

1 BHUTAN: BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND HORROR

2 Lorenzo Pellegrini and Luca Tasciotti**

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Abstract

6This study juxtaposes the congratulatory rhetoric surrounding Bhutan’s efforts to promote
7happiness and the gross violations of human rights that coincide with the happiness project. The
8academic debate has not reflected on the Janus-faced nature of the Bhutanese regime and the
9literature is replete with references to the Bhutanese happiness search. From these acclaims, it
10appears that the Bhutanese kingdom has overcome dialectical relationships; the government is
11promoting happiness for the benefit of “the people”, and “class, ethnicity and gender” and social
12antagonism more broadly are not current concerns. To the contrary, in this piece we highlight a
13gap in the scholarship on Bhutan and happiness by bringing to the fore issues that so far have
14been confined to specialized human rights literature, some isolated reports in the international
15press, and Nepali mass-media. Our aim is to bridge the intimately related issues of happiness,
16social struggle, and human rights in Bhutan and provide a critical reflection on the country’s
17experience.

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1** Corresponding author: Lorenzo Pellegrini, Ph.D. International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus
2University Rotterdam, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands. Phone +31 70 4260776,
3pellegrini@iss.nl.

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6* Corresponding author: Luca Tasciotti, Ph.D. Research Affiliate in Development Economics, International Institute
7of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands.
8tasciotti@iss.nl.

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“We have now clearly distinguished the ‘happiness’ ... in GNH [Gross National Happiness] from the fleeting, pleasurable ‘feel good’ moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds.”

Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley, 2009, Prime Minister of Bhutan¹

“Forty years ago, Bhutan’s fourth king, young and newly installed, made a remarkable choice: Bhutan should pursue “gross national happiness” rather than gross national product. Since then, the country has been experimenting with an alternative, holistic approach to development that emphasizes not only economic growth, but also culture, mental health, compassion, and community.”

Jeffrey D. Sachs, 2011, Professor at Columbia University, Director of the Earth Institute²

“In 1988, the Government began stripping thousands of Nepali speakers of their citizenship. The newly formed Bhutanese People’s Party responded in 1990 with violent demonstrations, prompting a crackdown on the Nepali population. Over 100,000 Southern Bhutanese fled or were expelled to Nepal in the 1990s. Since this time, the King has actively sought to restrict the migration of the vast majority of these refugees back into the country. Moreover, starting in 1998 the Government initiated a program of resettling northern Buddhists on the land vacated by Hindu refugees [...] Severe human rights abuses have been attributed to the government’s efforts to quell ethnoreligious challenges to Ngalong political primacy [...] Human rights observers have argued that the new constitution does not adequately protect the rights of the Nepali-speakers in Bhutan.”

121 Opening address of “Educating for Gross National Happiness” Conference: Thimphu, Bhutan, 7
13December 2009. See: Helliwell et al. 2012, 112.

152 Source: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-economics-of-happiness>, accessed
1629/05/2013.

46 Polity IV Country Report 2010: Bhutan³

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203 Available at: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>, accessed 29/05/2013.

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49 The strident contrast between the quotations above are exemplary of the divide that exists
50between the congratulatory rhetoric surrounding Bhutan’s efforts to promote and achieve
51happiness—as compared to the globally hegemonic pursuit of material wealth—and the gross
52violations of human rights committed by the government that coincide with the happiness
53project. The academic debate has not reflected on the Janus-faced nature of the Bhutanese regime
54and the academic literature is replete with (casual) references to (and praises of) the Bhutanese
55happiness search (e.g. Daly and Farley 2010). However, admiration towards Bhutan is not
56limited to academic circles, as international financial institutions have expressed their
57satisfaction with respect to several measures of betterment booked by the country beyond the
58more standard praise for the “sound macroeconomic and fiscal framework” and how the
59“development of the hydropower sector delivered robust economic growth” (IMF 2010). The
60International Monetary Fund has stressed that Bhutan’s development approach “seeks to improve
61overall quality of life and respect for human rights such as such that rights to education, health,
62and livelihoods complement abstract rights of equality before law” (IMF 2004), while the World
63Bank has emphasized the progress Bhutan has recently made in human development, literacy,
64and in the equality of property rights.⁴ From these acclaims, it appears that the Bhutanese
65kingdom has overcome dialectical relationships; the government is promoting happiness for the
66benefit of “the people”, and “class, ethnicity and gender” and social antagonism more broadly
67are not current concerns. To the contrary, in this piece we highlight a gap in the academic
68literature on Bhutan and happiness by bringing to the fore issues that so far have been confined
69to specialized human rights literature,⁵ some isolated reports in the international press, and
70Nepali mass media. Our aim is to bridge the intimately related issues of happiness, social
71struggle, and human rights in Bhutan and provide a critical reflection on the country’s
72experience.

