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Understanding Gross National Happiness in the Realm of Buddhism

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Abstract:

Bhutan is a very small country with an area of approximately 4000¹ square kilometers. Geographical location of Bhutan is landlocked in nature that isolates it from the rest of the world. Although Bhutan has become a multi-religious society in the 21st century, Mahayana Buddhism is still a state religion and subsequently prominent in the Bhutanese society. Buddhism is deeply ingrained in the society and the culture of Bhutanese people. For a society whose culture is so imbibed with Buddhism, it is quite natural for its people to be very religious. Bhutan has been able to sustain its goals for spreading 'happiness' throughout the country with the formulation of the concept of Gross National Happiness in 1972 by fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuk. In this paper the philosophy behind Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness and the Buddhist principles which recognizes the need to balance material well-being with spiritual are discussed. This paper has followed the descriptive and analytical method to analyse the Philosophy of Gross National Happiness, relied up on Buddhist principles in Bhutan. Along with available secondary literature the empirical data has been a major source to write this paper. Personal visit to Bhutan for collecting firsthand information in the forms of public opinions and interviews has been appropriately collected and analysed.

Keywords: *Bhutan, gross national happiness, Buddhism, public policy*

1. Introduction

The people of Bhutan are very religious; they would not do anything without the command of religion. Every single incident from birth to death is associated with religion and all the customs related to them have a religious base. According to Buddhist principles, most of the customs are derived from the Buddhist ethics like, compassion, freedom, spirituality, peace and happiness, friendship. The Bhutanese culture which took shape under heavy Buddhist influence has many unique features, out of which three— happiness, gender equity, and environmental conservation are of particular importance.¹The concept has been solely laid upon the teachings of Buddha, which say that the happiness is not just dependent upon the materialistic things alone but also depends on spiritual and emotional satisfaction of the individual.GNH has been the central developmental philosophy of Bhutan.²The concept of Gross National Happiness, aims at achieving a holistic development of the country and has led to the self-critical analysis of the conventional understanding of development (of any country), which has often been closely tied up with economic development.

2. Understanding of Gross National Happiness

Gross National Happiness in Bhutan is based up on Buddhist principle which recognizes the requirement to balance material well-being with spiritual, emotional and cultural well-being of the individual. In fact, the core idea behind the concept can be reiterated from the words of the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk 'Gross National Happiness is more than Gross National Product.'³These words are reflective of the fact that in Bhutan, merely achieving economic development was not the objective of the development model of Bhutan instead equal importance was also to be given to the spiritual, emotional and cultural well-being of the Bhutanese people. In fact, the main aim of Bhutanese development policy is to maintain a balance between modernization, culture and tradition.

In other words, development in Bhutan is only a means but not an end in itself Bhutan's concept of GNH is based on the Buddhist principle of maintaining a fine balance between the extremes, which in simple words meant 'neutral, upright, and centered' policy,⁴ but it does not mean mediocrity.⁵ In reality, middle path aims for the superior performance by taking a balanced view. For instance, Buddha was able to attain enlightenment, or was able to realize the ultimate truth through this path. Put in Bhutanese development context, the middle path means achieving the goal of sustainable development. The main characteristics of 'middle path' are molded into four folds: balance between materialism and spiritualism; focus on specific resource potentials for development; distribution of responsibilities and integrated management.⁶

3. Philosophical Perspective of GNH

To conceptualize Gross National Happiness, scholars have pointed out happiness as the important element of GNH. Therefore, questions have been raised, whether it is necessary to define happiness and if so, how it should be defined in the context of GNH. The GNH approach somewhat defies the orthodox western development model, which is based on materialistic values. As a result, this unique concept sparked international debate among GNH scholars. Today the debate rests on three key issues; conceptualizing, quantifying/measuring, and operationalization of GNH.

