, customary law and legal pluralism that reflected local traditions were applied to most crimes and disputes.

There was a dramatic shift in the local-centre relationship towards the end of the Second King's reign when he decided to restructure the in-kind taxation and flatten administrative hierarchies each of which had absorbed revenues to maintain. Real changes came towards the early 1960s when the Third King decided to change the traditional political structure to enable political participation through the establishment of the National Assembly and Royal Advisory Council. He also began fashioning concepts of citizenship based on national laws and certain legal and political rights that attend new nationalism. A new concept of the state as an owner of national property especially any land not specifically registered privately, began to emerge. As Kenneth Waltz (1999, 697) wrote, "in the state of nature, as Kant put it, there is no "mine and thine." States turn possession into property and thus make savings, production, and prosperity possible." Through the provisions of *Thrimzhung Chenmo*, state ownership was extended legally to natural resources such as forests and grazing land, laying the foundation for their public ownership, and control by the state that profoundly altered property relationships. This replaced local community stewardship and ownership of such resources as a set of relationship rather than property that was prevalent until that period. Until then, it would seem that no such legal concept of state-private ownership was clearly articulated, but only a communal vs private land. Further, he enacted, through *Thrimzhung Chenmo*, concrete ceilings on land owned by each household expressing the hitherto theoretical notions of equality. The conceptual origin of the land law and its ceiling were squarely in non-capitalist mode of economy at that time when land assumed a central role in means of production. The monastic cultivatable land endowments were privatised, thus relieving tenants working on it as well as release land for other holders to obtain new lands. Some of the aristocratic lands were decommissioned with the same effect, of reducing obligatory labour services by the peasantry. By late 1982, a new land law was enacted, in which the exclusion of orchard and urban land categories from land ceiling pre-figured commercial thinking, encouraging commercial farmers and farming quite a lot of who happen to be civil servants, in the body of land law which is otherwise rooted in an egalitarian subsistence agrarian mode. The Third King also began to craft, introduce and enact laws governing social and family relationships that were until that time completely matters of ethics³² and social institutions. Historically, land property ownership had been officially recognized historically by the state through land register but how it was transferred as patrimony was upto local tradition. So transfer through inheritance and marriages were until then objectified only as social institutions, and they were not incorporated into legal concepts until the reign of Third King. Inheritance and marriage customs were elaborated into detailed law in the early reign of the Fourth King.

From this description, it will be gathered that since the 1960s the old polity and economy have been increasingly transformed, whereby communities came to be regulated. They also became net recipients of resources from the state instead of being net payers to the state, whose material capacity was increased by international flow of assistance. It is an unavoidable consequence of resource transfer that the giver (centre) conditions the form and the content of its usage, which even successful decentralization cannot eradicate completely.

³¹ In fact, we have so far no evidence, textual or otherwise of laws other than monastic rules, of civil or criminal laws surviving from Zhabdrung's times. There is only 1729 legal code. John Ardussi (2000) has delved into this issue a little bit in his article.

³² Ethics can be defined in Foucauldian terms as negotiating one's relationship with morality.

At the same time, the Bhutanese state became a net recipient of capital in terms of international aid and foreign loans. Its use of such externally derived resources to some degree is circumscribed by regional and global strategic priorities. Such constraints are expressed through exacting assistance portfolios of the donors. In consequence, the irony is that participatory content of development programmes funded by aid can get narrowed right at the beginning as programmes have to fit with the donor pre-determined aid portfolios and budget lines and limits that are set in far away parliamentary committees of the donor countries.

Fundamental seed of change in local-centre relationship came about only with the accession of the present His Majesty the King. The institutional changes in numerous spheres initiated by His Majesty the King will be an inexhaustible subject on its own and it cannot be addressed here. I have to necessarily spotlight only decentralization initiatives. In 1981, His Majesty the King installed *DYTs* as development forum at the district level. The southern district of Samtse was one of the first districts to do so, which in itself is an interesting phenomena. As far as decentralization was concerned, it seems that the 1980s were devoted to structural replication of *DYTs* throughout the country and to engineer the formulation and publication of district development plans over two five year plans, as an instrument of local decision-making and distinguishing the local plans from the national sectoral plans to reflect this new self-definition of a district. Spending powers were decentralised to the district administrative chiefs in the early 1980s. This power was withdrawn after several district chiefs were censured severely for misappropriations by the Royal Audit Authority.³³ Decentralising financial powers has become more guarded after this experience. Substantial change in the pattern of financial authority between the district based field staff and the central organisations did not occur after that for a long interval of time.

For a few years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new entity called zonal administrations were in operation. In the vertical hierarchy between the centre and the districts, zonal administrations lay in the middle. Four such area specific bodies were established to coordinate administration and development of the country by grouping the districts into four quarters. High level officials designated as zonal administrators were appointed along with a nucleus of officials supporting these high profile appointments. The zonal administrations folded up in early 1990s. My own opinion on this decision are two-fold. The first reason is that the start of the unrest in Southern Bhutan made exploration of the new structures impossible, as events were to prove later. The second reason, however, is much more fundamental. There was no clear advantage of devolving control of districts to zonal administrations. It would only lead to centralisation in one node in the middle. The primary reason is that the blueprint of zonal administration did not conceive counter weight in terms of popular participation at the zonal level, and therefore zonal administrations could potentially spin out of control. In brief, there could not have been logical entities such as *zonal yargay tshogdu* (zone development committee).

In His Majesty's reform initiatives, *DYTs* continued, to be the centrepiece of political restructuring. *DYTs* were to play the central role in the making of development plan for a district while the bureaucracy was to implement the decision fundamentally made by the local people. The civil servants role was to gather ideas from the people as the basis of development programmes. He stressed on production of a district plan in close association with the local population and to make district the unit of planning. However, various supra-district programmes (region specific, circle specific, zones specific, watershed specific, theme specific) were routinely formulated with project managers and budget retained at the centre, which made integration and assimilation of such projects into district level plan very difficult. The process of supporting the production of genuine area based dzongkhag plans proved only partially successful also due to sectoral headquarters' inadequate attention to moving civil servants from their respective headquarters to the districts to create the man power base at the

³³ The amounts involved were not huge by today's scale of resources which are some of the subjects of audit objections in Bhutan.

periphery. Successive organisational attempts at the large scale infusion of staff into the district administrations by creating more positions as well as filling existing positions met with relatively little success given the gravitation within the bureaucracy to remain at the centre because of incentives structures.

Thus, the vision of His Majesty remained the only impetus in restructuring the polity. By 1991, His Majesty added another lower layer institutional configuration, *GYT*s, to facilitate access to decision-making process by and among the rural communities. The scale of operational unit for planning and management of development was smaller and closer to the communities. He wanted a more localised channel and platform for the manifestation of interests of small scale communities constituting *gewogs*, without losing their individualities in the wider aggregation process of district plans which in turn was amalgamated into national sectoral plans. Aggregation into larger system blurs finer information as well as control over the plans. Viewed from the perspective of *gewogs*, a district is too large a unit for comprehending their place and their allocations, let alone a national sectoral plan. For the people to comprehend and execute plans as their own, break down of development activities and their budgetary provisions needed to be projected at the *gewog* level, which is the lowest hierarchy of territorially divided administrative unit. Above all, a *GYT* which is the coordinating and implementing unit for the plan, such a document could serve a functional reference point in the ongoing annual revisions. Therefore, in 1998, His Majesty the King announced that 201 *gewogs* should contemplate making their own five year development plans. It would seem from the sequence of these actions that, regardless of the bureaucracy's success rate at implementing his vision, His Majesty the King wanted increasingly to propel the country towards a high degree of localisation. In accordance with a directive of His Majesty the King, old acts for *GYT*s and *DYT*s were amended in 2002 to enlarge the scope of their authorities as well as to introduce adult franchise for the election of *gups*, the chief executive of *GYT*s, for the first time. In the same year *gewog*-based five-year plans were launched along with devolution of some degree of fiscal powers. Until the *DYT* and *GYT* *chatrim* came into force in 2002, budget disbursement power was invested in the district administration, and therefore the decision-making was formally centered in the bureaucracy's hand. From all the initiatives launched by His Majesty, it can be concluded that his vision is to remake *gewogs* as key sites for social, economic, and cultural decision-making in future, and to make mechanisms and processes to restrain central sectors from all encompassing standardizations and normalisation, where inappropriate, by the state which would hollow out the meaning of decentralization. Development goals as normative: implies imagination of what a community ought to be or might be by themselves, and that means giving community choice for determining the nature of development as collectivities, without over riding standardization.

