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# National Road Construction and a New Labour Requisition in Contemporary Bhutan

Mari Miyamoto

## 1. Introduction

When the government of Bhutan embarked on the modernisation of the political system and the economy in the 1950s, one of the first things it tried to amend was the country's taxation system. This included the gradual conversion of payment in kind into payment in cash, but it never included the abolition of the labour tax.

Although the third King of Bhutan implemented the emancipation of the country's serfs in 1952, the scale of the labour tax was nevertheless extended as nationwide development programmes progressed. L. E. Rose, who conducted research in Bhutan during 1970s, described this labour contribution as unpaid and involuntary work which ought to be abolished; however, the government failed to make this a part of the reform of public policy during 1950s [Rose 1977]. In Rose's view, this failure was because there were no economically feasible alternatives available to the services obtained under the labour tax, as government revenue was still insufficient to provide these [Rose 1977]. Moreover, the demands for labour increased drastically in the late 1950s with the introduction of the large-scale road construction projects, followed by the start of the first five-year development plan in 1961.

*The Proceedings and Resolutions of the National Assembly from the First to the Thirtieth Sessions* indicated that public interest in the late 1950s and 1960s was directed towards the issues relating to national taxes, including labour contributions. Although Rose described the system as if it were unified under one name, *Chunidom* [sic: Rose 1977], according to

the Proceedings and Resolutions of the National Assembly this system of labour requisition had changed labels in terms of scope and structure. These adjustments had been made in response to the growth of the development projects and increasing requests from the people to reduce the burden of the contribution.

This essay will examine the characteristics of the first nation-wide labour requisition system in Bhutanese modern history through a diachronic survey of the articles of the National Assembly resolutions. For that purpose, the analysis focuses on the first ten years of National Assembly resolutions. These resolutions display the struggles and conflicts between the ruler and the governed during that time. The differences in the nature of the labour contributions before and after the national development programmes should be especially noted.

The Proceedings and Resolutions of the National Assembly referred to in this article were originally written in *Dzongkha*, the national language of Bhutan, but are quoted here in an English translation published in the 2000s for public reference. The proceedings have been recorded since 1953, when the government called the first National Assembly under the third King of the Wangchucks. However, the proceedings have been recorded in a condensed form rather than as a detailed account, and this does not necessarily provide us with the complete contents of each discussion or the names of the speakers. Oral histories have been collected from former workers and officers since 2002, and this information helps fill some of gaps (although not all of them) to understand the features of each labour system.

When the development programme was expanded nationwide, people were sent beyond their livelihood zone and stayed on construction sites with strangers from different areas of the country who spoke different languages. The new national labour requisition system gathered people in the same place (construction sites) and allowed them to share the same experience (construction works) as Bhutanese citizens for the first time in the country's history. As the development plans required such labour-intensive construction projects, the government also faced the necessity of organising people with new discipline to keep them healthy and maximise their usefulness. Therefore examining the significance of the first nation-wide labour requisition system will make us think of the process by which the nation

was created and managed.

## 2. The Himalayas in the late 1950s

Bhutanese development plans incorporated highway construction projects initiated by the Indian government in the late 1950s. In 1959, the government of India was involved in the Sino-Indian border dispute, and there was upheaval in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, due to the Chinese invasion. This was followed by the inflow of Tibetan refugees into Bhutan, Nepal and India. The political situation in the Himalayas was unstable. From the viewpoint of national security, the government of India recognised the necessity of connecting India with the Bhutanese capital by motorway. The Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in 1958 to persuade the King and government to accept India's assistance. In January 1960, work began on a 179-kilometre-long road linking the capital of Bhutan to the Indian border, carried out under the first national Five Year Plan (which began in 1961).

