

**A Story of *Drukyl's* Journey Toward an Enlightened Bureaucracy:
Review of *Growing Up with Modern Bhutan* by Dasho Kunzang Wangdi
(2025)**

Dorji Wangchuk^{1*}

Introduction

Growing Up with Modern Bhutan is the memoir of Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, a highly respected figure in the nation's modern history. This 553-page book recounts the author's journey from a humble village upbringing to assuming a pivotal role in shaping Bhutan's historic institutions and governance. Set against the backdrop of Bhutan's gradual modernization from the 1960s onward, the insights from the book extend beyond the author's life and career. It presents a broader perspective on *Drukyl's* journey of transformation under three successive monarchs: the Third King, the Great Fourth, and the People's King.

As the title suggests, the author's early life and career unfolded at a critical juncture when Bhutan was navigating rapid modernization amid acute shortages of manpower and resources. To keep pace with regional development and global advances, the country initially relied heavily on external financial and technical support from neighbouring countries and international aid agencies. While timely and generous, the Royal Government of Bhutan recognized that a prolonged dependence on aid posed a serious threat to national sovereignty and risked delaying critical reforms and long-term development. Therefore, self-sufficiency and self-reliance remained top priorities throughout the reign of the Fourth King. Achieving these goals

^{1*} Assistant Lecturer, Centre for Academic Programmes, the Royal Institute of Management, Thimphu, Bhutan. Corresponding email: dorji_wangchuk@rim.edu.bt

required building robust national institutions, including the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC).

Yet, this formative era was marked by a strong ethos of duty, integrity, and service, which guided both institutions and civil servants. It was during this period that the author began his public career and later emerged as a key architect of modern Bhutan under the guidance of the visionary monarchs and the mentorship of early modern bureaucrats and *ponkhags*.

Accordingly, this review extends beyond a summary of a book to offer an analytical reflection on the gradual unfolding of Bhutan's early modernization and nation-building process. It is written with deep reverence for the benevolent monarchs and pioneering modern bureaucrats who served the country with utmost integrity, sacrifice, and dedication. It offers a critical reflection on Bhutan's early modernization and nation-building process as narrated through the memoir of one of its architects. In particular, through the insider's account, the review examines how the early challenges and steadfast endeavours of forefathers of modern Bhutan laid the foundation for His Majesty the King's contemporary vision of an Enlightened and Entrepreneurial Bureaucracy (E2B).

The Author and His Service to the Nation

Dasho Kunzang Wangdi was born in 1952 in Ura village, Bumthang. It was a Dragon Year that coincided with the enthronement of the "Father of Modern Bhutan," His Majesty the Third *Druk Gyalpo*. As a child of a *Zurpa* (non-taxpayer) household, the author's education fell to the state, an arrangement, which was then "treated like any other public obligation" (p. 15). This circumstance, however, proved fortuitous not only for the author himself but for the nation at large. Over the span of forty-three years (1977–2020), the author served the *Druk tsa-wa-sum* in various key roles with integrity, dedication, and foresight.

He began his public service in May 1977 with the mandatory six-month National Social Service in Trashigang. His first assignment, as the author recalls, was overseeing the Zangpazor–Ranthangwoong road construction. After National Social Service, he reported to

Drukyl's Journey Toward an Enlightened Bureaucracy

Lyonpo Jigme Y. Thinley, then an Officer on Special Duty at the Department of Manpower and Statistics, the precursor to today's RCSC. His first major assignment at the department was studying the reorganization of Bhutan's civil service, which led to the country's first retrenchment exercise in modern history.

For the next fifteen years, the author was involved in one of the most consequential administrative reforms in the country: the institutionalization of the RCSC. Barely three years into his public service, he was selected for a United Nations Fellowship to pursue a Master's degree in Public Administration at Pennsylvania State University. His thesis was titled *A Proposal for the Introduction and Installation of a Merit-Based Personnel Administrative System in His Majesty's Royal Government of Bhutan*. After earning his Master's degree, he returned to the department, where he played an instrumental role in institutionalising the RCSC, including drafting its Royal Charter, decreed on June 2, 1982. This marked the establishment of a centralized, merit-based personnel system.