A few schools of thought have emerged concerning this issue; one school of thought takes the position of the philosophical perspective and the other school has taken the empirical analytical approach of defining and measuring GNH. The first route aims at happiness itself. Some take on board 'individual happiness' as an important determinant of GNH just as 'product' is considered in case of conventional GDP. Happiness is generally understood as subjective well-being of state of mind of an individual. They believe happiness can be measured, as there is firm empirical methodology developed to measure subjective well-being. According to Dorji, GNH; it has been derived by replacing 'product' in GDP with 'happiness'. He argues that GNH can be defined similar to GDP, which could be 'the sum total of individual per capita happiness that can constitute collective happiness or GNH.^{vii}

On the other hand, the empirical approach stresses on the societal determinants of happiness, it emphasizes the need to provide fair and equal opportunities.^{viii} Adding to the notion of equal opportunities, Mancall discusses the concept of 'GNH State' where by state 'assumes primary responsibility for the creation of a society in which the individual's progress towards enlightenment is not impeded by unnecessary suffering, material or mental. This suffering, according to Mancall, can be avoided by ensuring that all citizens obtain adequate livelihood through equal distribution of wealth.^{ix} However, McDonald, another scholar remarks that, although there is evidence showing a positive correlation between happiness and material wealth, beyond a certain threshold economic growth does not translate into individual happiness. Similarly, below a certain level of development, poverty reduction does not make any difference.^x On this basis the state of environment or ecology cannot be the measure of GNH.

Buddhist economists, like Payutto (1998) and Zadek (1993), argue that in a Buddhist society the lifestyle is strongly influenced by the Buddhist way of life, which is based on the principles of the 'Noble Eightfold Path' preached by The Buddha. Schumacher argues that Right to Livelihood, the fifth path, touches upon economic aspects of Buddhist life and forms the basis of economic principles.^{xi} It embraces the relationship between three interconnected aspects of human existence: human beings, society and the natural environment. Maintaining the balance among these enhances the quality of life for the individual, for society and for the environment.^{xii} In essence, the Buddhist perspective is that development is a holistic process, which should be directed to meeting the material, social and spiritual needs of human beings.^{xiii} The Bhutanese approach to development is strongly rooted in the Buddhist system of beliefs, values, and custom. So, Bhutanese political system is closely interlinked to its religious history.^{xiv} GNH as such should be linked to Buddhist philosophy to capture the spiritual dimension.^{xv} So, GNH has been theoretically debated and discussed by several scholars and in the mindsets of all these debates; the core concern would be the practicability or the operationalization of the concept of GNH.

4. Implementation of GNH

Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) has devised nine dimensions for assessing GNH. The nine dimensions are selected on normative grounds, and are equally weighted, each dimension is considered to be relatively equal in terms of intrinsic importance as a component of gross national happiness. It also integrates objective realities and subjectivity (what people feel about their own lives). The nine dimensions are: (1) Psychological Well-being, (2) Cultural diversity and resilience, (3) Time Use, (4) Governance, (5) Community Vitality, (6) Living Standard, (7) Ecological Diversity, (8) Health, and (9) Education.^{xvi} These domains have a number of indicators for each of these dimensions and the indicators tend to focus at a personal and subjective level. The information that the GNH index reveals are used by the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), which is the planning branch of the government to construct policies to promote GNH. So, the GNHC with the information provided by the GNH index; tends to channelize the resources to the areas and issues where they are most needed.

5. Execution and Challenges

The challenge for Bhutan is to champion the vision and rationale behind the concept of GNH. In order to execute and achieve the set objectives of GNH, focus needs to be made on the four pillars of GNH. In order to ensure self-reliance through economic growth and development, the measures adopted by the state to uplift the minimum standard of living of the Bhutanese seems problematic, as 8.2 percent of its population lives below poverty line in 2017 and youth unemployment rate quadrupled from 2.2 percent to 9.9 percent (ADB 2020).^{xvii} So, one of the pervading issue of Bhutan, to be tackled by GNH is poverty. Furthermore, GNH also aims at forest protection (72 percent of land is covered by forests) but on the other hand this would affect the already inadequate agricultural development of Bhutan, as less land available for cultivation and rural development. Indeed, 87 percent of the population depends on 7.7 percent arable land. So, this would then increase the rate of poverty further.^{xviii}