## 3. A new labour requisition

Increasing demand for a labour force for Bhutan's new era induced the government to develop an alternative labour requisition system called '*Dudom*'. Specific reference to a labour requisition for construction of the national highway was made during the 1957 eleventh session of the Bhutanese National Assembly. One out of ten articles related to requisition for labour. Article one read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO MOTORABLE ROADS: As the construction of motorable roads would bring great benefit to the general public, the proposed construction of motorable road from the Indo-Bhutan border into Bhutan should be undertaken. The selection of places through which the road was to be constructed would be in accordance with His Majesty's command. The labourers required for the construction would be made available uniformly from the people

of all districts within the country. However, the T&P for the construction would be issued by the Government, which should also set up a ration store. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1957: Session 11, Article 1]

At the twelfth session in 1958, two out of five articles related to the road construction and the requisition for labour, particularly the new requisition system, *Dudom*. Another two of five articles related to the army and recruiting soldiers. Article two of the twelfth session read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO ROAD CONSTRUCTIONS: It was explained to the members of the National Assembly that owing to the geographical condition of the country and because of the absence of proper trade routes between Bhutan and India, the people were facing difficulties in procuring essential commodities and other items from India. In the circumstances the few merchants able to procure these commodities were in turn selling them at exorbitant prices to the people.

To overcome the aforesaid difficulties, and in keeping with the unanimous decision in the previous session concerning the construction of a motorable road from India to Bhutan, it was deemed politic to begin work on the construction as early as possible.

On this issue all the members pledged that the labourers required for the same would be made available from the public. All males between the ages of 17 to 55 would be enrolled for the conscripted labour force (*Dudom*) and one person among each *Dudom* would be required to work seven months in a year compulsorily. The construction of the road would initially begin from Pasakha<sup>1)</sup> side, since skilled manpower for the road construction was very scarce, it was decided to hire the required personnel from outside the country. It was envisaged that the country's revenue would be insufficient to meet the construction cost and as such it was decided to seek foreign aid. It was pointed out that, as an independent country,

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1) This is the name of a place in the Puntholing district of the Chukha prefecture on the southern border with India. Pasakha is about 17 km from Puntholing.

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Bhutan would be eligible for international grants. As such, it was decided to seek foreign aid. If additional funds were required, the same would be sought from the government of India. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1958: Session 12, Article 2]

Article four reaffirmed the conditions of *Dudom*:

MATTER RELATING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROADS: It was reaffirmed that for the initial construction of the road from Pasakha side, scheduled to commence this year, all males between the ages of 17 to 55 would be compulsorily enlisted under the conscripted labour force system (*Dudom*). However, women and persons below the age of 17 and above 55 would be exempted from the said labour force system. One person from *Dudom* (a group of six) would be required to work for seven months in a year commencing from the 9th month of the next year. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1958: Session 12, Article 4]

According to these articles of the eleventh and twelfth sessions, the aim of the road construction was to overcome “the absence of proper trade routes” that had created difficulties for people “in procuring essential commodities and other items from India”. National security was not at all mentioned as a reason for constructing the road. Article two of the twelfth session noted that the construction of the motorway had been the unanimous decision of the eleventh session of the National Assembly.

The system involved all males between the ages of 17 and 55 and “one person from *Dudom* (a group of six) would be required to work for seven months in a year.” While other taxes were imposed on the household as a unit of taxation at that time, *Dudom* was imposed on individuals. The same resolution also ruled that “women and persons below the age of 17 and above 55 would be exempted” from the requisition.

The word *Dudom* means ‘a group of six’, in *Dzongkha*: ‘*Du*’ means the number six and ‘*Dom*’ means ‘combine’. According to the former officers and workers involved in this system, the assembled villagers were divided into small groups formed of six members, and if any vacancy occurred, members of each group had a mutual responsibility to fill it

to complete the work shift for the group.

