BHUTAN: BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND HORROR

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Abstract

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

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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 Bhutan

“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 Institute

“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.”


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

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

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29 For example, see Amnesty International’s reports: http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/bhutan, accessed 3029/05/2013.
attracted global attention and is a popular example of a quantifiable measure of happiness that is multidimensional and includes “other regarding motivations” (Ura et al. 2012, 110). The dimensions embedded in the indicator are psychological well-being, health, time use, education, culture, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and standard of living. The indicator itself is a guide to public policies that indicates the citizens who are most likely to be “not-yet-happy” and why. The pursuit of happiness by the Kingdom of Bhutan has reverberated widely and has been reported by mass media, informing policy makers and social scientists alike. For example, the Guardian has published an article that attempts to explain “Why we’d all be happier in Bhutan”, suggesting that the country “is offering a lesson to us all”. The United Nations has empowered “the Kingdom of Bhutan to convene a high-level meeting on happiness” as part of a session of the United Nations General Assembly. Recently influential economists such as Jeffrey Sachs have embraced the pursuit of happiness as an alternative to increased material wealth, contributing to highlighting the limitations of the mainstream view of development, and their publications on the subject contain praises for the Bhutanese model (e.g. Helliwell et al. 2012). Other scholars are going as far as suggesting that the Bhutanese experience should inspire a “new paradigm in economics” (Tideman 2004). Just as much, prominent ecological economists include in their discussions of happiness uncritical references to the experience of the Kingdom of Bhutan (e.g. Daly and Farley 2010, 274). Some components of the Gross National Happiness Indicator are particularly relevant for the case we are making: the promotion of culture and good governance. Burns notes that “Bhutan zealously guards its culture and the government sees the preservation of culture as a high priority. This is observed in the school system where all children are taught Bhutanese cultural values and language”, and continues with, “[t]he fourth king has long advocated and steered his people towards democracy. He has gradually abdicated himself from power, […] overseeing the establishment of an elected democratic government in 2008” (2011, 77).

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

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

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

There is in fact a stark contrast between the policies on happiness—and associated international praise—and the last three decades of domestic policies towards the Nepali minority (cf. Hutt 2005). Bhutan’s pains with the status of “modern nation” are relatively recent—the country was unified in 1907 and the Citizenship Act came as late as 1958—breaking with the tradition of autonomy of the country minorities. Since the enactment of the Citizenship Act, policies were put in place to encourage the assimilation of ethnic groups in the “nation”. This attitude was later reversed and, according to Human Rights Watch, the enactment in the late 1970s of the “One nation, one people” campaign by the Bhutanese government resulted in the arbitrary denial of citizenship to a large portion of the Nepali-speaking minority (who had been migrating to Southern Bhutan since the 19th century) as part of a campaign for the “Bhutanization” of the country. The milestones of this process are the Marriage Act of 1980, which discouraged weddings with foreigners, essentially targeting Nepali Bhutanese, and included provisions that were to bar civil servants married to non-Bhutanese from promotions and to restrict access to land, agricultural inputs, education, and training. The Citizenship Act of 1985 restricts citizenship only to those who speak Drukpa (the language of the northern majority) and are capable of providing proof of residence dating back to 1958; as a result, in 1988 many citizens were provided with non-citizen cards at the census. In 1989, “One nation, one people” was adopted, and the traditional Buddhist code of dress and etiquette (Driglam Namzha) became compulsory. The implementation of these policies generated widespread resentment in southern Bhutan, the area inhabited by the Nepali-speaking minority (Evans 2010).

The Government of Bhutan in the 1980s argued that illegal immigration, starting from the 1960s, was threatening to transform the ethnic Bhutanese into a minority in their own country. This fear was fuelled by the experience of Sikkim in which a Buddhist monarchy acceded to India through a referendum in 1975 when the Hindu population was a majority, as well as the

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

Gorkha insurgency of ethnic Nepalis in Darjeeling, India, between 1986 and 1988 (Hutt 2003, 135195-196). On the one hand, processes of exclusion are innate nation-building episodes throughout the world, and the very process of the birth of nations is intrinsically related to a process of identification of foreigners and otherness (Hobsbawm 1990; Sand 2010). On the other hand, changing policies with respect to citizenship have coincided in Bhutan with new leadership (the fourth king, Jigme Singye, in power since 1974) and the increasing economic importance of the south—the location of cash crops and hydropower projects. Cash crops and energy production are crucial for the economic modernization of the country and the transition away from a traditional agricultural society towards a high-growth economy, a transition that is currently praised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2011).

There is a lively debate on the nature and scale of the events engendered by the policies enacted to stop “illegal immigration” in Bhutan (Evans 2010). In particular, demonstrations and violent incidents have been read either as subversive activities threatening the state, or as a response of an oppressed minority resisting the state apparatus. Another possible reading is that resistance took the shape of violence, but involved only a small group of militant Nepali Bhutanese. This resistance was followed by repression on a grand scale that escalated to harassment, imprisonment, and the destruction of ethnic Nepali properties. In any case, the result was that approximately 90,000 persons fled the country in the early 1990s and refugee camps were established in Nepal. To date, the Bhutanese government has not started a process to repatriate refugees that hold Bhutanese citizenship and most refugees, having lost any hope for repatriation, have applied for the resettlement program under whose auspices approximately 58,500 Bhutanese refugees moved to third countries (United States Department of State 2012). Resettlement in a third country has been a source of bitter and, at times, violent disputes within the refugee community (e.g. Kumar 2005).

Meanwhile, India has been supporting Bhutan for several years primarily since the country serves as a buffer against Chinese influence; India is Bhutan's largest donor and its largest trade partner. Indian investment and grants play a crucial role in the development of the hydropower sector that is worth 15% of GDP and is generating electricity for the Indian market (IMF 2011, 8).
consensus by allocating those properties to residents of the north. Much of the information, in fact, comes from refugee camps and is necessarily biased by self-representation and non-reflecting of happenings within Bhutan after the exodus (Evans 2010; Hutt 2005).

Meanwhile, the Communist Party of Bhutan, founded in 2003, has launched an insurrection in the south in 2007, inspired and supported by the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), but the extent and support enjoyed by this movement and the possibilities it has to pose a real threat to the state are unclear (cf. Rizal 2004, 167).

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

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

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


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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