After fifteen years of dedicated service at the RCSC, the author moved on to a series of prominent leadership positions. He served as Director at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (1993–1996), Director of the Royal Institute of Management (1996–2000), Auditor General (2000–2006), and then as Bhutan's first Chief Election Commissioner (2006–2015), where he served two consecutive terms during the country's historic shift to a democratic constitutional monarchy. Upon his appointment as Auditor General, he was conferred the Red Scarf (hence the title *Dasho*) by the Fourth King. In 2008, he received the *Druk Thuksey* (Heart Son of the Thunder Dragon) Medal. He concluded his formal public service at the Royal Research and Advisory Council (2015–2020).

Early Bureaucracy Through the Memoir

As the memoir reveals, Bhutan's transition from a traditional polity to a modern administrative state was neither abrupt nor effortless. It was a gradual, deliberate process undertaken amid severe resource constraints and institutional uncertainty. The early modern

bureaucracy of Bhutan was a site of experimentation, learning, and moral commitment.

Shortage of Manpower and Outsourcing Expertise

The first prominent theme that emerges from the memoir is Bhutan's navigation through developmental activities with limited resources and manpower. This constraint was evident in the early civil service delivery and composition. Recounting his early education in Chapter 2, the author notes, "all teachers except one were Indian nationals" (p. 23). During morning assemblies, the Indian National Anthem was sung alongside Bhutan's own, and Hindi was used as one of three primary mediums of instruction besides *Dzongkha*, the national language and English. While this reveals Bhutan's close ties with India and the visible Indian influence during early modernization, it also indicates Bhutan's heavy reliance on external human resources.

This dependence was even more pronounced within the civil service. The author notes, "Bhutan's civil service was largely composed of Indians, either working on deputation or directly recruited by various departments," accounting for nearly 99 percent of the workforce at one point (p. 115). Institutional capacity was thin: the RCSC started with only fifteen members (p. 100). The Royal Charter that founded the RCSC was drafted by the author in close collaboration with Mr. U. Ghosh from India, who was serving Bhutan on deputation, and the RCSC itself was modelled after India's Union Public Service Commission. Major institutional reforms in subsequent years, such as the revision of the Bhutan Civil Service Regulations, were undertaken with technical support from UNDP and other international experts. Similarly, the introduction of a cadre system in 1989 was carried out with assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

To address these shortages, the state relied heavily on foreign expertise and international volunteer programs. During the mid-1980s, the RCSC introduced a volunteer deployment system involving the United Nations Volunteers, Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, Volunteer Service Overseas (England), and the World University Service of Canada, among others (p. 108). Technical capacity was similarly supplemented. For instance, in 1987,

Drukyl's Journey Toward an Enlightened Bureaucracy

a firm from Kolkata was contracted to support early computerization efforts. Likewise, in the early 2000s, Bhutan outsourced expertise to the Canadian Government's International Development Research Centre to secure internet connectivity.

These outsourcing arrangements served not just as stopgap measures but as invaluable sites of institutional learning, capacity-building, and skills transfer. It was only in the late 1980s that this landscape began to shift, driven by an increasing number of Bhutanese entering the civil service following the completion of their university degrees at home and abroad. The memoir thus captures a critical transition from a heavy dependence on external aids to gradual national capacity expansion and institutional self-reliance.

Capacity Building

The second major theme in the memoir is the localization of capacity through deliberate investment in training programs. Recognizing that institutions could not mature without competent personnel, the RCSC spearheaded several foundational reforms, as discussed in the second half of Chapter 12. In 1983, the Civil Service Officers' Selection Examination was introduced to ensure merit-based recruitment. This was complemented by the Postgraduate Diploma in Public Administration (PGDPA) at RIM—a one-year, full-time program designed to prepare newly recruited civil servants for the Administrator Cadre. To make training more systematic, the RCSC conducted a comprehensive Training Needs Assessment, which culminated in Bhutan's first National Human Resource Development Plan. Training Rules and Regulations were introduced, and previously fragmented systems were streamlined to ensure coherence, coordination, and long-term planning. With the arrival of the first computers in 1985, the RCSC built an information system to manage ex-country training, which helped systematize training projections for personnel development.