Could we then surmise that decentralization in Bhutan as a route to an adapted version of communitarianism which has many common elements with liberalism but which does not overlap completely with liberalism. In particular, communitarianism and liberalism are not opposed to each other in terms of individual rights, even though on the surface liberalism's bias towards individualistic rights may seem to be in tension with communitarianism's emphasis on collective interests and rights ascribed to a group or community.³⁴ Individual rights help members of a community to seek and protect their collective rights if they achieve collective action among themselves. The main controversy between liberalist thesis and communitarianism is perceived to be the incentive structure of a liberal society that makes the individuals as autonomous choosers of ends less likely to maintain commitment and bonding to community. In other words, communities cannot be preserved while individuals living in

³⁴ For a defence of the liberal political thesis as compatible with communitarianism See Buchanan (1982). He mentions that Rawl's justification for priority of liberal rights is not "biased toward individualism and against community"... because "the contract method assumes only pluralism, not individualism." And one can assume parties in the original position either as individuals or communities (pp. 864).

competitive market competition cannot maintain structures of a community. Like his previous argument in defence of individual rights as a 'good' for communitarianism, Buchanan's (1982) defence of individuals as autonomous choosers of ends is also based on his argument that voluntary choice is crucial to maintain a community and that unreflective commitments and obligations to the community by its members can endanger the autonomy of the individual. Thus the crucial question turns on autonomy and self as a bed rock issue, which will be dealt in the next section. At the end, Buchanan, following Feinberg, shows that individual autonomy in the framework of liberal rights is not the only value. Individual autonomy conferred by rights are valuable because it is necessary for pursuing well-being, and "well-being is to a large extent a matter of the successful pursuit of shared ends." As he recognises, it is not in the theoretical realms of liberalism vs communitarianism that problems lie. Buchanan (p.881) says that when we try to decide on the scope of rights in concrete cases, "the autonomy-based and a community-based arguments may diverge, leading to different and, indeed, incompatible specifications of the rights in question."

As it was argued at the end of the previous section on historical perspective on local-centre relationship, neither autonomy-based nor community-based arguments are fully compatible with the idea of a community I referred to. This is because the different conceptual underpinnings provided by Buddhist culture which views autonomy as not a given. Like all concepts, from a Buddhist point of view self is only a construct. Furthermore, it bears repeating that from a Buddhist point of view, liberalism, communitarianism, or any other political structure for that matter, are of only instrumental value and have no intrinsic value and truth in themselves. That is to say that they are all entirely conventions which are historically contingent (Herschock 2004, Mancall 2004). Justification for any convention lie only in the extent they facilitate the creation of a developed human being.

IV. EMPOWERMENT AND AUTONOMY

Participation, representation and empowerment are central to political liberalism and these three concept needs to be discussed, not only as contested concepts but as they may or may not apply in the case of decentralization process in Bhutan. I should therefore discuss them by turn, beginning here with the interrelated concepts of empowerment and autonomy. Decentralization is often referred to also as a process towards democratic local government (Blair 2003). Encapsulating all of these concepts is autonomy or freedom of individual according to liberal view (Bevir 1999). The liberal humanist view of freedom and autonomy rest on the device of human rights that protect individuals from social constraints and domination. Immediately, one can see that the liberal view of autonomy requires a conception of oneself (subject) and others (object), the unambiguous division of life into public and private spheres, and conceptions of rights attached to the subject. Extending liberal view, we can argue that decentralization is a method of demarcating and balancing power accretions between the centre and the local, and dispersing power from the centre to the local, with the primary objective of enlarging the autonomy and freedom of individuals.

However, viewed from the perspective of autonomy of individuals, the emphasis on the use of the main current indicators of decentralization pertaining to fiscal decentralization, popular participation in terms of election to representational institutions, delegation of powers to local administrations and so forth are imperfect instruments for cross-national comparisons. This is so because there is no necessary relationship between the levels of these indicators with degrees of individual autonomy and freedom. This does not mean a denial of the importance of these indicators for specific purposes such as fiscal indicators for fiscal decentralization, and elections for representational reforms, but only that the same level of indicators in different places do not necessarily entail the same level of autonomy and freedom. Same administrative and fiscal configurations across space can reveal very different levels of freedom and autonomy.

However, the liberal view of autonomy and knowledge has been criticised from several standpoints, such as holism, post-modernism and communitarianism, and most notably by Foucault (Bevir 1999, Rorty 1983). The basic thrust of Foucault's criticism against liberal view of autonomy is that a subject cannot stand outside society: he is necessarily part of it and all his reasoning and knowledge embody that context. Thus, a subject is not free of power relations which is pervasive in any society, and therefore no subject can be autonomous. Likewise, post-structuralist argue that any knowledge claimed to be universal and objective as done by liberalism cannot be so; it is locally rooted; and all knowledge systems are context based and are considered to be interpretations³⁵. The view that there may not fundamentally be a larger system of knowledge that compares and evaluates between and among different knowledges is also very important in the context of divergence between peasantry's knowledge and bureaucrats' knowledge in Bhutan. Technical approaches and criteria derived from bureaucracy's knowledge, and applied by bureaucracy in development programme management, often implicitly assumes a sense of superiority and attempts to subsume peasant's local knowledge. Bureaucracy's knowledge implicitly often assumes its own higher validity as a method in search for societal progress, and as a solution to society problems. Hence, this thinking leaves open the local initiatives based on local knowledge to be displaced when there are implicit contestations to development goals and methods.

We need not, however, reject empowerment through decentralization because autonomy is shown to be implausible. We owe to Bevir's work for drawing the distinction between the implausibility of autonomous subject³⁶ and defence of autonomous agency in Foucault postulates about power and knowledge and autonomy³⁷. Even if autonomous subject is impossible, the subject as an agent can resist others' dominance in determining the course of action he should take. Power and influence, as opposed to violence, implicates or presupposes the capacity of the subject to act freely (Bevir 1999, 73).³⁸ In decentralization arena, agency as freedom becomes the basis of defining a set of locally preferred programmes; to modify and adopt national plans and policies and laws as applied to local situations.

To Foucauldian criticism of the subject as autonomous may also be added Buddhist criticism of subject as an autonomous being. It is relevant to mention Buddhism in passing here, as Buddhist ethics should define at least some aspects of polity and economy of Bhutan, and hence decentralization, in Bhutan. According to the well-known Buddhist perspective,

³⁵ Warren Mark (1990:626) has pointed out that even if knowledge is interpretation, different 'local' "interpretations have different impacts on individuals' capacities for autonomy." He has also criticized poststructuralist and rational choice theorists equally. He says: "rational choice theorists are insensitive to domination, post-structuralist totalize domination by failing to show how any form of consciousness could contribute to political self-determination."

³⁶ According to Warren Mark (1990:603), Althusser showed that ideology shapes what the individuals understand themselves to be ie. their self-identity or subjectivity. The main effect of an ideology is supposed to be on how an individual defines himself or herself to be. If ideology constructs identity of a person and the person's knowledge of his own identity is the same as that of the ideology's construct of the identity, individuals are reduced to social structures. There is then no autonomous agents. Warren takes rational choice Marxism to be opposite of Althusserian hypothesis. In rational choice Marxism, social structures are explicable in terms of effects of individuals' maximising decision. He says that the role of political theory that seeks to guide action would be meaningless if there is no autonomous agents. He then improves on the explanatory power of the concept of rational autonomy.

³⁷ Warren (1990:626) defines autonomy as capacities for self-determination, but I could not get what self-determination is in a political sense, at least in the article. He remarks that autonomy is fostered by social process in broad terms. There are social processes through which autonomy is developed and others which blocks autonomy. He uses significance of ideology to explain how certain forms of consciousness undermines rational autonomy.

³⁸ Foucault defined agency and freedom as developing ethics. He further referred to ethics as negotiated relationship with a set of rules, not rules themselves. Ethical conduct is a practice questioning (social rules which includes moral rules) by interpreting creatively to resisting normalizing pressures of state power. Bevir (1999, 79) points out the danger that valuing good transgressions can provide ground to build ethics, while transgressions in and of itself cannot. Transgression expresses a capacity for agency.

there is no discrete consciousness that allows for such autonomy of an individual. Our consciousness is inter-subjective, when perceived through the lenses of interdependent origination and impermanence. There is no Cartesian self as posited in liberalism (Priest 1981).³⁹ But this no self concept⁴⁰ is not to reject the value of improving conditions of mundane life, for we exist with our pains at an empirical and conventional level, and its ameliorations becomes the basis of merit-accumulation and practice of impartiality as compassion. For a Buddhist perspective, decentralization can be evaluated as to whether it shapes people collectively away from self-centredness and towards understanding and practice of compassion, and shared karmic notions of justice and cultivation of wisdom mind.⁴¹ In emphasizing development and decentralization as conducive to material well-being, the strategy followed by most upwardly mobile Buddhists in Bhutan is to first get rich so that they obtain sufficient resources to buy merit by sponsoring rituals, renders Buddhists into a kind of commodity transactions in which those with material endowments will continue to dominate merit making. Yet it is clear from this that there is tension between merit making and equality.⁴²

Liberal democracy literature highlights the empowerment of civil society. Though they disagree on the nature of action for social and political change, both Habermas and Foucault, two influential thinkers, agree on defence of civil society. Civil society is usually considered positioned outside the state, in effect against or distinct from the state. But it actually seems that the location of civil society is not pre-determined; it redefines or defends the boundaries between itself and the state (Keane 1988 quoted by Flyvbjerg 1998, 211). A confusing variety of definitions and functions of civil society complicate discussion on this issue. Keane has alerted us to the bias in the concept of civil society itself: the concepts of inequality, exclusion and domination are inherent in the concept of civil society. So if one were to examine a relatively domination free society with this artefact of scholarship, the method would not guarantee any 'objective' result. It is often boldly noted in external consultancy reports that Bhutan lacks associations and civil society. In contrast, local reports and views affirm the abundance of networks and associations, clearly leaving a gulf to be crossed to come to a common view.⁴³ Perhaps, it is the difference in definitions of civil society used by each side.

