

Proclaiming Growth and Development: Visualizing Bhutan from the Perspectives of GNH and ICTs

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Abstract

Bhutan is a tiny monarchy lying in the lap of gigantic Himalaya, and striving hard to graduate from the list of LDCs by 2023. The progress of any nation depends on the level of educational development, and ICT is a powerful tool to improve it. The developmental goals of Bhutan revolve around the unique concept of 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH), rather GNH is Bhutan's compressive development doctrine. The GNH has been associated with various aspects of Bhutan; whether it is economic, social or cultural. To go further on the path of development Bhutan has set long term goals for the nation to become a "knowledge-based society" with ICTs as the major platform. This paper aims to understand and examine the co-relation between GNH, ICTs, and development paradigms of Bhutan. Secondly, whether ICT can be helpful in achieving the developmental goals of the nation is the question that this paper will try to address with reference to Bhutan. Thirdly, will try to know how Bhutan has been successful in striking the balance between development, environmental conservation, and spirituality; as Bhutan is suppose to present a notable example.

Keyword: Bhutan; ICT; GNH; Education; Development; Ecotourism; Paradigm.

Introduction

Bhutan a democratic Empire in lofty Himalaya, where images of magical grandeur hide their challenges, provide an approach to understanding the conflicts that developing economies face when they move towards collective learning. Till 20 years ago, this Himalayan nation was completely isolated

from the world if observed in the light of global exchanges going on the fast face. Different in every sense of the word from the outside world, with the exception of the mythology that surrounds it, Bhutan tries to shift from the agrarian social framework, as it did in the 1800s to the feudal reign. In the techno-lover affair of the 21st century, it is observed that "the demand for such a transition requires teachers and politicians at all levels to rethink the role of schooling and what it means to be educated in this country at this level. To provide guidance, the government set up a special task force, the Royal Council on Education, to develop a curriculum and pedagogy that would require young people to develop those skills without sacrificing their past" (Gordon, 2013). The challenges are faced by educators who work in difficult situations with minimal support. Later on, Corbett, Venendal and Ugel (2017) argued that in the modern era of monarchical legal orders and representative institutions, monarchical governance will be

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eroded. Yet, persistent waves of democratization have accumulated their worldwide authority, some emperors particularly of small states are devoid of. Based on extensive “historical research” conducted in small states that have desired “to reconcile democratic governance and monarchy” - it is argued that, unlike Huntington, the emperors of small states were dedicated not likely to disappear; “overwhelmed by the dilemma posed by modernist development”, in the context of Bhutan.

Child Care, Education and Progressive Changes

The societal developments and changes could be untouched till late in the Himalayan kingdom due to resistance towards the major changes taking place at global level. The infusion of information and technologies has been late yet the Bhutanese societies and governance have taken it strongly. Though ICTs have not been entirely imbibed in the education sector but the waves of changes from the neighboring countries and at global level have been influential to motivate the nation. While till the 1960s, there was no education roadmap or school scenario, yet the current situation shows the inclusion of English language since elementary level in education leading³ it towards the preparedness for ICTs among kids and youth. The evolution of the school assessment in Bhutan, as a context for examining current and future school assessment problems, particularly in terms of quality and education improvement in Bhutan. The national education evaluation program in Bhutan, inspired by an initiative launched in South Asia in 2002 and financed by the World Bank, is a reference point for Bhutan. The development of NEA in year the 2003 has been instrumental in understanding the information methods. Various technical issues such as methods and need to administer the comparative NEA in the year 2010 have been able to invite concern of the review panel of Bhutan (Maxwell, Rinchen and Cooksey, 2010). At the level of the system at different levels of interest to achieve improvements, the research should be of “interest to educational systems in developing countries that have undertaken or intend to establish national programs for the evaluation of education”.