The author's own UN Fellowship to pursue a Master's in Public Administration at Penn State indicates that individual capacity building was closely aligned with institutional needs. Beyond civil service administration, the author was also involved in establishing the Technical Education Cell in 1981 and the Institute of Traditional

Medical Sciences, underscoring Bhutan's holistic approach to human capital development. Later, as Auditor General and Chief Election Commissioner, *Dasho* continued to strengthen national capacity by engaging in global and regional forums, joining international organizations, signing memoranda of understanding, and facilitating the exchange of best practices. While these initiatives significantly strengthened the national human capital base, the memoir suggests that institutional capacity was ultimately forged through both formal training and practical engagement.

Learning-by-Doing Governance

The memoir offers a compelling lens through which to understand the learning-by-doing approach that defined governance during Bhutan's early modernization. Throughout his career, the author was entrusted with responsibilities for which he had no prior formal training. That required courage, humility, and a sustained willingness to learn. As a fresh literature graduate, the author began his public service by overseeing road construction under the National Social Service. This was an assignment entirely unrelated to his academic background. Upon joining the civil service, the author was soon tasked with studying the reorganization of the civil service itself, another pioneering institutional reform. These early assignments reveal that learning-by-doing was foundational to governance in the early modern days.

This approach would remain a defining feature of the author's career. In 1993, his appointment as Director at the Ministry of Trade and Industry marked another profound departure from his training and academic background; he recalls the role as "entirely new" and "daunting," given his limited background in economics, trade, and commerce (p. 129). Seven years later, similar discomfort and trepidation resurfaced when he was appointed Auditor General. Yet, in each instance, *Dasho* adapted through practice, consultation, and continuous institutional learning rather than formal expertise alone. His experiences demonstrate resilience, initiative, and ethical responsibility. The capacity to learn on the job, confront uncertainty, and build institutions in real time ultimately earned him the Red Scarf and national awards.

Drukyl's Journey Toward an Enlightened Bureaucracy

The 'learning-by-doing' approach to governance is most evident in the author's role as Bhutan's first Chief Election Commissioner. When His Majesty the Fourth King appointed him to this unprecedented position, entrusting him with the nation's first-ever democratic election, his response was, "I will try, Sir" (p. 281). This captures the humility, responsibility, and courage required to undertake such a novel task.

Conducting elections demanded far more than drafting laws; it required building institutions from the ground up. This involved educating a new electorate, delimiting constituencies, facilitating political parties, and operationalizing management systems. Virtually every component of the electoral framework had to be conceptualized, tested, and refined simultaneously. As the author notes in Chapter 16: "Recognizing the importance of continuous learning... [Election Commission of Bhutan] unceasingly pursued learning from our experiences to further refine the democratic process" (p. 310). For example, two rounds of mock elections were held, one for each house. During one of such sessions, it was revealed that voters favoured the colour yellow, associating it with the Monarchy (p. 309). This serendipitous finding led to a formal policy barring the use of specific colours in party logos to ensure neutrality.

This experiential approach to state-building reveals that the evolution of Bhutan's institutions and development in the early modernization epoch was marked by careful observation, deliberate learning, and corrective actions.

Civil Service Ethics

An equally noteworthy theme from the memoir is the strong civil service ethics during the early days of Bhutan's modernization. The early modern bureaucrats upheld a strong ethic of service, marked by duty, integrity, and sacrifice. The memoir illustrates how Bhutan's civil service was shaped not merely by rules and institutions but by values deeply rooted in responsibility to the nation. This experiential ethic reflects a broader culture of moral commitment that underpinned the early modernization of Bhutan's bureaucracy.

