

Preserving Bhutan's National Identity: An Analysis of Gross National Happiness as Survival Strategy

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Abstract

As a small Himalayan country of just under 800,000 inhabitants, landlocked between China and India, Bhutan has faced significant challenges - even existential threats - to the preservation of its national identity since its very inception as a united kingdom in 1907. This paper looks at the "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) strategy not just as a peculiar, holistic development paradigm, but also as a cohesive force promoted, in the last four decades, to cement and affirm Bhutan's national conscience. Protection of the local identity has been implemented over the years through various means, ranging from codes of "national customs and etiquette" (*Driglam Namzha*), to strict immigration and citizenship regulations, to a tightly controlled "high value, low impact" tourism industry, to rigorous environmental controls. Despite said countermeasures, the need for economic development through further integration into the world economy as well as mainstream converging forces of cultural homogenization represent powerful, potentially disintegrative factors affecting Bhutan on a regular basis. This timely analysis transcends the Himalayan context, as other similarly fragile nations across the globe, today, require comparable "survival strategies" in the face of equally daunting threats.

Keywords: GNH, identity, nation, survival, sustainability

1. Introduction

This essay provides an overview of broad policy approaches employed over the years in the political, economic, environmental and cultural realms to preserve Bhutan's most distinctive national features: what makes the country special, in fact, also determines its very vulnerability, and thus calls for decisive action.

Above all, since the 1970s onwards, the "Gross National Happiness" (hereinafter, GNH) strategy has slowly but steadily evolved into a holistic development paradigm informing the whole policymaking process, and a strong centripetal force both defining and safeguarding the various components of the Bhutanese identity.

The GNH framework, in fact, has charted the way towards sustainable socio-economic progress and actively protected the country's unique cultural and natural ecosystems by inspiring, for instance, an intense democratization process, the adoption of a "high value, low impact" tourism policy, the shelving of World Trade Organization (WTO) membership negotiations, as well as the introduction of strict "codes" of national customs and the implementation of effective forest management practices.

GNH is thus mainly considered here as a crucial "national conscience catalyst" strengthening the dignity and relevance of the most defining, yet most fragile, traits of the Bhutanese identity, while at the same time protecting them from looming internal and external threats.

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2. Uniqueness and Fragility

Bhutan is unique in many aspects, even its own vulnerability. In order to understand the need for intense “protective measures”, it’s important to define the roots of Bhutan’s national identity.

Squeezed between India and China, the small, remote Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is home to about 770,000 thousand people. The majority of them engage in subsistence agriculture and live scattered in the many valleys, at times very isolated, across the country’s rugged territory. Thimphu, the capital and, by far, the largest urban centre in the country, has just about 120,000 inhabitants.

Bhutan’s topography can be broadly divided into three horizontal regions: a southernmost strip, where elevations are between 100 and 1500 meters above sea level; the central region, hosting a southward portion of the Great Himalayan Range, where elevations are between 1000 and 3500 meters; the northernmost region, with higher peaks, some of which exceed 7000 meters. Forests cover about 70% of country’s territory, half of which is included in various forms of “protected areas”.

Despite a tiny population, the kingdom’s ethnic makeup is remarkably diverse, due partially to the prolonged seclusion of some of its communities. Four can be identified as the main broad groupings: the *Ngalops* (or *Bhote*), descending from early (9th century) migrants from Tibet and currently the most assertive group, despite accounting only for about 20% of the population; the *Sarchops*, making for around 30% of the Bhutanese population, descending from later migrants (13th century) from East India and Burma; people of Nepalese origin (*Lotshampas* or “southerners”, i.e. settled mainly in the south of the country), a 25%-strong product of very recent (late 19th-20th century) migration from neighboring Nepal; a series of smaller indigenous groups.

As a result, more than 20 different languages are spoken in Bhutan: while most of them are spoken by small communities of aboriginals, *Ngalops* speak *Dzongkha*, a Tibetan dialect that currently holds official language status (together with English) and is, in addition, the constitutionally designated “national language”; *Sarchokha* and Nepali are the native languages of the other two major communities.