73 Since 1972, the Government of Bhutan has been officially promoting Gross National
74Happiness as its main objective of public policies, superseding the search for economic growth
75(Grinde 2012, 96). In this context, the Gross National Happiness Indicator (GNHI) has emerged
76as an alternative to Gross National Product as a measure of achievement. GNHI itself has

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25 For example, see the World Bank overview of Bhutan:

26<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview>, accessed 29/05/2013.

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29 For example, see Amnesty International’s reports: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/bhutan>, accessed
3029/05/2013.

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77attracted global attention and is a popular example of a quantifiable measure of happiness that is
78multidimensional and includes “other regarding motivations” (Ura et al. 2012, 110). The
79dimensions embedded in the indicator are psychological well-being, health, time use, education,
80culture, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and standard
81of living. The indicator itself is a guide to public policies that indicates the citizens who are most
82likely to be “not-yet-happy” and why. The pursuit of happiness by the Kingdom of Bhutan has
83reverberated widely and has been reported by mass media, informing policy makers and social
84scientists alike. For example, the Guardian has published an article that attempts to explain “Why
85we'd all be happier in Bhutan”,⁶ suggesting that the country “is offering a lesson to us all”. The
86United Nations has empowered “the Kingdom of Bhutan to convene a high-level meeting on
87happiness” as part of a session of the United Nations General Assembly.⁷ Recently influential
88economists such as Jeffrey Sachs have embraced the pursuit of happiness as an alternative to
89increased material wealth, contributing to highlighting the limitations of the mainstream view of
90development, and their publications on the subject contain praises for the Bhutanese model (e.g.
91Helliwell et al. 2012). Other scholars are going as far as suggesting that the Bhutanese
92experience should inspire a “new paradigm in economics” (Tideman 2004). Just as much,
93prominent ecological economists include in their discussions of happiness uncritical references
94to the experience of the Kingdom of Bhutan (e.g. Daly and Farley 2010, 274). Some components
95of the Gross National Happiness Indicator are particularly relevant for the case we are making:
96the promotion of culture and good governance. Burns notes that “Bhutan zealously guards its
97culture and the government sees the preservation of culture as a high priority. This is observed in
98the school system where all children are taught Bhutanese cultural values and language”, and
99continues with, “[t]he fourth king has long advocated and steered his people towards democracy.
100He has gradually abdicated himself from power, [...] overseeing the establishment of an elected
101democratic government in 2008” (2011, 77).

102 These all-too-common praises for a monarchy and a country with bonding cultural
103connotations, based on “otherness” and (implicit) superiority to the rest of the world, are
104essentialising Bhutanese royalty and the country as a whole. We question fundamentally whether
105the Bhutanese monarchs are the embodiment of the “benevolent dictator” and whether Bhutan is

346 See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/sarah-boseley-global-health/2012/apr/02/unitednations-bhutan>,
35accessed 29/05/2013.

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38 See http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/opinion/the-un-happiness-project.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0,
39accessed 29/05/2013.

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106really the last Shangri-La living according to Buddhist principles on overcoming secular forms
107of social struggle.⁸ As a consequence, we also challenge scholarship that is not suspicious of the
108Orientalist characterization of Bhutan and does seem to necessitate a historical and political
109contextualization of the happiness project.