One of the major challenges among many would be the building of hydro-power projects which has become one of the main sources of economy for Bhutan, but at the same time this also meant the exploitation of the natural resources like rivers and forest. So then how would Bhutan be able to strike a balance between environmental conservation and economic development as the balancing of the two could challenge the objectives of GNH.

Furthermore, GNH also aims at promoting a harmonious culture but this aspect of GNH stands challenged due to the policy of 'One Nation, One People' which promoted a strong sense of identity to the Bhutanese culture, for example dress code, language, and religion. Such a policy has triggered ethnic resentment and disharmony by the Lhotsampas (Nepali ethnic community living in southern Bhutan). With such a situation the objective of cultural harmony that GNH aims at, is definitely prone to several challenges.

Many of the institutional and legislative structures necessary to ensure good governance in Bhutan have been in place for less than 10 years. A major initiative on the government's restructuring and democratic reforms occurred in 1998-1999 and the administrative decentralization process a few years later, in 2002. With the first local elections occurring in 2005 and the first election of a new National Assembly in 2008, it is relatively early to evaluate the efficiency of these newly established procedures and institutions. The second problem arises on who is to be held responsible for the successful implementation of GNH? Is it the government machinery and its representatives or the civil society or both accountable? Besides, the issue of accountability, the next issue to be addressed is the medium/ways for co-ordination between the stakeholders of GNH?

Other such issues that definitely deserve to be discussed is whether GNH is dictating its visionary objectives on the Bhutanese people and in the process are they able to provide to the people a free and open society? Does GNH shape institutions and policies, or is the GNH developed to justify and endorse existing institutions and policies? Though Bhutan is a homogeneous society in terms of race and religion, but along with Dzongkha, its official language, there are 19 different local dialects spoken, so to what extent can GNH be considered as representing the Bhutan's population as a whole?

6. Evaluation of Execution of GNH

A proper assessment of the working of GNH requires the identification of the various challenges that exist in the process of achieving the objectives of the GNH and the extent to which GNH has been able to successfully combat these challenging forces. A conventional understanding of poverty has been that of reducing income poverty. In other words, economic development has been understood as the only solution for alleviating poverty. But in the present contemporary context, poverty has varied dimensions like human poverty or capacity deprivation along with income poverty. It can be understood that poverty and development are to be inversely related but the irony is that faulty and rapid development could intensify the extent of poverty.^{xix}

Bhutan also has a strong nature conservation policy. This policy is firmly grounded in the principles of the country's development philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of achieving Gross National Happiness (GNH) over Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the firmly established ethos of conservation in Buddhism. Conservation is the central tenet of Buddhism which believes in preserving nature and the sanctity of life.^{xx} As a result, the importance of protecting nature in all its manifestations has permeated Bhutanese consciousness and has become integrated into the Bhutanese value system. Due to economic globalization and a media boom, however, the Bhutanese are now increasingly exposed to the Western lifestyle. This is creating tensions between the state, civil society, and the market. The state imposes a strict conservation policy, whereas the market and the civil society strive for more material wealth. The challenge facing the policy makers is how to create a balance in the development process. To this end, an environmental strategy called the middle path strategy has been adopted, the aim of which is to bring about balanced development by avoiding extremes in materialism on the one hand and environmentalism on the other.^{xxi}