Bhutan is a unique haven of Vajrayana Tantric Buddhism, infused of predating Bon animist beliefs: this very distinctive school and, in particular, its *Drukpa* denomination emphasize the harmonious interplay of universe’s elements, and the sacred, ubiquitous energy of nature. The *Drukpa* sect was originally specific to *Ngalops*, but most *Sarchops* and aboriginal groups have also converged, over the centuries, into the same faith, coming to constitute, despite their linguistic differences, a rather cohesive cultural group - accounting for about 70% of the total population - at the very heart of modern Bhutanese identity.

People of Nepalese origin have remained both linguistically and religiously distinct, if not marginalized: to this day, they are, in fact, mostly Hindu. As the number of migrants from Nepal grew over the 1950s and 1960s - when the government of Bhutan needed foreign laborers for infrastructure projects - relations with the assertive *Ngalop*-dominated “*Drukpa* block” became more and more difficult. Tensions turned violent in the 1980s, when the authorities adopted *Drukpa*-centered cultural promotion policies (e.g. *Driglam Namzha* or “code of national etiquette”) that were perceived as tools of

forced cultural assimilation, as well as strict and, to large extent, retroactive citizenship rules that eventually led to the de-facto expulsion of some 100,000 people of Nepalese origin.

Politically, Bhutan as a unified state is a relatively recent creation: for centuries, fragmentation and conflict characterized the relations among the many small kingdoms – ruled by lords called *penlops* - vying for leadership in the region. Only in 1907, the *Ngalop* ruler of Trongsa (now one of the 20 administrative districts of Bhutan), Ugyen Wangchuck, managed to bring together the traditionally quarrelsome neighbors, with active support from the British Raj, and establish a royal leadership which extends to the present day. Although remaining formally independent, the King agreed to have Bhutan's "foreign interests" overseen by the British. This privilege was then extended to India, at the time of the region's independence (Phuntsho, 2013).

From 1907 till the 1970s, Bhutan was run as an absolute monarchy, in which the king enjoyed a quasi-divine status. Poverty, illiteracy, meager life expectancy and lack of access to even the most basic services for most of the population represented the norm. Beside close, almost symbiotic relations with India, Bhutan remained substantially secluded from the rest of the world.

Complete isolation became soon less tenable or convenient: Bhutan decided to open itself to the world, although very prudently, by joining the United Nations (UN) in 1971. Its diplomatic approach towards the rest of world has remained to this day one of very cautious engagement. The country is currently a member of platforms like World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It does have relations with more than 50 countries and the European Union, but not with UN Security Council members, including China, and has so far opted out of membership to the WTO.

By the 1970s, the country was in dire need for enlightened leadership and comprehensive vision for the future: a recent history of political fragmentation, significant ethno-religious cleavages and severe poverty represented steep challenges to nation-building and politico-economic development. Moreover, the need to overcome isolation(-ism) and fruitfully engage with the wider world while still preserving a very unique, fragile identity added an international dimension to the domestic threats looming since the very inception of Bhutan's state construct.

3. Sustainable Vision for the Nation: Gross National Happiness

Much needed leadership came in the early 1970s in the form of a young new king, the fourth of the Wangchuck dynasty, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who ascended the throne in 1972 at the age of just 16. He brought direction, too: legend has it that at one of his very first press conferences, when asked by foreign journalists to detail his plans to improve the country's lagging economy and its dismal Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the young monarch responded by affirming to be more interested in promoting his people's overall "Gross National Happiness". What was at first a mere casual remark became, over the years, a more and more structured "paradigm of reference" eventually incorporated into the first democratic constitution of 2008 and in particular in article 9.2 of the Constitution, reading: "*The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the*

pursuit of Gross National Happiness'.

At the core of GNH lies the belief that sustainable development can only be achieved through a holistic approach that reflects the multidimensionality of human life and keeps into consideration the inherent interdependence of all domains – political, economic, cultural, environmental - of wellbeing. Policies' sustainability would thus consist in the recognition of all competing interests' equal dignity and in a balanced pursuit of the same, so as to avoid the traps of narrow approaches driven exclusively by prospects of immediate financial gains.