This ethic was formally nurtured early on. In 1977, Bhutan introduced its first Graduates' Orientation Programme to ease the

transition from student life to public service. This reflects what the author describes as “Bhutan’s growing confidence in the readiness of its citizens to assume greater responsibilities in governance” (p. 87). This moral grounding was further reinforced in 1983 through the introduction of the Oath of Service for entrants to the higher Administrative Cadre, presided over by His Holiness the *Je Khenpo*. The Oath became the moral and ethical anchor of public servants.

These values were further institutionalized through the Royal Charter of the RCSC, which articulated “a vision for a civil service or bureaucracy that would not tolerate spoils or patronage, but one that would promote and uphold fairness and justice, driven by motivated and determined personnel” (p. 99). Guided by His Majesty the Fourth *Druk Gyalpo*, the RCSC adopted the principle of maintaining a “small and compact, yet efficient civil service” (p. 103), emphasizing quality, integrity, and appropriate compensation over size.

The author exhibited these ideals throughout his service. For instance, as Director at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, he took firm action against entrenched practices of fronting and monopolization, drawing strong resistance and even threats. His subsequent transfer to RIM was widely rumoured to be the result of pressure from influential interests (p. 160). Nevertheless, he worked tirelessly to fulfil the Royal Vision and serve the greater good, unfettered by such rumours and menaces.

Sacrifice continued during his tenure as the first Chief Election Commissioner. In its initial days, the Election Commission of Bhutan operated from the author’s privately rented house. This reflects both institutional infancy and personal commitment. The scale of responsibility was immense, and the author recounts, half in jest yet revealingly, that young officials were asked to defer personal plans, including further studies and family commitments (Chapter 16). This request, as the author claims, was well-accepted by the colleagues and subordinates in the spirit of national service.

These chronicles in the memoir portrays public service in earlier days as a life’s calling that entailed personal restraint, moral courage, and collective sacrifice. The lived ethics of Bhutan’s early civil service underpin the values that His Majesty the Fifth King emphasizes for contemporary and future civil servants.

Reading the Memoir through the Royal Vision

During the 117th National Day address, His Majesty the King articulated his vision of an E2B: “The bureaucracy must be agile enough to keep up with the rapid changes and innovations arising from the GMC. Our goal is to create an Enlightened and Entrepreneurial Bureaucracy within the next 10 years.” This profound vision challenges civil servants to move beyond routine administrative roles and become proactive agents of innovation and development; adapt to technological change; improve efficiency, and foster an entrepreneurial spirit to achieve national aspirations.

The Royal Vision transcends mere administrative efficiency to emphasize ethical consciousness, innovation, and a deep sense of shared purpose. Although articulated in contemporary terms as guidance for the way forward, its spirit resonates strongly with Bhutan’s historical trajectory of state-building. The memoir offers a retrospective lens into the formative practices, values, and institutional experiments that quietly shaped Bhutan’s early civil service and laid the moral and structural foundations for the very vision His Majesty now articulates.

Enlightened leadership, as Oakley and Krug (1994) define it, is not just about the nobility of a vision a leader must possess but also about the ability to help an organization “accept ownership” of a shared vision (p. 19). An Enlightened Leader does not dictate direction but rather “inspire[s] and empower[s]” others to draw the common vision and work toward achieving it. Ultimately, this approach fosters a high-spirited, innovative culture where people are inspired to work toward shared success.

The enlightened dimension of this vision is deeply embedded in the very foundation of the RCSC. The Commission was institutionalized through the sacred Royal Charter, which envisioned “a bureaucracy that would not tolerate spoils or patronage [but would] promote and uphold fairness and justice” (p. 99). The introduction of the Oath of Service also reinforced this ethical grounding. Beyond formal structures, the enlightened aspect of governance was evident in the vision and deeds of successive monarchs and the bureaucrats of the early modernization period.