Those labourers were sent to the motorway construction worksite, and to the military training camp construction at *Wangdue Phodrang* (previously spelled *Wangdiphodrang*), as indicated by article twelve of the thirteenth session:

MATTER RELATING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARMY TRAINING CENTRE: As stated above all members were required to explain the policies framed in the National Assembly to the public and, accordingly, the labourers required for the construction of Army Training Centers at Wangdiphodrang and construction of motor roads from India to Bhutan, would be formed under the conscripted labour force (*Dukdom*)<sup>2</sup>. The public must be made to understand that the above work was undertaken for the benefit of both the government and the public, and the people should therefore come forward willingly to work hand in hand with the government. The members unanimously felt that road construction would be the main infrastructure of the nation's development and security. The Assembly hoped that the construction works relating to the construction of roads and the Army Training Centres would begin immediately. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1959: Session 13, Article 12]

This resolution indicated that *Dudom* was clearly designed for national projects. The government tried to make people understand that the work was “for the benefit of both the government and the public”, and demanded that the people “come forward willingly to work hand in hand with the government.” For this, the king and the government needed to create new vocabulary to enlighten the people and encourage them in their cooperation.

In 1907, when the first King of the Wangchuck Dynasty established his first government, he needed labour to build a new capital and support his reign. In *Dzongkha*, *Ula* means “labour”. I often found this word in the mouths of the older people I have interviewed in rural areas of Bhutan. According to the narratives of the villagers, the

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2) This must be a misprint. The accurate spelling is *Dudom*, as copied from the previous session.

Wanchuck kings imposed various *Ula* on their subjects to build their residences, clear mule tracks, carry various loads (grains, coins, fuel woods, furniture, cloths, bamboo boxes, cheese, butter or meats), entertain their guests, and so on, until *Dudom* was implemented in the 1950s. When the third King, *Jigme Dorji Wangchuck*, implemented the first Five Year Plan, his intention was to reform the structure of the political system as well as that of society: hence the conversion of the relationship between King and subject into that of a nation-state. According to the resolution above, the third King's government expressed its view that *Dudom* meant the people should be willing to contribute their work to the government, because that work contributed to the welfare of society itself. While people had been unilaterally exploited by the kings and the nobility under the old *Ula* labour tax, the new labour requisition for *Dudom* was supposed to be for the people's own benefit and for the development of the nation.

While the government introduced *Dudom* at the twelfth session of the National Assembly in 1958 to make good a shortage of labour, it was decided also to recruit troops from all males except "aged males and young monks." An intention to apply a conscription system for "young males" was revealed in the following year's session.

MATTER RELATING TO THE ARMY: It was decided to select Wangdiphodrang as the site for the Army Training Centre. In the face of an acute shortage of army personnel, the members of the Assembly suggested that all males should be recruited as soldiers and necessary training imparted to them. However, aged males and young monks would be exempted from all other army training except the handling of fire-arms. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1958: Session 12, Article 3]

MATTER RELATING TO THE GRANT OF ARMY TRAINING: It was resolved that an Army Training Centre would be set up at Wangdiphodrang and that the personnel required for border security and for various Dzongkhags would be provided from the training centre. As such, to facilitate measures to ensure the country's security it was felt necessary that all young male citizens of the country



should undergo military training. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1959: Session 13, Article 3]

In the same session, in response to the King's speech ("he [the King]<sup>3)</sup> said...he was prepared to risk even his life in striving to protect the nation and his subjects"), "the Lamas and the Monks said that if such was the aspiration of His Majesty, they would also go forward to the extent of handling guns to fight with the enemies to defend the country and its religion" [Royal Government of Bhutan 1959: Session 13, Article 10]. These resolutions show that there was a critical shortage of human resources in every field in Bhutan at that time.

#### 4. Paid or unpaid?

Although L. E. Rose defined this labour force as unpaid [Rose 1976], a regulation about the wage for *Dudom* was mentioned during the fourteenth session in 1960:

MATTER RELATING TO LABOUR ABSENTEES AND WAGES THEREOF: It was decided that 300 labourers who absented themselves from working on the road of Pasakha would be required to work on wages for four months at the rate of Nu. 2/- per day. 200 labourers required for road alignment of Samdrupjongkhar<sup>4)</sup> would be supplied by the people from Eastern Bhutan, and in addition to this, the supply of 2,500 labourers required during winter for the construction of the roads would also be made available from the eastern region. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1960: Session 14, Article 5]

This resolution showed that *Dudom* was considered as wage labour, and thus different from a compulsive labour tax like *Ula*. However, the introduction of wage labour did not

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3) The words in parentheses in the quoted passage are this writer's translation.