Notions of balance and interdependence are particularly engrained in the Bhutanese worldview due to the strong influence of both Tantric Buddhism and ancient Bon animism, which specifically stress the (need for) harmonious interconnectedness among all of the universe's components.

GNH comprises of four main, broad "pillars" considered particularly relevant to the Bhutanese context, namely: good governance, equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, environmental preservation, and protection of the local cultural identity.

Goals and achievements in each of said domains reflect the intent to pursue progress in a way that rejects the mere replication of typical, mainstream models, and instead takes into consideration the very peculiarities of the Bhutanese identity, synthesizing them into national assets to cherish and preserve.

3.1 Good governance

The entire governance system has been reformed in order to strengthen the state construct's legitimacy and long-term stability through increased political participation, power devolution and further institutionalization of GNH principles.

The Fourth King himself was, not surprisingly, the very force behind the democratization process throughout his tenure: he inspired the adoption of reforms enabling the parliament to limit the monarch's absolute authority and established mandatory age limits to kingship.

The process gathered momentum at the turn of the century, and reached its climax in 2008 with the first parliamentary elections and the adoption of the first democratic constitution, determining the country's radical change into a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, in the same year the Fourth King abdicated in favor of his 28-year-old son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who has since then vowed to proceed in his father's enlightened footsteps within the newly established democratic framework.

The administration of the country has been reorganized into a highly decentralized framework comprising of 20 administrative districts (*dzongkhags*) and some 205 sub-district units called "*gewogs*", i.e. groups of few villages headed by an elected representative, or "*gyap*".

An ad-hoc, overarching body such as the GNH Commission has been entrusted with overall "due-diligence" tasks in regards to GNH compliance verification ahead of policy approval. The commission is a technical organ including Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary, a representative from the National Environmental Commission and ten representatives from relevant ministries (depending on the content of the policy in question). Moreover, a "GNH Index" has been devised with the support of the influential Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research, so as to measure – through

nationwide surveys - relevant policy outcomes over time and thus further “operationalize” GNH (Ura, K., Alkire, S., Zangmo, T., Wangdi, K., 2015).

3.2 Sustainable socio-economic development

The challenge of ensuring sustainable socio-economic development is universally complex, in many ways. Policy outputs in this realm have the potential to profoundly transform, for better or worse, any society and their natural environments, especially when mainstream development approaches are applied: since the late 1980s onwards, in fact, common phenomena like global trade integration, foreign direct investment, intensive export-oriented manufacturing and massive urbanization have left indelible marks on much of the developing world.

For a fragile, unique context like Bhutan, choices are even more difficult and sensitive, as their consequences may be even vaster, and to some extent existential. In the GNH vision, the country has vowed to devise and implement its very own model, which may guarantee the much needed material progress that undoubtedly represents an essential component of wellbeing, but at the same time may also protect Bhutan’s identity from the distorting, transfiguring dynamics that have affected many other nations across the globe.

The country still ranks only 132nd in the 2015 Human Development Report. In 2015, the average life expectancy rose to 70 years (from 66 in 2000) and the adult literacy rate reached 65% (from 54% in 2000); virtually everyone had access to clean water (78% in 2000) and the under-5 mortality rate per 1000 births stood at 33 (84 in 2000). While income poverty decreased significantly from 31.7% in 2003 to 12% in 2013, there is still great disparity between rural (16.7%) and urban areas (1.8%) and across districts. Moreover, Multidimensional Poverty - a measure of poverty developed by Sabina Alkire and James Foster at the Oxford University and based on the same methodology as the GNH Index, redefining poverty as weighed average deprivation across ten indicators - still stands at 29.4%.

The Bhutanese economy is planned, on the basis of Five Year Plans (FYP). The current 11th FYP focuses on three main areas: further promoting inclusive growth, development of green economy, strategic infrastructure. Intervention in these areas aims at tackling challenges such as uneven achievements across districts and rural-urban divide, the need to overcome dependency from aid, imports and hydropower export revenues, as well as youth unemployment.

WTO membership, thoroughly debated in the past few years, has now been officially put on hold: the membership to the organization, although acknowledged as a potential short-term source of revenues, has been in fact deemed as a substantial long-term threat to the “sovereign”, independent implementation of GNH policy tenets in the country.