³⁹ Priest distinguishes the thinker (self) and thought in Cartesian case. He also distinguishes being conscious of an experience as consciousness from self-consciousness which is consciousness of being conscious (*rang rig* in Tibetan vocabulary). In any case, the existence of self, which can exist in a subjective world alone is implicated in Cartesian case. One should add, however, that the Cartesian self-awareness is consciousness of consciousness of first-person reference in a subjective world. This contrasts with Fregean and Wittgensteinian conception of self that says that any first-person reference is a special mode of identification in which there is no distinction between subject and object. Christofidou (1995) explained this: "in first person reference, the object of an 'I'-thought is identical with its subject."

⁴⁰ The eminent Tibetan scholar Samten Karmay questions the spread of the doctrine of no self in the Tibetan cultural world. This doctrine, according to him, did not fully displace the nativist concept of '*srog*' and left analytical thinking between no-self and *srog* in tension. I do not know where I read it and cannot give reference.

⁴¹ In concrete terms, it depends on whether decentralization can lead progressively to both leisure (releasing time from 18 types of preoccupations = *mi 'khom pa bco brgyad*) and wealth ('*byor ba*) while also enhancing the practise not only of passive 10 non-virtues (*Mi dge ba bcu*). Ten non-virtues to be renounced are: (1) not to take life. (2) not to take what is not willingly given. (3) not to engage in improper sexual practices. (4) not to communicate falsehood. (5) not to use violent language. (6) not to slander and malign. (7) not to talk irrelevantly. (8) not to feel covetous. (9) not to contemplate malice and harm. (10) not to hold '*logpar tawa*' beliefs. The virtues are almost reverse of these practices but there are important exceptions. Some of them consist of an activist ethics of 10 virtues (*dge ba bcu*). Ten virtues are (1) to save life, (2) to be generous, (3) to maintain conjugal commitment (4) to tell truth (5) to promote peace and reconciliation, (6) to communicate in gentle non-offensive manner (7) to speak only for significant and meaningful reason, (8) to practise loving kindness, (9) to practise compassion, (10) to practise dharma. For a succinct contrast of 10 virtues and non-virtues, See Karma Chagme's evocative *bde ba can gyi smon lam*.)

⁴² See Karma Ura, forthcoming article on Buddhism in Bhutan.

⁴³ Tashi Choden and Lham Dorji, researchers of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, have begun collecting profiles on associations existing in both rural and urban Bhutan.

External consultants or researchers, whose view of finding civil society in Bhutan embody assumptions of legal forms and separate interest of civil society do not concede to the different social structure and polity where the capacity and expressions for resistance may take very different modes and practices. They have also hardly had access to the operation of community dynamics or to historical evidences about politics of counter movements to test their view of society and civil society. The mere absence of legally registered bodies devoted to opposition to the state has perhaps led them to an image of a society subordinated completely and monolithically to a totalising power of the state.

In practical terms, true empowerment for effective agency cannot occur without devolving certain amount of regulatory powers and the financial authority. Both on economic and legal bases, for exercising local authorities and institutions are necessary for substantive empowerment. Where decentralization has often not succeeded as much as it should in other countries may have to do with over emphasis on empowerment in a participatory planning and management of the development programmes that still has to adhere to regulations and laws passed at the centre and the discourse of local community development are framed by universal discourse. Such empowerment, however successful, restricts its application to choices within broader uniform central rules, directives and legislation, and cannot give sufficient and effective space to local initiatives in the true sense of the term. To illustrate my point with a concrete example, the decentralised administrative powers to *GYTs* and *DYTs* will enable local people to exercise basically choices over where to do certain things (spatial choice) and when to do it (temporal choice) and what should be chosen (prioritisation choice) within given options. These three dimensions of choices given by decentralised administrative powers can be illustrated for a few sectors. In addition to prioritizing activities, the local people can choose where to have a facility like primary school, irrigation channel, feeder roads, suspension bridge, or choose where and when to plant a variety of root crop or tree crop from a given set of variety advocated by farm extension staff. These are the usual contents of administrative powers devolved to the local representative institutions and the local population. When one examines these choices, they do not meet the expansive concept of decentralized administrative powers, that was for example, proposed by Tocqueville (Kincaid 1999), to exercise local initiatives. Genuine initiative consists fundamentally in conception, identification and designing stage which implies an act of creation and envisioning. In the context of decentralization, true local initiative and liberty lies in authoring and origination of an activity rather than its execution. If this initiation stage is subsumed by a centralised decision or a nationally uniform design, say for primary school, bridge, irrigation channel, adoption of a variety, it effectively preempts the creativity and innovation. Thinking locally thus becomes difficult. One can only implement or execute locally a centralized national design. The very idea of decentralised polity as an approach to fit diversity of various kinds: ecology, natural resources, social beliefs, etc. that leads to different learning processes is frustrated. In this respect, the search for replicable experiences through decentralization and replication of designs, that is unwittingly a criteria of good projects, among decentralised units is a little contrary to the spirit of decentralization. Decentralization should encourage social and economic experiments and those successful experiments can be the basis for emulation by others. But this is different from replicating from above any best way. As an example of successful local approach based on diversity of local designs, Bhutan is marked by one of the main symbols of a local community: the community temple. Temples of various shapes and design across the country provide testimony to the viability of community's ability to conceptualise and envision both artistic and utilitarian structures. It is not only physical structure but organizational sophistication which sustained community life.

People's participation in the authoring and origination of activities is indeed the centrepiece of empowerment. Whether a decision made reflects empowerment of local participants can be studied in greater detail by determining different types of actors

participating in various stages of a decision. Broadly, we can envisage three types of participants: elected representatives of a community (political participant); individuals and groups from the community (community participant); and civil servants (bureaucratic participant) (Skok 1974, p. 69). The level of participation in a decision by these three types of participants can be assessed as to which type of participants contribute more extensively in a decision. Degree of decentralization cannot only be studied for a particular decision, it can also be broken down further by the three decisional stages to inquire at which stage who participates more.⁴⁴ Skok divided decision making into three stages: problem identification stage, decision structuring stage and decision selection stage. But one could plausibly divide decision making simply into designing and conceptualisation stage and implementation stage against the background of a perceived need. It is quite likely that the decisions made in rural Bhutan for rural infrastructural development or other planned activity have pervasively greater bureaucratic participation at the designing and conceptualisation stage. The bureaucracy must not only present a proposal, but a set of alternatives which also can be overridden by *GYT*s and *DYT*s.

In Bhutan, as in most developing countries, promoting local participation within the context of a rising strength of professionalised bureaucracy into which the state injects huge amount of its plan budget to train and retrain, asymmetry in the prestige and influence between civil servants and the local elites and people present constraints to decentralization. Since modernisation started in 1961, there has been a steady growth of bureaucracy organised in same international rooster of sectoral ministries with various field posts, and parastatals whose decision widely affect the daily lives of the people. The field officers are physically located in the districts, but administratively and functionally located in their sectoral heirarchical centralisation with much of the responsibility assigned and directed by directorates in Thimphu.

Growth of a professionalised bureaucracy tended to result in a new style of decision-making that is often internal to the complex Weberian organizations within the civil service, based on technocratic criteria derived from their specialized disciplines. The very constructs of development and development programme purveyed by the civil servants in new vocabularies, which are translations, meant a very difficult dialogue based on imprecise and unreliable understanding between the civil service and the peasantry. The civil servants approach the people holding prescriptions based on what they construe as universal knowledge, while the local peasantry think in terms of solution only to their particularistic context and knowledge. Between the people and the professionalised civil servants, the asymmetry of knowledges, technical skills, resources including technology of communication and mobility, make rational and equal dialogue between the two difficult. In this context, an increased interaction between the bureaucracy and *DYT* and *GYT*s, can in fact encourage *DYT*s and *GYT* to be subjected more and more to wider rules and regulations and authority of the bureaucracy, if the domain of the *DYT*s and *GYT*s' activities continues to be confined to development programmes. This also points to the need for *GYT*s and *DYT*s to have a minimal rules making powers, to provide them with opportunity to practice small policy making for their locality in order to learn and apply it to bigger national issues in course of time.