4) It is the name of a prefecture and town located on the south eastern border between India and Bhutan.

change the domestic economy into a money economy at once. In the 1960s, the government still collected the tax in kind. However, tax collection goals were not always fulfilled. Article five of the seventeenth session read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROAD LEADING TO BORDER POSTS: The representatives of army, Makshi Akhu, reported that the construction and renovation of army camps and construction of new camps and roads leading to border posts was to be undertaken on a priority basis at an early date. While supporting the views expressed by the Army representatives, the Assembly decided that the works were to be initiated from the first day of the 5th month of the Water Tiger Year, for which the labour would be provided by the public who were absent from the previous road construction works. It was also decided that those who were absent for two days would have to work for three days. Wages would be paid for the actual day of absence but not for the additional day.

The outstanding food commodities to be received in the form of tax were still not being fully deposited by the public till the Iron Rat Year. Considering the convenience of the people, His Majesty desired that the Assembly should decide on the recovery of the food commodities in the form of labour for border road construction. In compliance with His Majesty's command, it was decided that the outstanding foodgrains would be converted into working days at border road construction sites on the basis of the existing government rate of wages, and the people would be asked to provide labour accordingly. (*sic*) [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 5]

When outstanding grains were not fully deposited by the public, the third King commanded the assembly to rule that the outstanding grains would be made up for by working days at border road construction sites. The twenty first article of the seventeenth session read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO BUTTER TAX OF WANGDI: Some of the chimis of Wangdi suggested that the butter tax be levied according to the 'Shingthrel'. Since the shingthrel had already been converted into Dudom, it was also requested that the butter tax should be converted into Dudom. However, some of the chimis of Shah did not agree. In view of this, it was decided that the matter would be discussed with the public, and the outcome submitted in the next Assembly. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 21]

According to the article fourteen of the same session, '*Shingthrel*' is a wood tax, for example timber contribution. Article twenty-one said that the wood tax had been converted into *Dudom*, so the butter tax could also be converted into *Dudom*.

In the early 1960s, absences from labour requisition duties were noted by the government. To fill the absence, the Assembly decided that outstanding tax in kind could be converted into labour. This conversion had also been requested by the people's representatives. In 1960 *Dudom* was reconceived as wage labour, but it was still considered as a tax by both government and public.

## 5. The extent of mobilisation

Unlike *Ula*, *Dudom* was supposed to contribute to projects on a national scale, such as highway construction or creating facilities for the national army. It was not to be applied to regional work, such as the maintenance of prefectural fortresses or bridges. In contrast, people outside the targeted age range for *Dudom* were responsible for the refurbishment of prefectural fortress, called *Dzong*<sup>5)</sup> in *Dzongkha*, or the maintenance of communal facilities. Provision eight of article twenty-one of the sixteenth session read as follows:

(8) A turn wise labour force system was introduced for the purpose of meeting the

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5) *Dzong* is a building with two functions. It is part of the prefectural government (*Dongkhag*), and also a Buddhist monastery/temple. Some buildings formerly functioned as fortress with windowless walls and a watch tower. Each prefecture has a *Dzong* in their capital.

labour requirements for miscellaneous work in Dzongs, and for the maintenance of mule tracks and water canals. The labour force would comprise of persons below the age of 15 and between the ages of 56 and 60. However, the diseased and handicapped would be exempted. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21(8)]

The government and National Assembly attempted to confirm that *Dzongs* would receive enough labour to sustain functionality by establishing a sift system for the age group that was exempted from *Dudom*. However, in contradiction of provision eight, the National Assembly and the government also attempted to extract almost 1,000 labourers from the same age group for construction sites, streamed according to ability:

(15) A conscripted labour force system was formed of persons in the age group 15–16 and 56–60 for the purpose of husking rice in Dzongs. However, the respective Gups and Chimis were required to classify the three categories of this labour force according to their ability.