Bhutan remains in the UN list of Least Developed Countries, which does, currently offer benefits in the form of lower tariff-barriers to export into developed countries: said benefits, though, are yet to be fully tapped into due to limited exports available in the first place, significant non-tariff barriers, and the fact that most of Bhutan current exports end, currently, into neighboring SAARC countries with which preferential agreements are already in place.

In general, it is in the realm of economic development that GNH best displays its

twofold mission of development promotion and national preservation: while common econometrics provide a picture of only partial achievements, it is important to consider that the GNH strategy calls precisely for the very overcoming of narrow GDP-based approaches, profoundly encouraging, instead, the shift towards nation-specific, holistic paradigms that consistently acknowledge and protect the local way of life. This is particularly visible in the tourism sector.

Tourism is crucial for the country. Although its contribution to the GDP is limited, it does represent a significant source of non-hydropower convertible currency, and it employs more than 20,000 people. Tourism policies alone could dramatically transform the economic scene of the country, but, in consideration of GNH's vast array of equally important components, the sector is managed according to a rigorous "low impact, high value" criterion.

Visitors are accepted into the country only for limited periods of time and after clearing cumbersome visa procedures handled, several weeks in advance, exclusively by local tour operators and the Tourism Council of Bhutan. They are also required to pay a compulsory fee of up to USD 250 per day, which includes government taxes and basic services such as guide, driver, food and lodging in standard hotels.

The sole access point to the country for international tourists - as opposed to "regional" ones from India, Maldives and Bangladesh - is Paro's international airport, but only Druk Air, the national carrier, and the more recent, privately owned Bhutan Airlines are authorized to connect Bhutan with selected cities in Asia.

Options for consumers are limited, and there's virtually no international competition to threaten the local industry. This favours the local economy, and helps the country position itself as an exclusive destination: as a result, only about 136,000 highly motivated, discerning, relatively wealthy visitors accessed Bhutan's unique beauties in 2014. This allows to reduce the strain on the environment as well as the risks of erosion of cultural authenticity, while at the same time maximising returns, safeguarding the employment of locals and optimising existing infrastructure.

Besides cultural heritage, perhaps the most significant of such amenities, coveted by visitors and cherished by locals, are the pristine environment and lush forest coverage, home to unique flora and fauna.

3.3 Environmental preservation

Nestled in a remote portion of the Eastern Himalayas, Bhutan has a unique ecology, which geographical isolation and a small, mostly rural population – traditionally depending on nature for their very survival - have de facto contributed to preserve so far. In addition, Bon animist beliefs and Vajrayana Tantric Buddhism have for centuries infused the Bhutanese culture with a profound sense of reverence for natural elements: they are believed to be home to spirits and deities and, more importantly, essential components of the universal order. In particular, the principle of "*tendrel*" affirms the inextricable interdependence of all phenomena, and stresses the symbiotic roles that both humans and nature play within a broader single system.

To reflect these traditional attitudes, GNH establishes that socio-economic progress and environmental preservation must be pursued harmoniously, as they complement each other and are indeed equally relevant. In order for growth - in the holistic sense of the

term - to be sustainable, natural resources should be managed in consideration not only of their immediate “use values”, but of the wider benefits potentially arising from deferred use, non-use and optional values to both current and future generations (Tietenberg, T., Lewis, L., 2010).

Bhutan is today a rare case of carbon negative country. This certainly owes to “structural” factors currently including small population, rather insubstantial industrial base, very limited use of cars (i.e. 59 per 1000 inhabitants, according to World Bank 2009 data), abundance of hydropower and large forest coverage, but it is also the product of specific GNH-inspired provisions and policies. The Forest Management Conservation Act of 1995 and the Land Act of Bhutan of 2007, for instance, represent landmark legislations, but it’s again the 2008 Constitution that elevates conservation and sustainable utilization of environmental resources to the rank of fundamental national principles.