Major decisions on projects and programmes must not only be presented or chosen on technical criteria, by which must decisions are made today, but by moral, aesthetic⁴⁵ and social criteria. Excessive emphasis on technical orientation of the discussions is always shown to preclude participation of the local people. If technical expertise and technical criteria were

⁴⁴ Skok's (1974) comparative study on Montgomery and Prince George communities' decision-making in terms of participation and overlap disproved the notion implicit in the reform style hypothesis that professionalized bureaucracies necessarily replaced community participation.

⁴⁵ Aesthetic standard here is not meant to apply to technical skills of making somethings. It is to be understood more in terms of social aesthetic standards of how to relate to others (Carrithers Michael, 1990).

all that were necessary for successful plans, the local participation would be entirely redundant. The issue between technical criteria-led decisions is also an issue between the local policy-making and implementation. If local policy-making is subsumed by technical criteria, all that is left to the local population is implementation.

The alliance between plans, technical criteria and physical targets and resource estimation are the key features of the language of development. It embodies technocratic perspective of development. And this is also the main obstacle to participation. How decisionmaking can be transferred from those with technical expertise to those without it in a world most individuals have no technical knowledge is a challenge of knowledge decentralization. It must be emphasized, however, that the peasants by virtue of the transmission and accumulation of knowledge about the local ecology and landscape, they possess perhaps higher knowledge of this kind compared to outsiders with theoretical knowledge.

Moreover, it is not only the launching and legitimation of the programme by *GYT*s and *DYT*s that is at stake during deliberations, but the local participation is crucial to the overall sustaining of development process. If *DYT*s and *GYT*s and the local population do participate in designing and conceptualisation stage, *GYT*s and *DYT*s can become public arena for orientation of their members to secure approval of plans made by experts on the basis of technical criteria alone. At the same time, the divergence between national technical criteria led decisions and local decisions may parallel the divergence between peasant's local indigenous knowledge and bureaucracy's knowledge, criteria and rules and norms, assumed to be universally applicable ones. The issue reflects once more the controversy about the best means of intervention for the development of a community: should the decisions on goals and methods of intervention be made by planners and technicians or the peasants themselves (Summers 1986, 361) as agents of change. But if planners and technicians, as so called change agents, are the ultimate interventionists, the agency of locals is displaced, and we are back to not only loss of autonomy of subjects but also denial of subject as agent to transform his or her condition based on their experiential learning of their every day life.

Often, the fundamental ground for minimisation or exclusion of laypersons involvement in scientific and technical issues is based on their lack of understanding about complex decisions. Such decisions usually have technical risk assessment as a major element of decision. More is now known that scientists and experts also use extensively value judgements in making decisions about risk management and uncertainty (Frewer and Rowe, 2000) and that properly communicated, laypersons can participate in evaluating technical and scientific policies. In addition, laypersons are often not given access to information on which a structured decision can be made by laypersons. A number of procedures and criteria have been developed to promote effective participation of the laypersons in science and technology policy. These procedures and criteria do not usually measure what constitute better outcomes resulting from public participation (Frewer and Rowe 2000, 10).

In terms of power, decentralization seeks to promote local power *vis-a-vis* the centre power by striking a balance of power in the centre-local relationship. While both the centre and the local have to co-exist, the international literature on decentralization is conspicuously deficient on the exact balance that is to be struck in financial, technical, regulatory and administrative powers between the centre and the local decision-making entities. Within the Bhutanese context, power accretion in the *GYT*s and *DYT*s means the creation of regulatory and administrative powers to enable representative to take the initiatives in context with the bureaucracy. District administration are often considered as an object of delegation of power. However, taking a long term view its will be misleading to consider it as an institutional edifice for decentralization. Rather, district administrations should be considered as evolving non-politicized structures effecting the decisions made by the *GYT*s and *DYT*s.

At present, the district administration and the sectoral staff constituting the district administration are the field network of the centre. However, as the central directorate holds

power over local sectoral staff over their promotion, foreign travel, higher studies and training, they walk a tight rope between four actors: the district chief, the day-to-day head of the district administration; their 'clients' embodied in the *GYT* and *DYTs*; and sectoral headquarter in Thimphu who is their final and ultimate personnel and technical authority.

Within the district administration, the district administrator has a primal public relations and communications role and the balance he can strike between this role and the complicated role of development programme management depends on his skillful maximisation of his inputs which he views as having greater pay off for his career. Unlike other positions in the civil service, the district chief's posts due to its extensive roles that defies any neat categorisation, paradoxically, provides the greatest range of opportunities for a civil servant to negotiate his functions with real latitude of focus. His own career prospect are relatively immune from the failure of development plans as he can hedge on the delays and non-responsiveness of central sectoral directorates and ministries, who have the final say on budget estimates and release.

Decentralization entails ongoing dialogues and communication between the central bureaucracy and *DYTs* and *GYTs* through district administrations. But the feedback cycle is not operational to a desirable degree. There is no direct links between *GYTs* and *DYTs* with the directorates and sectoral ministries, except in theory, through Home Ministry. As most of the discussions and decisions of *DYTs* pertain not to security and immigration issues, the choice of Home Ministry as the primal recipient of such minutes and resolutions 'for kind information and necessary action' seems puzzling, and is a historical practice that could not yet adapt to the changed reality in the administrative system as a whole. Indeed the choice of Home Ministry as the institution coordinating decentralization process is less than ideal. Relevant sections of deliberations of the *DYTs* and *GYTs* which have implication on each ministry ought to be sorted by an agency from the general mass of deliberations of *GYTs* and *DYTs*, and messages and actions requests should be distributed to the relevant decision centres in Thimphu, if the intervening layers of decision maker such as district administrator and regional officials do not have power to respond quickly or resolve the service request within his power and resources. This step will bring to a concerned ministry rich vein of communications from around the country regularly, and present a broader popular view of the local participatory institutions on sectoral performances that is not depended entirely on their field staff. If the *DYT* and *GYT* proceedings are regularly scrutinized for feedbacks, there will indeed be no need to establish any parallel national monitoring and evaluation system that has been the object of every ministry led by the Department of Planning for almost a decade. The local staff posted in the districts and *gewogs* are partly responsible for data collection and reporting to the centre on meeting of physical targets of an annual or longer duration of a plan. Thus they have a compulsion to drive forward for quantitative fulfilment to meet physical targets. At the moment, there is no institutionalization of feedbacks and no unit to process information generated by the *GYTs* and *DYTs* even though a substantial part of minutes and resolutions of their meetings assume central ministries as their audience. The flow of information in this regard has remained a one-way process from bottom to top, but emptying, it seems at the moment, into a vacuum.

Although *DYTs* meet and produce volumes of data in terms of proceedings which one day researchers will uncode and analyse, effective participation by elected members in this fora are still hampered by lack of access to broader policy documents and prior discussion papers, due to the currency of English medium in official policy documents, that would lead them to consider alternatives courses of action, rather than changing elements within a given course. The requirement for fruitful and meaningful exchanges can be improved by giving all the members equally privileged access to wider information. Due to the higher density of information, and perhaps higher quality of information, that is available to the civil servants who are observer members in *DYTs*, the weight of arguments can lie heavily in favour of them, in case they intervene. The continued presence of the district chief in the *DYT* is both a help

and a hindrance at the same time, depending on the ability and personality of the incumbent to empathize with non-civil servants who do not belong to the bureaucracy with which district chief identifies.

One of the bureaucracy's main method of making decisions within itself is multisectoral consultation that allows it to devote untold amount of its expensive time on discussions. In principle, such consultative mechanism should bring diverse views to bear on a decision, and to co-opt any objections and differences. If meetings are a key method of decision-making and sharing views in the bureaucracy, the same latitude to enable numerous meetings in the *GYTs* and *DYTs* to occur need to be provided. The current level of budget for travel, food and stationeries to support a higher frequency of their meetings is limited; these institutions can hardly hold the current minimum of four meetings a year with the present level of financial provisions.

The central issue, as pointed our ealier, is the the degree of regulatory powers as distinct from administrative ones given to the local representational institutions like *GYTs* and *DYTs*. Administrative powers in the usual sense of the term imply powers to carry out rules, not to make rules or regulations or local laws. However as soon as a richer notion of decentralization is conceptualised, as a means to promoting agency, it seems desirable that some degree of the rule making or the regulatory power be broadened to the *GYTs* and *DYTs*. Regulation is different from administration in that "it involves the use of governmental authority to constrain the behaviour of private actors. Unlike distributive, redistributive, and other policies, and regulation does not involve large amounts of direct governmental expenditure..." (Teske and Gerber 2000, 852). This means that delegating certain degree of regulatory power is much more effective than giving a lot of administrative room. It is conducive not only for local democratic practices but also accomplishing tasks.