Miscellaneous: From the conscripted labour force for road construction, 1,000 labourers were to be sent to Punakha for river bank works. People owning horses would have to bear the responsibility of transporting government materials. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (15)]

In the next year's Assembly, however, an article suggested that the plan to send the exempted age group to construction sites had not been a success:

MATTER RELATING TO CEILING OF AGES FOR *DUDOM*: The Assembly noted that the people below 17 and above 55 had to provide labour for other related works in their respective Dzongkhags, as those age groups were unable to provide labour for the above works. Therefore, the Assembly resolved that henceforth all road construction including the river protection works of Punakha should be made through *Chunidom* in summer and *Dudom* in winter. However, under no

circumstances should the *Dudom/Chunidom* labourers absent themselves from road construction work for the sake of carrying loads or other internal works. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 2]

In the seventeenth session, the Assembly decided that “the people below 17 and above 55...were unable to provide labour for the above works” (*Dudom*). “The river protection works of Punakha” were also included in *Dudom* by this point.

While eligible workers were sent to the front lines for national development, children and the aged were left behind to keep traditional communal works going, so the function of rural administration could be maintained. Nevertheless, the Assembly and the government always had given *Dudom* (national development work) priority over communal works for rural administration and village societies.

In the resolution above, an alternative labour force, *Chunidom*, had made a sudden appearance, but explanation about what the system entailed needed to wait until future sessions.

## 6. New disciplines

During the early 1960s, the government attempted to implement rules to discipline workers at a national level. The workers were gathered from different regions throughout the country. As we still see in the cultural and linguistic variety of current Bhutanese society, people at the construction sites spoke different languages and sometimes had conflicting customs. Since this was the first national-scale development programme of the country, the administrators were required to implement an alternative management scheme to organize the large labour population. At the sixteenth session in 1961, 15 provisions for *Dudom* were introduced. A few items related to punctuality:

MATTER RELATING TO ROAD CONSTRUCTION AND MOBILIZATION OF LABOURERS: (1) Whoever failed to report to work in time would be penalized accordingly. A labourer who was not replaced by his substitute as per the labour

force system and found absent from the day of his end-of-term would not be penalized while working for his substitute. However, the labourers who could not report in time for replacement as substitutes would be made to work one day more for every 2 days absent. Those who could not report in time owing to sudden unavoidable circumstances like illness, death in the family etc. would be exempted from the penalties provided they produced satisfactory explanation and certificate from their respective gups and chimis. (2) It was decided that the absentees of the present and past years would be made to work at the road construction site for a period equal to the number of days absent, up to the 20th of the 8th months of the current year. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (1–2)]

Concrete penalties were implemented to discipline people to be punctual. If people could not reach at the construction site in time to begin their shift and replace a previous worker, the predecessor would be requested to continue the work. In another case, if a worker failed to report in time, they would be requested to work extra days in proportion to the number of days in arrears. Also, if the prescribed number of working days was not met by a labourer, a carry-forward system meant that the balance could be paid by the same labourer in the next year's road construction as we can see in provision three of the same article:

(3) In case the services of a labourer was required for some urgent work after his prescribed term was over, he would be detained for 2 weeks, for which a certificate would be issued, and the number of extra days for which he worked would be accounted in the coming year. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (3)]

In addition, the police authority was required to arrest those refusing to work under *Dudom*. The provision eleven of the article twenty-one says:

(11) Those refusing to report to work under the conscripted labour force would be

brought to work under Police escort. It was decided to pay T.A. to the police in such cases from the amount being kept with the labour officer as Labourers Welfare Fund. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (11)]

While the government and the Assembly tried to strengthen the discipline of *Dudom*, the government also introduced compensation to meet people's demands for health and welfare:

(5) In case of the death of labourers at the construction site, they would be compensated by the government. It would be the responsibility of the concerned labour officer to reach the injured or sick labourers to the nearest hospital. Labourers who, instead of availing of the government's medical facilities, chose to go home would not be compensated by the government. A compensation of Nu. 2,000 would be paid to the bereaved family of a labourer killed in duty. Labourers dying from illness would be dealt with in accordance to the previous rules. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (5)]

The Assembly and the government agreed to pay compensation of 2000 ngultum for labourers who died during construction, and labour officers were responsible for taking the injured or sick to the nearest hospital.