Lately, few authors (Pisani; et al. 2017) examined and demonstrated that early childhood development and protection services are constantly expanding and have structures at “the community, national and international levels.” However, many “low- and middle-income countries still have very limited DPCDE coverage, and there are

no comprehensive guidelines on good practice for effective primary education development”. Around the middle of this decade, during 2015, Bhutan achieved an effort towards the national assessment of existing DPCA programs to engage the evidence route with this process. With the help of “International Assessment of Early Development and Early Learning” program, the nation could evaluate and understand the effect of the same program on learning, growth and development. The results showed that children with access to the center’s programs gain more capacity than children who do not have access to these programs. There have been few factors in this context, related to the child benefits such as the higher quality centers, with fewer children. These factors also include family wealth, nurturing environments, positive home care, and learning methods. While moving towards higher education which is always related to the speedy growth and progress of a nation, Maxwell (2019) examined to show that “higher education in Bhutan in 2003 has irrevocably changed with the amalgam of unequal colleges to form the country’s first university”. The university and college system caters to the youth and guiding towards the higher education, careers, and nation building prospects. The research activities and outputs are directly related to the intellectual growth converting into economic growth. The observations from Maxwell’s study reflect that during the last two decades, the research doctorate degrees were obtained from outside Bhutan. The diverse nature of higher education and research included various aspects such as considerable professional benefits, tutoring, and researches on leadership roles.

Cultural heritage and Happiness Economics

Sonnenberg and Lham argue that the concept of researching gross national happiness (GNH) - or the idea that a country’s development strategy should aim to maximize the happiness of a people rather than maximizing its economic output - is attractive by its humanist simplicity. When drafting the concept for the first time in 1979, Bhutan’s 4th Druk Gyalpo told the world that “Bhutan’s integration into the global community” should not be rewarded by blindly accepting the standard definitions of the development of progress. The ability to define “success, and focus on economic growth and environmental preservation, the preservation of culture and communities, and good governance” are few of the aspects that may vary from a country to another one. In retrospect, Bhutan’s insistence on

GNH has been on legislators, legal academicians and development partners in Bhutan.

Economic, religious and community norms are associated with environmental values in many villages of three major communities in Bhutan. Using a multi-level logistic regression, Brooks (2011) analyzes four questions related to environmental values, and concludes that not economic rather religious factors are better indicators of environmental values, thus supporting the “conservation and development” approach. Besides, traditional community norms have little relation to environmental values. However, a national environmental standard may emerge as a result of government efforts and based on Buddhist principles. Although the economic reasons and objectives are significant, Bhutan’s approach to development suggests that commitment to the environment; expressed religiously, may also affect environmental values. Suntikul and Dorji (2016) understand that the “Himalayan nation of Bhutan” has been known for adopting gross national happiness. It has been used as a check and measurement for gross national product where the “happiness, spirituality and cultural authenticity” are significant causes in the tourist image of Bhutan. The various characteristics of the GNH have been reflected in the society as traditional festivals, which intrigue and attract many foreign tourists. The ethnic aspects and cultural practices of various celebrations and festivals in Bhutan expresses the relations and effects of tourism. The survey of monks and Bhutanese laity about the effects of tourists on festivals; the “Tsechu Festival connected with the aim to increase the number of annual tourists more than four times to 200,000 by 2018”. In this perspective, the Government of Bhutan has been proactive and it provides some glimpses of “perceived impact of tourism” on religious and cultural festivals of Bhutanese people.

Attacking cultural stability issues by examining traditional festivals in Bhutan, Suntikul (2018) attempted to identify a “cultural gap” in the sustainable tourism literature. It is considered “Cultural tourism is the main driver of tourism in Bhutan and religious festivals are among the main contexts in which locals and tourists interact. Tourism puts the forces of modernization and globalization in contact with traditional practices with various consequences.” Mainly based on on-site visits and observations of religious activities, community involvements, festivals and specific interviews with monks and monasteries of Bhutan, the modernization events are disguised in the