For analytic purpose, one may categorise regulatory or rule making powers into concurrent, pre-emptive and subsidiary powers. Concurrent powers would be those powers enjoyed equally by both the centre and the local representational institutions. In fiscal matter, the power given to a municipality to obtain loan is also enjoyed by the centre to obtain loan for spending in the municipality. This is an instance of concurrent power. Subsidiary powers are those given exclusively to local representational institutions. Pre-emptive powers are those that the centre may exercise in the jurisdiction of local representational institutions.

In the current *GYT* and *DYT* acts, some of the more simple regulatory powers⁴⁶ are based on the concept of minimum standards preemption power reserved for the central legislation. That is that the regulations passed by these local institutions can exceed the national regulatory framework: but the minimum standard must be the national standard. However, in many areas in which a locality preceives to be in need of urgent action, there may be no national laws to provide the framework for local laws or regulation. The local representational institutions have, and should, take their own measures for and on behalf of their communities. This has anyway been the experience in Bhutan. The centre has adopted regulations throughout the nation after a certain *DYT* pioneered them. For example, the national regulation prohibiting plastic shopping bags had its precursor in Samdrup Jongkhar

⁴⁶ Regulatory powers of a *DYT* consist of: esignation, protection of monuments, sites parks, sanctuaries; delineation of boundaries between geogs, towns and municipalities; posting of billboards, road signs, posters, banners, & other commercial advertisements; consumer protection against unfair pricing, counterfeit goods; commercial sale of alcohol, tobacco, tobacco products; prevention of gambling and control of noise pollution; content of cable telecasting; defence and security; prevention of communicable diseases among livestock; regulation of prices, & safety standards of dairy & livestock products; establishment of quarries, mines; protection of public health.

Regulatory powers of a *GYT* consist of: safe waste disposal; control, prevention of pollution (air, water, soil); sanitation standards; control of communicable livestock disease; allocating drinking & irrigation water; architectural standards within national standards; sustainable harvest of edible forest products; establishing handicraft enterprises and setting up co-operatives; preventing depredation of crops by livestock and wildlife; creating, designating recreation areas around villages; exemptions of in cash, in kind or labor contributions

district, whereby this *DYT* invented a rule which did not exist at that time nationally. Drinking, gambling, and tobacco regulations are some of the other areas where local representational institutions passed regulations effective in their jurisdiction long before the centre, either the ministries or the National Assembly, considered the issue for the whole country. In the current *DYT* and *GYT* acts, regulatory powers over many problems of local natures related to environment and commons that cannot be resolved easily by the centre are accorded to them. Thus, truly local initiatives are permitted, unless explicitly preempted by national laws. The problem with this approach is that most national laws drawn up earlier than 2003 presumed a completely unitary system. Moreover, laws engineered by various central institution continues to be enacted reserving exclusive powers to the centre.

After empowerment for making decision at the conceptual and designing stage of development programmes is secured, the next most salient issue in empowerment and in local administrative autonomy is allocation of resources, ie., where and for what should a given resource be spent in the locales if the local institution had the requisite power and authority. Although the acts gives them sufficient financial authority⁴⁷, the starting problematic is that there is no given budget that can be freely allocated by local political unit, just as there is no capital budget at the centre that can be allocated. The capital budget, whether at the centre or local level, is notional and its actualization depends on cascading flow from external development partners to the national budget and from there in quarterly releases to the sectors and dzongkhags. What there is in more concrete terms is an array of skeletal proposals of activities scheduled for a specified period of plan – one or five years – proposed by the local political units. Such needs are processed through successive levels of heirarchy of bureaucracy, and as it goes higher, the similar sounding needs from a number of districts are integrated and packed together as a programme or project and given for funding to the donors, now wrapped in elaborate vocabularies and technical criteria of development projects. Meanwhile the programmes and projects might be considered approved although funding has not been secured, whereas ‘approved’ to local ears often has the air of finalized appropriation.

At present, the amount of spending channelled through the district administration and local representative institutions is not substantial. A recent finding⁴⁸ showed that the central government accounted for 82.9% of the total spending in 2002-2003. The districts accounted for 16.4% and the *gewogs* for 0.7% of the total spending for 2002-2003, the first year after the new *GYT* and *DYT* acts were passed. Of course, this pattern of spending will most probably change in favour of district administrations and *gewogs*, but a substantial shift cannot take place without government becoming self-reliant in capital expenditure.

Moreover, a substantial shift in spending from the centre to the local cannot take place without abandoning the irresistible practice of devising supra-district programmes (region specific, circle specific, zone specific, watershed specific, theme specific) that lead to appointment of project managers at the centre and budget-retention at the centre both of which precipitate substantial fringe benefits such as training, travel, office automation, transport facilities etc. to the personnel at the centre. The continuation of supra-district programmes is often defended on grounds of efficiency. Efficiency argument thus seems a factor in centralisation. As this is a major plank in the defence of centralisation used by certain quarters of Bhutanese central bureaucracy, one needs to take a closer look at it.

Operating within liberal political and neo-classical economic framework, Deutsch and Kochen (1969) formulated an exploratory functional theory of decentralization which focused on cost-effectiveness of responding to the population’s demands for services, both material

⁴⁷ The *DYTs* have powers to prioritize resources for the dzongkhags and gewog plan activities; re-appropriate dzongkhag plan budgets according to financial rules and regulations laid down for the purpose; re-allocate gewog plan budgets from one gewog to another gewog to finance plan activities. A *GYT* can retain rural taxes for maintenance of certain facilities in a gewog.

⁴⁸ See Francoise Vaillancourt (2004. p. 12).

and informational, by several decision-making units. In brief, their model suggested that the decision-making units or service centre points can be multiplied until the marginal increase in fixed cost equals the marginal decrease in the cost of communication and transportation due to decentralization, taking into account costs of delivering services, cost of waiting time for those deliveries, and cost of redundancies between multiple service centres. Their paper suggested that “optimal degree of decentralization increases with the decrease in the proportion of the fixed capital cost of the service among its total costs.” (Deutsch and Kochen 1969, 748). So, as cost of labour increases relative to capital goods, the number of decentralised units should increase. Besides, the load on central agency would increase tremendously as peoples needs, that has to be sorted and referred to decision centres, changes and grows more complex. Mean response time is taken as an important performance indicator of the decision centre or central agency, wherever time is relevant factor of response. The longer the response time, the higher the cost of waiting. The cost of waiting can be indexed to “the utility of time to the average user.”

This framework points to three important cost factors that should favour decentralization in Bhutan. First, the cost of labour, on its own and relative to capital, has shown signs of exceptional overheating in rural areas for a long time. This phenomenon has hardly entered policy debate. The except to this tendency is the edict issued by His Majesty the King abolishing compulsory labour contribution for 15 days by each household, known as *gungdang woola*. Three factors are responsible for this overheating: (a) departure of people from rural sector to the modern sector including bureaucracy, military, monasteries, trade, education and parastatals and industries; (b) it has to do with absence of foreign immigrant labour in rural areas compared to towns or urban areas where, paradoxically, labour wages are lower, held down by immigrant labour supply. Immigrant labour permissions are not applicable to rural house construction; (c) the wage rate in rural areas for labour contribution to beneficiary local projects are equalized by law through out the country. But the fact that labourers cannot be hired for Nu.100 as substitute workers, when those liable cannot attend to it themselves, suggests that actual wage rate has overshot the national official wage level in many parts of the country. Second, related to the first point, people value of time is rising. Third, the diversity of the country on many dimensions, and hence also the country’s vastness despite its area, makes minute diversified response from the centre too challenging. As *GYT*s, *DYT*s and the people’s value of time increases speed of responsiveness of an centre agency to their request becomes crucial factor in decentralization. Deutsch and Kochen’s analysis is particularly relevant to overcome the views of those officials in Bhutan will believe that the expansion of communication facilities favour centralisation. With the introduction of faster communication and transportation, they argue that the size of the country, already comparatively small, is becoming progressively smaller, and that duplicating decision-making units in the twenty districts is not cost-efficient. In their view, a single centralised planning and administration system that subordinates, but addresses the localities needs well should be perfected. Implicit in their assumption is that the centre can continue to enlarge its current limited processing capacity to respond at an effective rate to the districts and *gewogs*. Their assumption will exacerbate the male distribution of staff between the centre and the districts, which has less than 50 per cent of the civil service. More seriously, it ignores the lack of context based knowledge of resolving problems by being at the operational area and belonging to locality. The social and the environmental cost of congestion in the capital city is also hardly taken into account in this kind of argument.