For instance, the Article 6 of the constitution states that:

Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom’s natural resources and environment for the benefit of the present and future generations and it is the fundamental duty of every citizen to contribute to the protection of the natural environment, conservation of the rich biodiversity of Bhutan and prevention of all forms of ecological degradation including noise, visual and physical pollution through the adoption and support of environment friendly practices and policies.

After spelling out in further detail the government’s actual preservation duties, the same article establishes that “*the Government shall ensure that, in order to conserve the country’s natural resources and to prevent degradation of the ecosystem, a minimum of sixty percent of Bhutan’s total land shall be maintained under forest cover for all time*”.

About half of the national territory is included in various forms of protected areas: here, besides the call for “stewardship” emanating from traditional Bhutanese spirituality, a core driver is the actual economic interest in preserving nature’s tangible and intangible assets such as the potential for ecotourism and the crucial water cycles (Pradhan, R., 2010).

As for the “non-protected” half of the country, traditionally, farmers and herders had customary rights to access and utilize natural resources. Today, though, “slash and burn” (known locally as “*tser*”) agriculture has been banned and land tenure largely formalised. In particular, forests are harvested for wood and non-wood resources according to principles of “sustainable yield” through so-called “Forest Management Units”. The scheme allows small groups of households to be allocated the joint quasi-ownership of portions of forests on the basis of “Community Forest Management Groups”. The purpose is to target the typical public goods’ issues of “free riding” and consequent “tragedies of commons”, enabling subsistence farmers to sustainably preserve the crucial agriculture-livestock-forestry linkages by sharing both the benefits and the responsibilities of forest management. As of late 2016, more than 20,000 households depend on this scheme, and about 600 such groups are active in the country.

3.4 Protection of the cultural identity

In the GNH design, cultural resilience is considered an essential component of wellbeing. More importantly, the dominant *Drukpa* block has perceived it as the most urgent of tasks, pursuing it accordingly, to even draconian extents: strong measures, in

fact, have been taken to preserve the national identity and the related socio-political order from looming threats such as the pervasive, erosive influence of foreign popular culture (TV and internet services were introduced only in 1999, while tourism, with various restrictions, only in 1974) and, more importantly, migration from neighboring countries.

As a consequence, from the 1970s onwards, tensions ensued with the increasingly vocal Nepalese ethnic minority; in the late 1980s, conflict erupted, culminating with some 100,000 people leaving the country between 1990 and 1993, and a consequent refugee crisis that has remained partially unresolved to this day.

The crisis is the result of the universally problematic interplay between the need to accommodate the rights of economic migrants on the one hand, and that to preserve the ethn0-demographic balance in the place of destination, on the other.

About 60,000 Nepalese laborers were brought into what would later become Bhutan in the late 19th century. They were subsequently given land and thus settled in the southern lowlands (hence the term, now considered derogatory, of *Lhotsampas*, or literally “Southerners”). In 1958, with the “Nationality Law of Bhutan”, in response to claims of socio-political marginalization, all Nepalese settled in Bhutan until then were ultimately recognized Bhutanese citizenship and given representation in the *Tshogdu* or National Assembly (Kharat, R.S., 2005). This allowed them to enjoy the same rights as the locals - including, by the early 1960s, free education and health care - and came soon to represent a further, significant pull factor: more Nepalese, between the 1960s and 1970s, became attracted by prospects of employment in infrastructure projects, settlement, public services and even possible pathways to citizenship.

Soon, though, the steady inflow of Nepalese laborers across the porous borders with India and Sikkim as well as their high fertility rates greatly alarmed the local *Drukpas*, and in particular the dominant *Ngalop* community: it appeared clear, in fact, that the ethno-demographic balance would soon shift in favor of Nepali-speaking, mostly Hindu immigrants, unless initially accommodating stances were soon replaced by strict containment measures.

Similarly, growing numbers of rather assertive and vocal Nepalese had been also entering neighboring Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Darjeeling, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In adjacent Sikkim, in particular, Nepalese migrants had come to outnumber the Vajrayana Buddhist majority, significantly destabilizing the traditional autonomous system of government - centered around the figure of a *Chogyal*, or “Dharma King” - until the eventual merger with India, in 1975.