traditions of religious festivals. Baumann’s idea related to “fluid modernism” is applied to clarify the difference between “traditional and modern practices and to express the frame of reference in a constantly changing way”. This leads to a significant discussion of the fact that the case of festivals in Bhutan reveals the need to see “cultural stability in fluid and evolving terms”, especially in the “modern liquid” era. The tourists and young people from the region are recognized as special agents of fluid modernity in festivals, bringing attitudes and behaviors different from those of traditional yet contemporary Bhutanese society. Understanding the relations of climate, economics and cultural roles, Yangka, Rauland and Newman (2019) researched on climate policy around the world, which evolves at a very variable rate. Some places are very committed to decarbonising their economies and others are just beginning. However, Bhutan is one of the few states committed to achieving carbon neutrality as the country reconciles its aim to develop “economic opportunities (GDP) and human happiness (GNH)”. The policies and processes should be in tandem with the idea of how Bhutan will maintain carbon neutrality. The recent developments conform to the history of Bhutan and its utility for policy framing, and the exchange of information, particularly in the context of climate governance in emerging countries.

Development through Embracing Changes

The rich heritage and strong convictions towards the growth based on preservation of climate, sustainable development, and use of information, have compelled Bhutan to look outside the framework which has been the guiding force of national progress. Chaudhary et. al. (2017) analyzed the fact that Bhutan is at the forefront as a contributor to global conservation goals. The implementation of a systematic research framework for considering that quantitative, qualitative and geospatial tools were tested. It has been observed that a large number of the local population is still directly dependent on the various ecosystems for services. An integrated and holistic approach, focusing on both conservation and community development, should be used to manage and develop the valley and the region in a sustainable manner. This is revealed that limited livelihood strategies reduced the pressure on the forest and marsh. Proper land-use planning in the valley would be beneficial for maintaining and regulating land uses effectively and avoiding potential

conflicts between colonization, agriculture, forest, and swamps.

A long-separated Buddhist nation in the Himalayas, Bhutan paved the way for "internal modernity and global integration", using the teachings of "gross national happiness"; and the preservation of "culture, environment, economic equity and sustainability, and clean and transparent governance". Various challenges are there which include the degree of desirability according to the principle "one nation, one people". Youth in the country struggle with an education that is "often unsuitable for job prospects, urban migration, social temptations and declining traditions". The choice of "appropriate cultural elements for preservation, modification, or replacement" includes basic components of "spiritual continuity" to facilitate the path of development (Walcott, 2011).

The major concerns in the recent past are conserving forests and urban development. The contemporary times have witnessed the altered mechanisms for modernity yet at slow-paced and highly fixed in nature. According to Yeshey; Shrestha; Schmidt-Vogt and Qasim (2018), the cultivable lands of Bhutan, are seriously threatened by land degradation. To control soil erosion problems, an appropriate approach to soil management was considered significant. The attempts "to characterize and document conventional and community land management approaches applied in Chukha and Dagana districts, respectively. The endeavors applied to benchmark its "social, economic and environmental impacts" on participating farmers. This type of approach had a considerable impact on the level and intensity of farmers' participation in the program, the implementation of "soil erosion control measures (SECM)" and the social, economic and environmental impacts. The comparisons between "community-based approach" and "conventional approach" reflect the status and popularity of these approaches among people. Various attributes of the community approach are expressing the reasons for usage among the respondents. The traditional approach has been left behind though it tried to charm the people with the innovative aspects. Thus, the community-based approach had a higher potential than the conventional approach "to meet the diverse requirements of rural subsistence farming communities in Bhutan". The recent inclination towards the ICTs has been associated with the GNH [3] in Bhutan.

Ecotourism and Bhutan

The role of information is spanned beyond the usual course of monarchy and democratic government for sustainable development. Since, tourism is gravely woven in Bhutan's cultural and economic growth; the ICTs play an instrumental part in facilitating the steps, scope, and sophistications of modern governance, growth and "gravitational" factor to people, in general. Montes and Kafley (2019) believe that the traits and characteristics of ecotourism function as a boon for futuristic growth. Bhutan, "a small kingdom of the Himalayas", has been a strong example of marketing and promoting ecotourism. This focus has been framed due to the infused concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This may be considered and as a "philosophy of local development derived from Buddhist ethics and Bhutanese values". The understanding of the "ecotourism" societies has "ethnographic evidence" of diversity and prosperity among man, society and the environment. Such diversity and prosperity are generating the divergences, which are "representative of an underlying neoliberal logic and discourse that drives the ecotourism sector".