However, at the end, the primary goals of decentralization not efficiency and cost-effectiveness, as supposed by Deutsch and Kochen (1969), is not consistent with the principle purposes of decentralization advocated as value pluralism and diversity. The objectives of efficiency and cost-effectiveness incline the process of decentralization towards purposes of spatial and functional decentralization.

From the point of view of rising cost of labour in rural areas, it is also relevant to relate a conception of decentralization that exist in some quarters of bureaucracy and beneficiary labour contributions in *gewogs* and *dzongkhags*. As an aside, the lack of such labour contributions in municipalities and towns provides a contrasting conditions in local governance units between *gewogs* and municipalities, and maybe adding to the incentive to locate oneself in urban areas, and compounding the phenomena of 'empty households' in rural area.

The perpetuation of self-help associations through contribution of labour was an element in the official decentralization concept. This particular reasoning for decentralization was first evoked, though unstated so visibly and strongly, in an official thought in the early 1980s.⁴⁹ Labour contributions to local infrastructure development featured as an aspect of decentralization. Some officials took the view that scaling down of the local initiatives including labour contribution for maintenance of infrastructure such as irrigation channels and cantilever bridges would hobble the state eventually by overstretching its resources. Communities who expressed infrastructural needs could thus value more the joint investments into the infrastructure. Thus, the state conceived itself as a provider of capital while the beneficiaries would supply labour for a range of simple construction activities from which they would benefit. The perceived flaw in this argument was that the principle was not applied in urban areas, which is predominantly the environment of the commercial groups, where the the density of infrastructure formation is in fact the greatest as is the ability to contribute financially.

If decentralization is a manner of promoting civic responsibilities, sense of membership of a polity, and means of cost sharing between the beneficiaries-users and the state in the *gewogs*, this purpose or objective is at risk in municipalities or urban areas where none of the features of obligations and participation in *gewogs* seem to apply. The residents within municipalities, or towns, are understandably engaged in different economic fields such as industries and services. But the role of such residents, probably richer than an average rural resident, with respect to these particular objectives of decentralization to revive civic responsibilities is ambiguous. In other words, there doesn't seem yet to be a conceptual framework that explains the urban life in terms of decentralization, and decentralization in terms of the urban life, besides voting for members of the municipal committee. For instance, how does principle of cost sharing between beneficiaries and the state in terms of labour contribution operating in *gewogs* applies in municipalities? How do other levies collected in *gewogs* apply in municipalities? A recent world bank mission noted that "urban areas are more dependent on RGOB grants than they should [be] given the level of economic activity observed in them. This means that for a given budget, less resources are available to rural areas where economic activity is low" (Vallaincourt, 2004).

V. REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

The normally held image of traditional societies is that they suffer from political apathy due to political centralisation. Anthropologists have argued that it is not only modern democratic states with a high level of social and economic capacity to enable citizens to be involved in political participation, but that pre-industrial societies show a high degree of political participation. In other words, it is argued that pre-industrial societies also display extensive participation, if we look beyond modern form of electoral activity and voting which are an outward expression of voice on issues.

The substantive essence of voting is collective structure of decision making. How collective decision-making is actualized should be the main focus. A broad definition of political participation would be "efforts on the part of members of a community to influence,

⁴⁹ Royal Civil Service Commission. 1981. Decentralization Strategy Paper.

either directly or indirectly, the authoritative allocation of values in the community (Ross, 1988)," whereas defining political participation in electoral terms makes many prior assumptions about structures and processes of political participation. Thus defined, political participation can be measured by selecting suitable variables for both range and involvement in political participation in any society, traditional or modern.

There is considerable likelihood that the members of *GYT*s and *DYT*s may get politicised by being nominated and sponsored by political parties once they are launched. I have argued elsewhere (Ura 2004) that the local government institutions should not be politicised. Political parties should not be allowed to interfere in these bodies. The local government institutions and elections to *GYT*s and *DYT*s could best operate without following party policy lines. Political parties should have no hands in nominating candidates to *GYT*s and *DYT*s. This arrangement, if institutionalized in election laws in the making, will lead to lack of explicit interconnections and interference between national political parties and *GYT*s and *DYT*s and preserve the integrity of *GYT*s and *DYT*s to respond to local interests and pressures instead of central political parties. This institutional arrangement will also decrease by one important factor the total domination of the political landscape by national political parties in a country where civil society of western kind is currently very weak.

In this section I shall be focusing more on participation instead of representation. In representation, Bhutan could be among the countries having the highest number of elected representatives per 1000 adult voters in the gewog, district and national representational institutions. All representatives are elected/coopted as individuals or independents, except those nominated in ex officio capacity to the *GYT* or *DYT*.

Representation has increased after the creation of *GYT*s and *DYT*s. The membership of *GYT*s in particular are drawn from each *chiwog* (a village or cluster of village grouped as a subdivision of a *gewog*) and therefore every group of villages is represented in their respective *GYT*s. Altogether, in 2004, there were 2614 representatives in 201 *GYT*s and 572 representatives in 20 *DYT*s. But the total number of representatives in these two local government institutions is not the sum of these two figures as the *DYT* members are partly composed of *GYT* members. There is no data on the number of *GYT*s and *DYT*s membership disaggregated at the gewog level. Nor do we know at this stage about the social and economic status of individuals who are members of *GYT*s and *DYT*s.

It is not in representation of and in itself that is crucial in democracy or decentralization; it is in participation in various stages of decision-making that reflect democratic ideals. High political participation is often said to be associated with high social and economic and educational status of the participants, according to what has come to be understood variously as the socio-economic, resource, or mobilization hypothesis. It is argued that increasing resource level in a society boost the political participation of its members. Comparative studies find that both within and between countries, individuals endowed with higher resource are politically more active. Individuals get the desire and the skill to participate politically and build pressure from below to hold authorities accountable. Sustained participation in decision-making by subsistence peasants, such as that of Bhutan, is certainly limited by the costliness their time diverted from daily preoccupations to secure their living, especially if they realize that their voices do not count at the end. But neither low level of resources among the peasantry nor preoccupations with daily farming routine need inhibit peasant participation when the decision-making process is structured to involve laypeople and the criteria of decision lend to their views and knowledge.

Literacy has been particularly stressed as an important politically relevant prerequisite for enhancing political participation in social mobilization literature (Deutsch, 1961).⁵⁰ In arguing for literacy as a causal agent, Deutch was perhaps part of the school of thought

⁵⁰ Deutsch selected literacy as one of the seven major variables in his index of social mobilization or modernization, which measures multiple correlation between seven of these variables. Social mobilization, he defines, as simply a label given to overall process of change.

demonstrating literacy not only as a different (read advanced) way of creating and storing knowledge but also as an agent of new social structures. However, such mobilisation hypothesis, pivoted on literacy as a crucial variable, does seem to ignore the nature of knowledge and learning among peasantry in oral preliterate or nonliterate societies, by failing to distinguish it from literacy and literate knowledge imparted in formal mass educational institutions. Yet such a distinction is important in the Bhutanese context of peasantry's participation in decisions that is the aim of decentralization. Summarising various authors, Akinasso has questioned that literacy and literate knowledge necessarily equips individuals possessing them with greater cognitive capacities, as opposed to cognitive skills. Akinasso argues that "... although literacy facilitates acquisition of certain cognitive skills and operations, it does not, in itself, engender novel cognitive capacities" (Akinasso 1992, 70). The import of the argument on decentralization is that knowledge of peasantry living in largely nonliterate society of Bhutan may not be dismissed. Indeed, knowledge of the nonliterate society, characterised by practicality, particularism and contextualism makes it a suitable base for tapping in decentralization, as opposed to mass literacy and knowledge transmitted through formal institutions which is decontextualised and specialized, and laden with exotic lexicon of a foreign tongue and values of the far away national educationists (who are external to the community).⁵¹

The other approach to the study of political participation, especially in preindustrial societies, stresses not the level of resources, but the organisation of resources.⁵² In this hypothesis, what is more important is the structural forces or institutional patterns in a society. The institutional pattern consist of "the concentration of power and authority, the strength of cross-cutting social ties,... in a society".⁵³ These factors, according to resource-level hypothesis become the most important factors in political participation. In analytic terms, political participation has been bifurcated into involvement and range (Ross 1998). Range refers to the number of areas of life over which collective decisions are made. It relates to the question 'what are the areas in which collective decisions are made?' Involvement refers to the number of people who makes the decision. It relates to the question 'who has participated in the decision?' Strong cross-cutting ties are positively related to involvement and range. Cross cutting ties, in which Bhutanese communities situated in the same physical space abound, provides informal institutional base for collective action mobilized through social and kinship connections, though such kinship affinities must be tempered by Buddhist broadening of concerns for all who are also not kins. Centralisation of power is inversely related to collective involvement and range. Moreover, the range of decisions will be fundamentally limited if they are restricted only to administrative spheres. This fortunately is not the case with *GYT* and *DYT acts* where the range of decision is extended to a modest level into regulatory 'general' areas.