The Bhutanese authorities feared politico-economic consequences of immigration just as much as they did cultural ones: above all, their concerns focused on the revival of “Greater Nepal” ideologies traditionally present in the rhetoric of Nepalese monarchs since the 18th century, and on possible spillovers from communist and republican revolutionary movements developing rapidly in Nepal from the 1970s onwards.

A series of unapologetic countermeasures began in 1977 with stricter immigration controls, and in 1980 with a new Marriage Act, overtly discouraging marriage with non-citizens (Mathew, J.C., 2005). A new Citizenship Act was introduced in 1985, which replaced existing provisions granting citizenship retroactively only to those residents who could provide solid evidence that they were inhabitants of the country since at least 1958,

or earlier. It also introduced the knowledge of “local traditions” as a requirement for citizenship. To better enforce the act, a census was conducted in 1988, establishing the presence of an unspecified, “dangerously disproportionate” number of “illegals” among a Nepalese community claimed to account for some 45% of a then total population of 600,000.

A new, major step was taken a year later, in 1989, when the Fourth King introduced the “*One nation, one people*” policy, imposing on all Bhutanese a strict *Drukpa*-oriented code of “national customs and etiquette”, or *Driglam Namzha*, with the clear intent to strengthen the local national mainstream and possibly assimilate minorities. The swift enforcement of *Driglam Namzha* generated further discontent within the Nepalese community, with demonstrations turning violent, consequent police crackdowns and a general climate of unrest.

Soon, it became necessary for many Nepalese to leave, either voluntarily or as a consequence of forced eviction. In 1992, about 62,000 were accommodated in refugee camps managed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Eastern Nepal. The number rose to 80,000 by June 1993, 95,000 by 1997, and reached a peak of 108,000 in 2007. Years of subsequent bilateral talks between the Nepalese and Bhutanese governments did not produce any substantial breakthrough. Since 2007, therefore, the only solution for most refugees has been that of UNHCR-brokered resettlement in third countries, with about 18,000 refugees still remaining in two camps, as of November 2015.

National “survival instinct”, more than ideological nationalism, seems to have inspired the radical Bhutanese stance in regards to the issue of Nepalese migrants: evidently, authorities felt they had no alternative but to pursue “survival” even before “sustainability”. It is nevertheless imperative for Bhutan, now, to make non-*Drukpa* sections of the population feel part of the nation-building process, because political stability, social harmony and, ultimately, the very success of the GNH design depend on that too. Recent democratic reforms are to be interpreted as substantial, encouraging moves in this direction, concretely empowering the whole Bhutanese civil society, in all of its ethnic components.

4. Conclusion

Gross National Happiness is a distinctively Bhutanese phenomenon, with universal significances. It is the “inevitable” product of the local context in two important ways: first, Bhutan’s cultural heritage, historical evolution patterns, unique geography and pristine environment have represented a fertile ground in which a view of development as an intrinsically holistic endeavor has actually been deeply rooted all along. In particular, culture, in all of its complexity, distinctively marks a society’s worldview and can define the very identity of a nation: in this sense, Tantric Buddhist consciousness almost coincides with the Bhutanese national spirit, and should therefore be seen as the core “justification” for an approach that rejects the idea of progress solely based on material achievements, to instead pursue societal wellbeing as a consequence of harmonious balance across multiple domains. Secondly, GNH appears as the only viable route for a country whose fragile identity could be severely endangered by the blind

application of mainstream, output-maximizing paradigms.

Twofold is also the mission that GNH-inspired policies need to pursue on a day-to-day basis, as they carry the responsibility of simultaneously promoting progress while also protecting the nation from the risks of radical transfiguration and disintegration. This is indeed a complex balancing act and a constant work in progress: partial are, for instance, the achievements in terms of poverty reduction and material wellbeing, especially if compared with the effective commitment towards environmental preservation and the intense, even controversial pursuit of cultural resilience.

Nevertheless, despite context-specific characteristics and implementation challenges, in an era of intense debate over “costs” of economic growth and globalization such as environmental externalities, cultural homogenization and extreme materialism, the core messages of GNH seem able to transcend the Himalayan context in which they originated, and may well resonate with nations equally concerned with the sustainable management of their social and natural capital.

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