110 There is in fact a stark contrast between the policies on happiness—and associated
111international praise—and the last three decades of domestic policies towards the Nepali minority
112(cf. Hutt 2005). Bhutan’s pains with the status of “modern nation” are relatively recent—the
113country was unified in 1907 and the Citizenship Act came as late as 1958—breaking with the
114tradition of autonomy of the country minorities. Since the enactment of the Citizenship Act,
115policies were put in place to encourage the assimilation of ethnic groups in the “nation”. This
116attitude was later reversed and, according to Human Rights Watch, the enactment in the late
1171980s of the “One nation, one people” campaign by the Bhutanese government resulted in the
118arbitrary denial of citizenship to a large portion of the Nepali-speaking minority (who had been
119migrating to Southern Bhutan since the 19th century) as part of a campaign for the
120“Bhutanization” of the country.⁹ The milestones of this process are the Marriage Act of 1980,
121which discouraged weddings with foreigners, essentially targeting Nepali Bhutanese, and
122included provisions that were to bar civil servants married to non-Bhutanese from promotions
123and to restrict access to land, agricultural inputs, education, and training. The Citizenship Act of
1241985 restricts citizenship only to those who speak Drukpa (the language of the northern majority)
125and are capable of providing proof of residence dating back to 1958; as a result, in 1988 many
126citizens were provided with non-citizen cards at the census. In 1989, “One nation, one people”
127was adopted, and the traditional Buddhist code of dress and etiquette (Driglam Namzha) became
128compulsory. The implementation of these policies generated widespread resentment in southern
129Bhutan, the area inhabited by the Nepali-speaking minority (Evans 2010).

130 The Government of Bhutan in the 1980s argued that illegal immigration, starting from the
1311960s, was threatening to transform the ethnic Bhutanese into a minority in their own country.
132This fear was fuelled by the experience of Sikkim in which a Buddhist monarchy acceded to
133India through a referendum in 1975 when the Hindu population was a majority, as well as the

438 The term Shangri-La originates in the novel *Lost Horizon* (Hilton 1993) narrating the marvels of a
44mystical and secluded Himalayan valley akin to paradise on earth.

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469 See Bill Frelick (2011), “For Bhutan’s refugees, there’s no place like home”,
47<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/30/bhutan-s-refugees-there-s-no-place-home>, accessed 29/05/2013.

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134Gorkha insurgency of ethnic Nepalis in Darjeeling, India, between 1986 and 1988 (Hutt 2003,
135195-196).¹⁰

136 On the one hand, processes of exclusion are innate nation-building episodes throughout
137the world, and the very process of the birth of nations is intrinsically related to a process of
138identification of foreigners and otherness (Hobsbawm 1990; Sand 2010). On the other hand,
139changing policies with respect to citizenship have coincided in Bhutan with new leadership (the
140fourth king, Jigme Singye, in power since 1974) and the increasing economic importance of the
141south—the location of cash crops and hydropower projects. Cash crops and energy production
142are crucial for the economic modernization of the country and the transition away from a
143traditional agricultural society towards a high-growth economy, a transition that is currently
144praised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2011).

145 There is a lively debate on the nature and scale of the events engendered by the policies
146enacted to stop “illegal immigration” in Bhutan (Evans 2010). In particular, demonstrations and
147violent incidents have been read either as subversive activities threatening the state, or as a
148response of an oppressed minority resisting the state apparatus. Another possible reading is that
149resistance took the shape of violence, but involved only a small group of militant Nepali
150Bhutanese. This resistance was followed by repression on a grand scale that escalated to
151harassment, imprisonment, and the destruction of ethnic Nepali properties. In any case, the result
152was that approximately 90,000 persons fled the country in the early 1990s and refugee camps
153were established in Nepal. To date, the Bhutanese government has not started a process to
154repatriate refugees that hold Bhutanese citizenship and most refugees, having lost any hope for
155repatriation, have applied for the resettlement program under whose auspices approximately
15658,500 Bhutanese refugees moved to third countries (United States Department of State 2012).¹¹