The compassion and care that the government displayed in provision five was strategically placed, given the following provisions emphasised the necessity for conscripted labour:

(9) The members of the Assembly re-iterated that development activities had considerably increased from the current year. In order to meet the requirement of labourers, people in the age group of 17-55 were enlisted in the conscripted labour force (*Dudom*). The labour force system was specifically formed for the purpose of development activities, and those in it would not be made to work in other miscellaneous works in the Dzong. Under the system two out of every 6 people

were required to be present for work.

In order to safeguard the security of the nation and promote its socio-economic development, it was felt necessary to develop economic infrastructure, like modern methods of farming, preservation of forests, basic health care, etc. To undertake the above it was imperative that the people worked hand in hand with the government in a spirit of dedication and service, while continuing to maintain the sanctity of the kingdom's religious traditions. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (9)]

The necessity of the development of economic infrastructure including basic health care had been stressed: therefore, the provision continued, the Bhutanese people had to cooperate with the government and work with selfless devotion.

## 7. The exemption lists

After *Dudom* was implemented, various problems appeared regarding the distribution of labourers and labour shortages in society. Initially, the government made no exceptions in the labour requisition, apart from age and gender restrictions. People (male) from all levels of society and professions were included. In session sixteen in 1961 and session seventeen in 1962, the government became aware of a dysfunction in society in various fields such as public administration, national defence and the social organisation of the country due to the penetration of *Dudom*. To normalise such a situation, a number of special exceptions from the labour requisition were made in the Assembly.

Some of these exemptions were described in article twenty-one of session sixteen. Two provisions out of fifteen suggested the existence of certain exemptions from the conscripted force. Local leaders or skilled labours, such as carpenters were also given the right to exempt others (such as family members or assistants):

(10) A Gup or a Chimi from a locality where the government realized taxes in the form of cash would be entitled to three persons enlisted in the conscripted labour



force for his personal use, whereas a Gup or a Chimi from a locality where tax in cash was not realized would be entitled to four. However, these 3 or 4 persons would have to be from his own household and not from another's. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (10)]

(14) In case a carpenter or a mason employed by the government was paid at the prevailing rate, he would be entitled to only two persons from the conscripted labour force, whereas if he was paid more than the prevailing rate, only he himself would be exempted from the conscripted labour force. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1961: Session 16, Article 21 (14)]

During session seventeen in 1962, several further exemptions were discussed in the National Assembly. Firstly a special exemption was made for soldiers on leave after completing ten months' training, or after being posted to the border area:

MATTER RELATING TO LEAVE FOR ARMY PERSONNEL: The army personnel going home on leave for two months after completion of their 10 months training at Tenchholing or after having been stationed at border posts during their leave period would be exempted from 'Dudom'. Such personnel should however produce leave permit for two months from the army authorities. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 3]

This article shows that, until this resolution was passed soldiers might have been chosen for *Dudom* work even if they were on leave.

Article twenty-five suggests that the 'orderlies' [*sic*] of government servants were also exempted from *Dudom*. This indicates that government servants had been exempted from *Dudom* in the first place, and that now their attendants were being taken into consideration:

MATTER RELATING TO DUDOM FOR GOVERNMENT SERVANTS: In view of

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the fact that government servants in different Dzongkhags shouldered great responsibilities of the Royal Government, their orderlies were henceforth exempted from Dudom. However, private orderlies engaged for commercial benefit would be required to provide 'Dudom'. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 25]

Exemptions were also given to certain occupations. One was 'businessman'

MATTER RELATING TO BUSINESSMAN: Businessman both from the government and the public would be exempted from providing Dudom. However, shop-keepers and those working in private companies would be required to provide 'Dudom'. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 26]

Another category were the herdsmen of livestock belonging to the government:

MATTER RELATING TO DUDOM FOR HERDSMEN: The herdsman and their assistants looking after flocks of government cattle would be exempted from 'Dudom' whereas herdsmen working for private parties would be required to provide 'Dudom'. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 27]

Skilled workers such as carpenters, masons and painters were also exempted from *Dudom* contribution, although they were requested to contribute to the annual maintenance works for *Dzong* without payment. However, their entitlement to exempt others was cancelled.