⁵¹ Lipset (1994) has prioritized social equality, competitive market economy, culture favorable to democracy, disassociation between political and religious communities, legitimacy, appropriate executive in electoral systems, existence of political and civil society as the main prerequisites for democracies. But these conditions seem to be what democracy is rather than conditions for democracy. In any case, all of these variables are shown to be coorrelates rather than causes of democracy. Lipset, a promient current political scientist, did not touch on either the role of Buddhism, which is a determinant of Bhutanese culture, or on the importance of sub-national institutional arrangements for democracy in his list of social pre-requisites for democracy.

⁵² Ross's study (1988:79) of political participation in terms of range and involvement supported the organisation of resources hypothesis in a multivariate model (multiple regression). This result did not come through clearly at the bivariate tabulation.

⁵³ Ross, *ibid.*, 75-76.

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The essay begins with a historical interpretation of the local-centre relationship demonstrating that the traditional polity of Bhutan had a decentralized authority. This is not merely an exercise to portray past to reflect current circumstances. The depiction of decentralized authority in traditional polity in Bhutan is not an exception in the Buddhist Himalayan political world. Although historical narrative of non-centralized state is dissonant with Western political theory, some scholars, for example Geoffrey Samuel (1992) characterised Tibet as a non-centralised state, with substantial autonomy left to local figures. However, decentralization has been necessary and natural in Bhutan because of its social and ecological diversity. Whether the decentralised authority in Bhutan was a factor in hundreds of years of stability is partly a matter of interpretation, but it can be argued that it was until the external factors in the form of British imperial interest changed the basic premises governing national stability and security. Paradoxically, even the defense of the country in olden times required more lateral and decentralised coordination compared to vertical coordination.⁵⁴ The causes for decentralized authority in the traditional polity stemmed from several features of the country's politics and geography. First, the structure of power exhibited various centres like the *Zhabdrung* incarnates, penlops, druk desis, chief abbots, heads of private religious establishments, lineage based community authorities and so forth counter balancing each other. Second, in a state leadership and officialdom penetrated by the monk-statemens with classical Buddhist training, centralization of power would have had very little appeal and value. Despite the lack of institutional design for check and balance like the modern separation of power, Buddhism supported an individual psychology of balance of power in the concept of *mkyentse nus gsum* (coherent equilibrating qualities of a leader in terms of knowledge, compassion and power). Power was to serve only to effect compassion and wisdom. Abrogation of power to an individual authority for its own sake is undermined by this Buddhist concept of the three supreme qualities of a leader. Third, the pervasive and centralizing presence of state in the communities was impossible because of the pedestrianism of Bhutanese society. Control of regulation of communities⁵⁵ was circumscribed by sheer pedestrian cost. For heuristic purpose, a community can be functionally and territorially considered equivalent to a *gewog*, the main locus of collective decision-making and authority, both in the past and today.

The fundamental effect of the nature of non-centralized state in the traditional polity in Bhutan was to encourage considerable degree of community autonomy and diversity. Individual autonomy in the standard liberalist sense is the mere absence of 'illegal or unconstitutional' coercion while making any choice. The term diversity can be best understood as it is done in ecological terms. "Diversity measures the resilience of a self-sustaining ecosystem" (Hershock forthcoming book. Ch. 5). Diversity can be understood as the extent of "interdependencies by means of which individual members contribute to each other's welfare," materially, emotionally, and spiritually. Diversity is indeed necessary for us as individuals to contribute and be contributed to. When there is no diversity, there will be no space to contribute in any meaningful way to each other. And it is only through the meaningful diversity and interdependence, 'not mere co-existence' as Hershock writes, that we can increase our welfare, which is always a relational matter.

Diversity in traditional polity, which coincides with value pluralism to an extent, entailed to institutions controlling renewable resources, rural settlements based on customary laws, and customary property relationships that varied across the country. Clearly, there was far more diversity in every domain of human life due to lesser universally applied terms of

⁵⁴ Food stocking and militia raising were done at a local level. Oral sources also maintain that fighting went on local command,

⁵⁵ I identify the community here with mainly territorial base, although it can also have a functional, associational, non-territorial locus.

decision making. The community was the main setting for the individual and his or her ideas and meanings, and the community's social, religious and economic world constituted the self-concept of its members. Individuals developed in their respective communities which, as Wilkinson argued, served as both means for achieving social well-being and end of its realization (cited in Summers 1986:355). One should add that this statement gives the impression of individual being reduced completely to community, while the Buddhist view is that an individual is a relational entity, and the community itself is a system of relationships without reality of its own. The community is a suitable pragmatic locus for practising and constituting meaningful and interdependent relationship because of its scale. All individuals and beings are, in Buddhism, part of an individual's concern, but a community yields the best possible pragmatic field for meaningful interdependences.⁵⁶ But such a normative community that should be the object of state embracing diversity as a value is neither identical to a liberal community inhabited by the autonomous agents as rational choosers posited in liberalism nor to a communitarian community where individuals are bound insularly by common values as the basis of a community. Individuals are existentially grounded in their communities but their world-view is also borderlessly open and inclusive as they practice in these communities the values of compassion and interdependence encompassing all sentient beings.

Decentralization in the context of liberalism is to enlarge the autonomy of individuals who are portrayed as independent, separate bearers of inalienable rights and choosers of ends. We need to realize that all choices are contingent and shaped by larger forces, and that choices are largely influenced, though not determined completely, by beliefs, by values and assumptions of the society we live in. It seems quite implausible, as poststructuralist have argued, that an individual can be autonomous in liberalism's sense of the term as standing outside of society (Bevir 199:71-73; Foucault 1993: 201-203).⁵⁷ Such criticism of autonomy does not apply for the subject as agent, in whom the poststructuralist see the capacity to act freely. This capacity is correlated to minimum of domination and toleration of difference. These are part also of decentralization and diversity arguments and are can be linked to reduction of the normalisation⁵⁸ and individualisation under modernity, a concept elaborated by Foucault (Bevir 199:74-76). Poststructuralist thought points to more a realistic assessment of the subject with regard to the question of autonomy but we need to depart from poststructuralism to be more situated in Bhutan. It needs to be recalled here that the concept of lack of an autonomous subject (self) is suggestive of Buddhism which rejects it on grounds that it is made up the eight interactives aggregates of consciousness) which is constantly changing. It is argued that an illusion of self exist due to an illusion of self persisting through time, and that gives rise to itself as a seat of self-centredness (Kaptein 2000:115).⁵⁹ However,

⁵⁶ Meaningful interdependence in the context of Buddhist practice is elaborated by Peter Herschok (2005 forthcoming Chapter 6. Diversity As Commons: International Relations Beyond Competition and Cooperation)

⁵⁷ Foucault (1993:202) remarked that "historians prefer a history of social processes, and most philosophers prefer a subject without history" in the study of constitution of the subject over time.

⁵⁸ In what appears to be a key passage on normalisation and domination, Foucault (1993:203) says: "But, analysing the experience of sexuality, I became more and more aware that these in all societies, I think, in all societies whatever they are, another type of techniques: techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on. Religious all of this kind of techniques a techniques or technology of the self... I think that if one wants to analyse the genealogy of the subject in Western civilisation, he has take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self ." Foucault (1993:204) suggests techniques of the self as "...the techniques oriented towards the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself..." He says that "the examination of on conscience and confessions are among the most important of this procedures."

⁵⁹ Advanced teachings often include ngo sprod in order to introspect on the mind itself: examining what it does by itself before techniques are learnt to calm it down and eliminate its activity to a minimum. At its

at a conventional level, Buddhism does not deny existence of an individual as life histories and identities; rather it points out that to take even such life histories and identities of individuals is mistaken because they are part of interdependent phenomena.

While we need to enlarge human rights as the lowest or basic common bench marks for interrelationships, we need not accept reified existence of free and autonomous agents as given. Given the notion of subject as agent with capacity for freedom from normalization and domination, the need for freedom and human rights to undergird human dignity is the same whether one looks at individuals from any humanistic standpoints, including Buddhism. We can also agree with libertarian arguments that individual human rights are necessary as a common value for individuals not be bound unreflexively and involuntarily to a community. But a Buddhist caveat suggest that achievement of human rights is not in itself a cause for celebration. World would be much better if human rights were not needed, as Herschman has argued from a Buddhist perspective. The fact that they are so badly needed, in his words, “as a set of practices established to perform triage of emergency care for ailing societies” can only be construed as “an indictment of society”⁶⁰ of how we have failed to be aware of our interrelatedness and basic sympathy and compassion. The import of the Buddhist view of interdependencies, in which compassion and empathy is central, is that we need to cultivate values much beyond human rights, and such a possibility of practice seem more realistic in the setting of communities. At the same time, diversity of local institutions, freedom for diversity and relating to each other freely according to specific needs of the individuals seem more realistic in setting which do not atomize individuals in mass society.