The author's public service adds depth to this aspect. His unfettered zeal to undertake unfamiliar and demanding roles, ranging from auditing and trade administration to electoral governance, is one clear instance. Restraint, discipline, ethics, and courage are evident throughout the memoir, particularly when confronting entrenched interests. As Director at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, for instance, the author took firm action against systemic practices of fronting and monopolization, inviting strong resistance and threats. The rumour that he had been "pushed out" of the position to another organization due to pressure from influential entities is revealing; and even more so is the fact that he confronted these challenges with fortitude and determination. Subsequently, in his capacity as Auditor General, he continued to serve without "fear, favour, or prejudice" (p. 252). Through such courageous deeds, the author demonstrated moral clarity and professional integrity, which are the defining traits of enlightened leadership.

Beyond bravery, enlightened leadership is found in duty, integrity, humility, and accountability. These traits emerge clearly from Chapter 9 onward. In Chapter 14, for instance, the author recounts addressing seemingly mundane issues, such as managing stray dogs on campus as Director of RIM. A more complex challenge involved resolving tensions with the local community, who perceived threats and encroachment when RIM was established at its current location. Addressing these concerns required sensitivity, dialogue, and moral judgment rather than the executive order. He navigated this through a thoughtfully designed initiative, "Living in Harmony in the Community," during the Silver Jubilee Commemoration of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, ensuring institutional development while maintaining healthy relationships with local stakeholders. This is testament not only of enlightened leadership but also of the entrepreneurialism in public service delivery that His Majesty calls for.

In the book, *The Entrepreneurial State*, Mazzucato (2023) argues that an entrepreneurial state requires "effective engagement of citizens to ensure that innovation and growth are fostered and that their results reflect the needs of the people they are for—and are seen to do so. The direction set by the state must resonate with citizens, and

they must be engaged in solutions development, as contributors to bottom-up experimentation and to ensure solutions are widely adopted and benefit from public support” (pp. xxviii–xxix).”

Conflict resolution with residents as Director at the RIM is one small piece of evidence. More of this aspect was seen in the author’s leadership in transitioning Bhutan to the democratic constitutional monarchy as the first Chief Election Commissioner.

The memoir also portrays an entrepreneurialism within governance in the early modern days. Confronted with acute shortages of manpower, infrastructure, and institutional experience, Bhutan’s early civil servants have had to improvise and innovate. The account of improvisations during national service, the introduction of merit-based personnel systems, the development of training frameworks, and the design of electoral processes from the ground up, all demonstrate initiative, creativity, and adaptive problem-solving. Institution-building involved trial and error, learning by doing, and the courage to reform. This deeply resonates with Mazzucato’s (2023) argument that the public sector, just like business organisations, must be given space for “experimentation, exploration, and trial and error” (p. xxvi).

The account of capacity-building efforts also demonstrates entrepreneurialism, aligning with Mazzucato’s (2023) call for dynamic public sector capabilities, tools, and institutions, and hence investment in state capacity building. Capacity building, as detailed in section 3.2, was seen as the investment to the nation’s future. In this sense, entrepreneurial governance emerges not in a commercial context but as the capacity to create, adapt, and take calculated risks in pursuit of the public good. Literally, during his tenure as Director of RIM, *Dasho* was involved not only in shaping the institute’s foundational academic content but also in planning and developing its physical infrastructure.

At the same time, the memoir reveals that promoting entrepreneurship itself was recognized as a state responsibility rather than being left solely to private enterprise. This aligns with Mazzucato (2023) as she argues for the state’s role in “setting a clear direction and orienting these industrial strategy investments around bold social goals” (p. xxvii). “Innovation results from the public and private

sectors working together, and states have a responsibility to maximize the public value of these collaborations” (Mazzucato, 2023, p. xxviii).

By the early 1990s, this understanding had begun to shape policy and institutional design. During his tenure at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, concerted efforts were made to foster entrepreneurship through Business Opportunity Workshops, the establishment of Entrepreneurship Development Programs and loan schemes, and the creation of an Entrepreneurship Promotion Centre within the Ministry. Under this framework, the Comprehensive Entrepreneurship Course was launched to build skills, confidence, and enterprise among Bhutanese citizens. These initiatives suggest that the entrepreneurial mindset was deliberately embedded within the purview of public service, thereby positioning the state not merely as a regulator but as an enabler of innovation, self-reliance, and economic participation.