MATTER RELATING TO THE WAGES OF SKILLED LABOURERS: Skilled labourers such as carpenters, masons and painters were not paid wages for the annual Dzong maintenance works. However, they were paid wages for other government works and their Dudom was also exempted. It was now clarified that henceforth only they themselves would be exempted from Dudom and not, as

previously, their thencha<sup>6)</sup>. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 31]

For these exemptions, the priority was to normalise the country's administrative functions and national security functions. For the economy, this meant exempting 'businessman', who played an irreplaceable role in the county's development. Another priority was to safeguard cattle as governmental property and as an essential resource for the royal family. Skilled workers played a vital role in housing construction in the village and repairing the *Dzongs* and local monasteries. They were thus to be retained in the local community.

When the road construction project was fully underway, many practical problems appeared relating to *Dudom*. Beside the exemptions mentioned above, the assembly also discussed families that were unable to contribute labour. In the initial structure of *Dudom* in 1958, "women and persons below the age of 17 and above 55 would be exempted from the said labour force system" [Royal Government of Bhutan 1958: Session 12, Article 4], but article twenty-nine of seventeenth session demonstrated that women had also been requisitioned for *Dudom*: the exemption of a woman who had given birth to a child was particularly raised:

MATTER RELATING TO FEMALE LABOUR: In case there were fewer than three persons in a household and the woman in that family gave birth to a child, the mother would be exempted from providing "Dudom" for at least 6 months after delivery and four months before delivery. However, it was clarified that the request for exemption in other replacement would not be entertained. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 29]

This maternity leave from *Dudom* applied to women from households of fewer than three

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6) The term '*Thencha*' was not explained well in the National Assembly records. From the context, the word appears to refer to servant or assistant, or the entitlement to receive services or supports from servants or assistants.

people. This shows concern about smaller households. A household with many children to feed, and poor households, were also objects of exemption:

MATTER RELATING TO EXEMPTION OF LABOUR FOR ROAD CONSTRUCTION: It was decided that the public affected by poverty and having many children to feed may be exempted from the labour works by the C.L.O. after proper investigation. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1962: Session 17, Article 30]

The system of exemption from *Dudom* was at first designed to support security, administration and economy at the national level. Then administrative and economical functions at the local levels were considered. Besides skilled workers such as carpenters, *Gups* were exempted from *Dudom*. In article thirty-seven of session nineteen, the *Gup* was supplied with clerks to assist them in their duty and entitled to exempt two people from their family from *Dudom* work:

MATTER RELATING TO THE APPOINTMENT OF A CLERK FOR GUPS: With regards to the requirements of clerks by the Gups of Eastern Bhutan, it was resolved that with effect from the 5th month of the Iron Ox Year, the Gups would be eligible for the following entitlements. In areas where the payment of taxes by cash had been introduced, the Gups would be paid a sum of Nu.300/- per year, and two thenchas and himself would be exempted from *Dudom*. In areas where the payment of taxes in cash had not yet been introduced, the gups would be exempted *Dudom* along with three thenchas. It was clarified that this exemption was only applicable to persons residing in the same house as the *Gup*. As Gups in western Bhutan were permitted to keep a clerk from the *Dudom*, the gups of Eastern Bhutan would also be entitled to the same. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1963: Session 19, Article 36]

The list of exemptions kept expanding during the following years. At article twelve of session twenty, the maintenance of the functions of religious institutions was taken into

consideration. The exemption list expanded to include those in charge of herding cattle and operating mills for Buddhist institutions:

MATTER RELATING TO THE EXEMPTION OF DUDOM: The herdsmen and mill operator for the monk bodies would be exempted from Dudom in the following manner. However, only those herdsmen who were with the livestock would be exempted from Dudom, and the exemption would not be extended to anybody else. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1964a: Session 20, Article 12].