The preservation of communities with the help of clearly structured decision-making demarcating areas between the centre, communities and other intermediate entities is crucial to diversity as a value. And these are equally valid reasons in the present efforts of the government seeking for a balance between vertical and horizontal intergration, although it must be recognized that the nature and complexity of decisions in a modern state means that a considerable range of decisions will be reserved to the centre. A general problem in the context of preserving community is that competitive market conditions that is spreading everywhere associated with globalization and political liberalism do not give incentive for individuals to be committed to their community and the community to be viable for the individuals. Liberalism’s or enlightenment view of knowledge as objective knowledge of the world, and therefore universally applicable, might be another factor prejudicial to the survival of communities and their diversity. In that sense, opposite poststructuralist insight that all knowledge are contextual and local offers another advantage to the preservation of communities, for the existence of communities might in no small measure depend on accommodation of particularistic and contextual indigenous knowledges and cultures.

His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck’s (reign 1972-) vision of a political community in the context of Gross National Happiness combined with historical and cultural compatibility of decentralized authority resulted in the modern phase of political restructuring of the centre-local relationship. In comparison with developing nations in general, the initiative of His Majesty the King went back as early as 1981, when he established a representative institution - district development committees - to resolve collective political and economic issues through discourse, at least a decade ahead of the OECD adoption of participatory development as goal of aid in 1990. In programmatic terms, His Majesty insisted that the operational unit of planning and management and documentation of plans should not be sectoral and national, but local to prevent vertical integration and blurring of specificities of plans that lend diversity to communities. The localisation of planning and documentation at

limiting case, contemplation is supposed to make it free from phenomenal reality. Some say that it is the moment when wisdom quality which may be identified with compassion and borderless openness dawns.

⁶⁰ This view though sounding extreme actually accords well with how democracies based on human rights come about as a result of truce after inconclusive fighting for dominance between various groups (Flybjerg 1998:226 citing Herschman 1994:208).

the district and *gewog* levels to permit fine-grained view of activities and budgets so that the small scale communities can keep sight and control of what might otherwise get aggregated, reduced, and centralized into national sectoral plans. Aggregation into larger systems may come at the cost of shifting of coordination and accountability from the local towards the central. Likewise, having to align with every standard and criteria laid down by the centre can only come with a degree of trade off with local creativity, resilience and innovation which are usually sustained under diversity.

In the literature of decentralization, there is excessive reference to the need for participatory planning and management and very little on creation of regulatory space. Activating participatory planning and management within prior set of regulations, criteria, norms passed by the centre often sets narrow limits to the discourse and actions of the locals. Local choices and creativity then have to be exerted within ranges specified by uniform central rules, legislation and directives. Devolving administrative and associated financial authority will allow for locals to decide, for example with reference to a structure, on dimension of choices such as where to build it (spatial choice), when to build it (temporal choice) and what to be given priority among the various needs (prioritization choice). But all three of them belong not so much to conception and design of an activity, which is the true mark of a local initiative, as to implementation stage. In this hypothetical example, centralised design preempts true local authorship of the activity and the aim of decentralized polity as a response to diversity of design to fit local ecological, resources and skills is made untenable. The thrust of this hypothetical case, which can be extended to many different activities, is that the ultimate success of decentralisation and participatory planning will be heightened by giving more regulatory rooms might be more effective than devolving a great deal of administrative powers. Regulatory space is the undecided, clean space (*tabula rasa*) in that a decentralized unit can set rules and criteria for and by itself. Incipient forms of decentralized regulatory powers are already granted to local representative institutions like *GYTs* and *DYTs*. The introduction of regulatory powers in some domains promote the environment and knowledge for communities to practice small rule and policy making for their own localities while providing opportunities for training to enter bigger discussion on national policies and laws. There value for allowing certain areas of regulation-making to be decentralized has been borne in several instances where the centre has followed pioneering steps taken in the districts. As lateral learning process deepen through decentralization, there will be many innovations and solutions bubbling up from the communities. The benefits of diverse new solutions communities find can only be shared if they are surveyed and documented for diffusion.

Like regulatory powers, devolution of financial powers is another indicator of decentralization. The pattern of spending in 2002-2003 fiscal year, which was also the first year of the implementation of the new decentralization laws, show that 17 percent of total spending was channeled through the districts and *gewogs*. The rest was spent directly by the central agencies. This pattern will certainly change progressively in favour of the districts and *gewogs*. Yet a substantial shift cannot take place until the government become self-reliant in both recurrent and capital expenditures through dramatic revenue enhancement based on mega-investments like the hydro-power exploitation. Contrary to arguments and expectations of external observers on decentralization, decentralization should not be perceived, at least for the foreseeable future, as a way for all *gewogs* to generate enough revenue to cover all types of recurrent budget, let alone capital budget. The tax and population bases, which may be declining in some *gewogs* affected by migration, makes that infeasible without incurring great human costs. His Majesty the King has rightly and benevolently curtailed an increase in rural cash taxes. And were locally decided cash taxes to rise significantly in *gewogs* without concomittant lowering of a spectrum of locally organized and decided labour contributions, it would add to the push factors of urban bound migration. The current level of labour contribution to build community facilities and carryout other communal tasks may be huge, in that it negatively impacts agriculture and livestock and household management, in certain

gewogs. Labour contributions to build communal infrastructure not only benefits the contributors directly, but people yet to be borne. Thus, it is a part of nation building to make future generate inherit a greater level of assets. Indeed, economically speaking, such sacrifices for nation building either in cash or labour contributions have to be placed increasingly also on urban populations who may have greater capacity to bear them. As labour contributions to maintenance and creation of infrastructure in *gewogs* is an important issue in decentralisation, the issue needs closer examination.⁶¹

The commitment and pace of Bhutanese government to decentralization and diversity is hindered by lack of human, financial and technological resources. With as many as 201 *gewogs* institutions (*GYTs*) to be strengthened, investment on this wide front is thin. If a sustained progress is to be made at the same time in all *GYTs*, it can realistically be done only with substantial support of Bhutan's development partners. The current pattern of spending which show higher spending by the centre compared to the *districts* and *gewogs*, as mentioned earlier, is a consequence of the lack of revenue self-sufficiency and subtle processes and pre-conditions of aid that favour agglomeration of donor assisted project coordination units at the centre as well as programming of activities that may ingeniously diverge from local financial authority. If aid money is to respond directly to local choices, priority identified by communities need to be respected without questioning fundamentally the choices and preferences of people. But the donor assistance portofolio, set according to strategic priorities, out of which resources are allocated, do impart a conformist tendency way down to the locals. Decentralisation and diversity requires free commitment of resources, given to the government in many decentralized sectors, of which spending can be prioritized by the locals. The dynamics of centre-donor negotiations may lead to devising supra-district programmes associated to regions, circles, eco-zones, circles, themes, etc.. As a consequence, these lead to budget retention above the districts and *gewogs* entities in project management units where such supra-district projects precipitates comparatively concentrated opportunities for foreign travel, office automation and other comforts of working life. The management of supra-district programmes at the centre are often defended on efficiency grounds, but such efficiency may be far less defensible when their spillover social, demographic, political and economic impacts are viewed from a wider perspective. The cost of congestion and overcrowding at the centre, maldistribution of staffing between the centre and the local, the decrease in the speed of responsiveness to local requests relatives to rise in the value of waiting time of the locals, lack of context based knowledge at the centre to resolve issues at the site are some of the potential drawbacks when seen from a wider perspective.

The last issue that I wish to touch here is the political discourse among the peasantry in decentralized decision-making and the need for sensitivity to local knowledges in the decision making structure. There is a tendency in the literature on decentralization to view literacy and other resource levels as crucial to political participation. If the pre-requisites were true, a lack of these pre-requisites in the predominantly nonliterate society in Bhutan forestalls effective participation among the peasantry as well as their political representatives (*DTY* and *GYT* members) whose world view and cognitive capacities may not be different from the peasantry. An overemphasis on mass literacy and mass knowledge transmitted through formal educational institutions is indeed a bias on its own that does not recognize fairly the different nature of learning and knowledge in a nonliterate society. In the context of decentralization and diversity, nonliterate communities's knowledge and skills characterised by practicality, particularism and contextualism offers rich bases for self-mobilization. They are also the framework within which decisions by the locals are partly made. Here again, if all the local decisions have to conform strictly and dissolve into expert-led technological and scientific criterion made by the centre, such preconditions will preclude local participation as well as broader local foundation of decisions that should encompass aesthetic and moral values; and

⁶¹ A preliminary paper on the variety and quantity of labour as revealed by a survey carried out in early 2004 contributions will be forthcoming in early 2005.

locally relevant knowledges. On the whole, however, better decisions are made on the basis of values than on the basis of technical and scientific criterion alone.

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