157 Unfortunately, the details of what happened within Bhutan are obscure since domestic
158censorship is matched by limited access for foreigners. For example, we do not have a systematic
159assessment of what happened to the belongings of Nepali Bhutanese that were left behind and we
160can only speculate on how local or national elites have benefitted, or how the state has increased

5110 Meanwhile, India has been supporting Bhutan for several years primarily since the country serves as a
52buffer against Chinese influence; India is Bhutan's largest donor and its largest trade partner. Indian
53investment and grants play a crucial role in the development of the hydropower sector that is worth 15%
54of GDP and is generating electricity for the Indian market (IMF 2011, 8).

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5611 Resettlement in a third country has been a source of bitter and, at times, violent disputes within the
57refugee community (e.g. Kumar 2005).

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161 consensus by allocating those properties to residents of the north. Much of the information, in
162 fact, comes from refugee camps and is necessarily biased by self-representation and
163 non-reflecting of happenings within Bhutan after the exodus (Evans 2010; Hutt 2005).¹²
164 Meanwhile, the Communist Party of Bhutan, founded in 2003, has launched an insurrection in
165 the south in 2007, inspired and supported by the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist),
166 but the extent and support enjoyed by this movement and the possibilities it has to pose a real
167 threat to the state are unclear (cf. Rizal 2004, 167).¹³

168 Returning to the happiness discourse and to the objective of preserving traditional
169 culture, it is also worth mentioning that only English and Dzongkha languages are the mediums
170 of instruction in schools, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about
171 the rights of minority children, specifically the Nepali-speaking minority, to take part in their
172 culture, practice their religion, or use their language.¹⁴ In fact, the imposition of traditional
173 Bhutanese dress code and its enforcement through fines and physical harassment is mentioned
174 most often by refugees as a form of discrimination against Nepali Bhutanese. These practices,
175 apart from being aberrant per se, overlap chillingly with the rhetoric on customs, tradition, and
176 national identity utilized in the happiness discourse (cf. Adler Braun 2009). Under these
177 circumstances, it seems rather ironic to discuss how the governance of Bhutan promotes
178 happiness and how it measures it through the GNHI while some of its citizens are
179 disenfranchised, stripped of their citizenship and property, and denied their right of return.

180 To conclude, assessments of the Bhutanese experience with happiness are often oblivious
181 of the blatant violations of human rights perpetrated by the Bhutanese state. In fact, this
182 blindness serves—knowingly or unknowingly—the purpose of identifying a “paradise on earth”,
183 a symbol of Oriental otherness, and a direction to overcome the social, spiritual, and

6112 For example, see the report made by the “Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility”,
62 <http://ceslam.org/index.php?pageName=newsDetail&nid=3728> accessed 29/05/2013.

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65 See TP Mishra (2010) “Rise of Red-army in the Last Shangri-La”, Bhutan News Service,
66 <http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/feature/rise-of-red-army-in-the-last-shangri-la/> accessed 29/05/2013

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6814 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008), Forty-Ninth Session: Consideration of Reports
69 Submitted by States Parties Under Article 44 of the Convention, available at <http://uhri.ohchr.org>,
70 accessed 29/05/2013.

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184environmental failings of modern Western culture. This utopian society is incidentally
185increasingly integrated in the global capitalist economy without corrupting its Orientalist charm
186and demonstrates that a Shangri-La can adopt the best of two worlds: ruled by a benevolent
187dictatorship caring for the happiness of citizens and powered by a modern, growing, and
188internationally-integrated economy.

189 The contention of this article is that looking at the Bhutanese experience only from the
190perspective of the happiness project without a mention of the human rights abuses in the country
191would be like reading “Heart of Darkness” and limiting oneself to contemplation of the
192industrious nature of trade in the United Kingdom, of the “luminous waters” of the Thames, of
193the manly camaraderie of seamen, and omitting what lies beneath it all: “The horror! The
194horror!”

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