

Oxford educated 'prince charming' new Bhutan king

From 'prince charming' to becoming the king of Bhutan, the sudden transition to monarchy of 26-year-old Oxford educated Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has left the tiny Himalayan kingdom stunned.

Former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck in a hush-hush royal decree handed over the reins of Bhutan to his eldest son Jigme Khesar who assumed office Thursday as the fifth ruler in the Wangchuck dynasty that came to power in December 1907.

Born to Queen Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, the third of the four wives of the former king, Jigme Khesar was drawn to managing the state of affairs quite early in age after he completed his basic education in Bhutan before moving to the US for further studies.

A bachelor, the new king studied at the Cushing Academy and the Wheaton College in Massachusetts before graduating from Magdalen College, Oxford University, where he completed the Foreign Service Programme and M. Phil studies in Politics.

'The new king was found to be taking keen interest in the welfare of the nation for the last couple of years. He is a man with a strong personality and is very popular among the people,' a Bhutanese foreign ministry official who wished not be identified said by telephone from Thimphu.

The oldest among 10 children - a younger sister and brother and also four half-sisters and three half-brothers - the new king was hailed as 'prince charming' by the international media when he visited Thailand recently to attend the anniversary celebration of the Thai King.

'His charming and suave personality had sent the Thai girls crazy and even in Bhutan people endearingly refer to him as prince charming. I had seen him once and found him to be a man with a vision like his father,' Y. Penjor, a retired government official, told IANS by telephone from Thimphu.

During the past one year after he was officially announced to take over the reins from his father, Jigme Khesar had endeared himself to people in Bhutan, a predominantly Buddhist nation.

'I have every confidence that there will be unprecedented progress and prosperity for our nation in the reign of our fifth king,' the former king said in the royal decree.

Apart from the confidence expressed by his father about his capabilities, the common Bhutanese too repose faith in his abilities to run the nation until the first general elections in 2008 when the kingdom shifts from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy.

'There is no doubt about his capabilities. We are sure the new king would be able to take the kingdom forward and ensure the slogan of our beloved former king of 'gross national happiness' adhered to in letter and spirit,' Ugyen Dorjee, a businessman, said.

The transition began five years ago when the former king handed over the powers of daily governance to a council of ministers and empowered the national assembly to force a royal abdication if three-quarters of its membership backed the motion.

Bhutan in 2004 year unveiled a 34-point constitution and the same was sent to some 530,000 citizens for their views. The constitution is expected to be ratified after a referendum.

Once adopted, it replaces a royal decree of 1953 giving the monarch absolute power.

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