In retrospect, the author’s service, rendered under the farsighted guidance of the Great Fourth *Druk Gyalpo* and later the People’s King, represents a formative chapter in the making of Bhutan’s civil service. Alongside other dedicated leaders, colleagues, and subordinates, he helped lay the moral and institutional foundations for the Royal Vision of an E2B for Bhutan’s future.

Continuity in Transformation

The author began his service to the nation by overseeing road construction in the remote eastern region; it was a task that symbolically and practically bridged the country’s past isolation with its aspirations for the future. Three decades later, he assumed the role of the first Chief Election Commissioner of the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy, transitioning from his position as the last Auditor General under the monarchical system. In this sense, the author’s professional journey mirrors the broader national transition by embodying the linkage between tradition, modernization, and forward-looking governance.

The memoir underscores that the evolution of the civil service has been, and continues to be, a dynamic and ongoing process. His Majesty’s call for an E2B is therefore not a declaration of

accomplishment but a renewed mandate to deepen reforms, strengthen ethical and professional values, foster innovation, and continuously adapt institutions to emerging national and global challenges. Thus, the memoir presents a brief account of the foundational phase in this ongoing journey. It documents the institutional, ethical, and professional groundwork upon which future generations must now build. The Royal Vision is the call for extension, refinement, and elevation of the trajectory that early civil servants like the author initiated.

Relevance for Today's Civil Servants

The memoir offers lessons for contemporary and future civil servants. First, it serves as a repository of institutional memory; it reminds civil servants of today that many systems now taken for granted were forged through uncertainty, imperfect conditions, cautious judgment, and personal sacrifice. This is particularly relevant in an era of rapid technological, social, and geopolitical change, where better systems, higher remuneration, and ideal working environments are often assumed as norms rather than recognized as outcomes of sustained effort.

Equally noteworthy is the book's lesson on adaptability and resilience in the face of uncertainty. The career journey of the author shows that effective public service delivery requires stepping into unfamiliar arenas, learning under pressure, and responding creatively to evolving challenges. Unlike earlier generations who navigated scarcity and institutional infancy, contemporary civil servants may encounter fewer material constraints but greater psychological, professional, and ethical pressures. The author's experiences demonstrate that resilience is not merely endurance but the ability to persist with purpose, discipline, and commitment even when outcomes are uncertain. This capacity to remain flexible and open to learning is increasingly vital as Bhutan navigates through complex global issues and major transformations.

Above all, the memoir reaffirms the primacy of service. Nation-building, as the memoir repeatedly demonstrates, transcends narrow job descriptions and individual ambition; it is about a collective

responsibility that requires ethical restraint, moral courage, and a willingness to step beyond comfort zones in service of the greater good.

Conclusion

Growing Up with Modern Bhutan by *Dasho* Kunzang Wangdi is a reflective account of the evolution of Bhutan's civil service at a critical historical juncture, one that now stands on the threshold of a renewed phase of transformation. Through the life and service of the author, the memoir documents the formative struggles, ethical foundations, and adaptive practices that have shaped the country's governance institutions. When read through the lens of His Majesty's Vision, the narrative emerges as a compelling testament to the values and institutional ethics that underpin an E2B. The book reminds readers that such a bureaucracy is neither built overnight nor brought into being through proclamation alone. Rather, it is forged through decades of service, sacrifice, learning, and institutional progress, guided by unique Bhutanese values of *tha-damtshi*. In this sense, the memoir is not merely a record of what has been achieved but also a reflection on responsibility, a salient call for the present generation of civil servants to carry forward this legacy with renewed commitment, innovation, and purpose for future generations.

References

- Oakley, E. & Krug, D. (1994). *Enlightened Leadership: Getting to the Heart of Change*. A Fireside Book.
- Mazzucato, M. (2023). *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs Private Sector Myths*. Penguin Books.
- Wangdi, K. (2024). *Growing Up with Modern Bhutan*. Cho Sid Public Policy Publication and Studies.