The next session also exempted attendants of *Lama* (high priests) and *Lopon* (teachers). This resolution suggests that those high-ranking Buddhist monks had been exempted from Dudom. Article six of the twenty-first session read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO EXEMPTION FROM DUDOM: Retired government officials who had served the government satisfactorily along with their spouses and one orderly, would be exempted from Dudom. One ‘Tozay’ of Lamas and Lopens would also be entitled to exemption from Dudom. However, those terminated from government service would be enlisted into Dudom according to their ages. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1964b: Session 21, Article 6]

In this way, while the assembly and the government initially aimed to preserve the secular administrative function, the religious functions of the monasteries were considered later. However, expansion of the exemption list for *Dudom* ended in 1964, because the government and the National Assembly decided to introduce *Chunidom* instead of *Dudom* as a way of organising a conscripted labour force.

## 8. Conclusion

Article one of the twenty-first session read as follows:

MATTER RELATING TO CHUNIDOM: It was decided that the system of Dudom would be applied throughout the country till the 30th day of the 12th month of the Wood Dragon Year. Thereafter, the Chunidom system would be introduced with effect from the 1st day of the 1st month of the Wood Snake Year. The labour force required for the re-construction of the Thimphu Dzong would be met out of this labour force system and the rest of the labourers would be used for the construction of schools and hospitals, and to meet the requirement of various Dzongkhags. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1964b: Session 21, Article 1]

*The Chunidom* system had been established by 1964, although detailed explanation about the structure of the system had not been mentioned in any resolutions of the National Assembly. Before article one of the twenty-first session, a resolution relating to *Chunidom* was released:

MATTER RELATING TO CHUNIDOM: As explained by the members, His Majesty was pleased to command that, to facilitate sowing, instead of Dudom, Chunidom would be introduced for two months during the 5th and 6th month of every year. [Royal Government of Bhutan 1964a: Session 20, Article 11]

By examining these two articles, it is possible to tell that the intended character of *Chunidom* should have been less harsh than *Dudom* for people in Bhutan in terms of frequency and duration, and it should also have been less far from their home in terms of distance. Therefore, farmers might continue sowing the field in their own village, and communities could rely on more labourers for the development of their own area.

The *Dudom* system that was imposed in the late 1950s was harsh in terms of distance, duration of work and working environment. Many people must have died on the construction sites; hence the National Assembly kept raising the issue, and the government eventually showed care and compassion towards the needy and weak.

Until the time of the second King of Bhutan, kings wielded the power of sparing or taking the lives of their people. Harsh slave labour was imposed on the king's subjects,

and physical abuse was doled out to his opponents. However, when the modernisation of the country became unavoidable, the king was required to spare the lives of his subjects, preservation of health and promoting the welfare of the public became the duty of the ruler. Once modern society was born, it made no sense to take its members lives; instead, it was important to make better use of them, because by losing its components, society lost a part of its life.

From the viewpoint of the King and the government, which had begun to attempt forming a modern nation state from this period, the value and legitimacy of the ruler could be guaranteed only by the public. This public had to be kept alive, otherwise their loss would affect national resources.

The labour requisition system of Bhutan between the late 1950s and the early 1960s was a very different experience for the people, and the government, from the previous *Ula* system. The *Ula* work of carrying loads gradually became unnecessary, because national highways slowly reached rural areas. Although the labour for *Dudom* had destroyed communal and religious functions in rural areas, those functions began to recover following the exemption system for the monks, *Gups* and carpenters. By the end of 1964<sup>7)</sup>, this *Dudom* system had finally reached its end.

The alternative of *Chunidom* replaced it to continue national works in 1965. According to the resolutions of National Assembly, *Chunidom* was also converted into the other form later. Indeed, the Bhutanese labour requisition system continued until the 2000s in various forms.

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7) To be precise. it's the 30th day of the 12th month of the Wood Dragon Year in Bhutanese calendar, equivalent to 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1965.

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