Bhutan and Recent ICT Roadmaps

The technology could not pave its way in Bhutan till late. Almost three decades ago, the country had the advent of first-ever television broadcast in 1999 and though the license for the television station was granted during 1980s [3]. The arrival of this basic one-way mass communication medium opened the doors for the later information communications technology (ICT) advancements. It is nearly a surprise that the mobile subscriptions began early in 2003 where the entire world was enveloped in mobile communications networks. During the year 2015, there has been tremendous growth in the mobile subscriptions as 87 per 100 persons and internet use [1] by 40%. Current times have observed the networking of fiber optic cables in major districts. These developments are distinguishing factors to reflect the growth of ICTs in Bhutan.

During 2015 Bhutan brought upon an ICT policy and roadmap [1] intending to consider the goals which included aims to have ICT Infrastructure with the citizen and business (central and participative)

approach to have investment-friendly environment. The ICT roadmap contributed towards the facilitation of ease of access to information while creating a transparent and accountable ICT lifestyle. These goals are to create learning and responsible society to have an active role in preserving and promoting culture. According to, the “World Bank’s 2016 World Development Report” related to “Digital Dividends” has been able to assert the role of ICTs in opportunities and service deliveries. The growth in ICTs, mechanisms, and implementations became instrumental in the contexts of reducing the economic isolation by factors such as the removals of trade barriers, improving mobility and tourism. The Bhutan ICT Roadmap and Bhutan E-Government Master plan along with The Government to Citizen (G2C) program are providing glimpses of ICTs inclusion and governance and citizens’ advantages. In these perspectives, the national ePayment Gateway Infrastructure was established by the Royal Monetary Authority (RMA). RMA is the central bank that made efforts to augment the online payments for services. The further developments in this direction are in the form of “eCitizen Portal” [2]. This portal is an outcome of the endeavors of the National Land Commission (NLC) for solving the problems of urban development. This portal is facilitating the transfer of property titles online. This attempt of NLC is involving the private sector for feedback as well as improvement in the service. Few other ICT related attempts and establishments are including electronic government procurement system (e-GP) [4], Thimphu Tech Park [5], and an initiative in the form of ICT College (Ishihara, 2017) in 2017. These endeavors have enhanced the provisions of affordable internet connectivity and minimizing the digital divide while placing it 117th rank among 175 countries in the 2016 ICT development index. The ICT policies of Bhutan have been emphasizing on the use of Google Apps, strengthening the e-Government Interoperability Framework and bringing various projects through e-Governance.

Conclusion

‘Gross National Happiness’ has been the cardinal principals of Bhutan’s growth and development philosophy. And, ICT has been an important tool of GNH, another model of growth and development that the Kingdom has followed over the last twenty years. The alternative model of growth and development places comprehensive

prosperity and human happiness at the heart of the growth equation. In the contemporary world order, no country can refrain from the external world. Despite of geographical, historical, and cultural limitations Bhutan was bound to expose to the outside world. Being a resource-starved nation it requires external assistance. So the major problem of Bhutanese development policy is that it can’t allow uncontrolled and limitless cooperation; as Bhutan has given more priority to people’s happiness over material well being. Further, the preservation of culture and the environment is also an important issue. This also entails the formularization of development policy in such a way so that external exposure does not pollute its long-established cultural fabric and the environment. The aristocracy of Bhutan has to be vigilant about the limitations put down by the ‘Gross National Happiness’ while implementing the ICTs operations. Hence, a balanced ICT approach is needed to achieve the goals of GNH.

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