The crucial environment challenge for Bhutan relates to the competing interests of conservation and human livelihoods that concern many local communities living in protected and national park areas. This is not made any easier by the fact that the country is hugely dependent on natural resources for sustaining its economy and the livelihoods of the majority of its people. Sustaining large protected areas and maintaining the extensive water and sanitation facilities already developed will require significant resources and capacity, both of which are severely limited in a least developed country like Bhutan. Thus, at the heart of this challenge lies the urgency of securing long term sustainable financing arrangements and capacity building without which past gains on the environmental front could be severely compromised.^{xxii} However, while the impetus behind modern environmental protection schemes may be spiritually influenced, specific environmental policy mechanisms and procedures are scientifically based, with influence from Western environmental paradigms. Environmental conservation broadly falls in line with Buddhist values; however environmental policies themselves in Bhutan may in fact challenge traditional and religious understandings of the environment. The government's overall policy objective for biodiversity conservation is to integrate nature conservation into economic development plans, with an emphasis on communities living within the protected areas and the buffer zones. The present analysis gives a brief background of the nature conservation policy, park management system, and the existing rules and regulations. Since the Forest Act of 1969, the basis of Bhutanese policies and laws pertaining to conservation have progressed from forest-based land management to sustained yield principles and approaches. The 1969 Forest Act focused on traditional forest protection and introduced user permits. The revised 1991 Forest Act recognized the need for systematic management of conservation areas and to consider the economic needs of the local communities living in and around the conservation areas. This Act declared all non-private forest land to be government-owned forest reserves. In 1995, the National Assembly decreed that 60 percent of the country would remain under forest cover for all time. The amended Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995 therefore mandated the establishment of protected areas and the management system. The act also requires that the conservation of biodiversity should be guided by conservation values and should benefit the Bhutanese people. Over the years, the government has issued several acts, regulations, and orders, which provide the legal framework for the measures taken by the park managements to achieve the conservation goals.^{xxiii}

7. Conclusion

Buddhism which was introduced in Bhutan in Seventh century has come a long way in Bhutan. Bhutan has gone through many phases in its history right from theocracy to the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in the year 2008. Now Bhutan has joined the growing number of democracies in the world. Bhutan has recently completed its third National Assembly Election on October 18, 2018. Countries all over the world focus upon GDP especially in order to measure the economic well-being of the people. In such forms of measurement and indexes, based only on monetary terms does not consider spiritual and emotional needs and the psychological well-being of the people. Bhutan is motivated by the Buddhist belief to achieve genuine happiness and has thus become till now, the only country in the world to officially follow the state of happiness. Today also, Bhutan's development policies and social and political institutions reflect Buddhist concerns for equality and compassion, particularly the sense of responsibility for maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering for all members of society. The government views happiness as a policy objective that can be achieved only by enhancing people's well-being. Gross National Happiness (GNH), measures the quality of a country in a more holistic way than the Gross National Product. It believes that the development of human society will take place when material and spiritual development occur side by side. The concept of GNH formally constitutes the key objective of national development and serves as the foundation for Bhutan's normative approach. The GNH concept squarely places the individual at the center of all development efforts and includes a multi-dimensional approach toward improving human well-being. It acknowledges that people are the real wealth of a nation and propounds that income alone cannot be the measure of all human endeavors; equal emphasis must be given to the spiritual, cultural and emotional needs of the people. Whatever means we imply to achieve our end-the end of happiness this calls for the balancing of our spiritual and material needs and the enlightenment of the individual.

There is some concern that the concept of GNH is merely an elitist ideal, held by the ruling class but alienated from the common man. Despite its seemingly recent origin, the term GNH is a mere popularization of deep-rooted philosophies that have been present in Bhutanese development since even before the modernization efforts that started in 1960's. In spite of this, there are still discrepancies in how different people view and understand the concept of GNH. While some view GNH as an enlightened personal philosophy other are more critical, commenting that GNH is a mere repackaging of the long-iterated concept of sustainable development made more appealing by inserting the word happiness. The other concerns are that happiness is a subjective and a psychological concept which cannot effectively be measured. Therefore, the challenge lies in how the nine dimensions of the GNH index will be implemented in order to measure GNH.

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