

Deconstructing The Strategic Politics Of ‘Development As Happiness’ In The Kingdom Of Bhutan

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Bhutan has been at the forefront of a new paradigm of thinking about development at the global level. It has been pushing for the same at the international platform of United Nations. This article offers a critical deconstruction of an oft overlooked rationale underlying Bhutan’s interest in effecting a transformation of development thinking. It employs the Social Constructivist approach while making the key argument.

Introduction

The UN General Assembly adopted a path breaking Resolution in July, 2011 titled, “Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development” that kick started international deliberations towards securing a major rethinking on the way development has been conventionally understood. The motivation for this move came from a growing realisation that the predominant conceptualisation of development¹ that has been followed in the west and beyond where ‘development’ and ‘progress’ were viewed as being coterminous with emulating or catching up with the western capitalist countries, was largely failing. “The dominant growth-based model had maximised productivity, increased income and consumption, created prosperity for atleast some, and made life longer, easier and more comfortable-for those able to exploit its potential. But it had also reached its ecological, social, cultural and economic limits and there was growing agreement globally that the world and humanity now needed a development vision that could guide society towards higher and more meaningful advancements.” (Report, 2)

It is interesting to note that the Kingdom of Bhutan had been at the forefront of this novel move. The UN General Assembly Resolution numbered, 65/309 was initiated by Bhutan at the UN. Thereafter in 2012 the Kingdom hosted a High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing & Happiness: Towards a New Economic Paradigm at the UN. Subsequently, the King of Bhutan established a Steering Committee and an International Expert Working Group to chalk out the contours of

¹ As given by the Modernisation Theory.

a new paradigm of development thinking which would be inspired by the concept of Gross National Happiness that was being followed in that country since much earlier.

While the world is not mistaken in thinking that Bhutan spearheading this novel initiative reflected the tiny Himalayan kingdom's ethical commitment to human well being, environmental sustainability and the preservation of culture, it is argued here that what is often being missed out is that an equally powerful rationale animating Bhutan's role has been strategic. It is further argued that given the relatively weak status of Bhutan in the international political scene -at least when judged by conventional Realist and Liberal standards of military might and economic prowess and size-GNH is being used by the Kingdom as a soft power tool, an ideological device to make an impact in world politics through the might of a novel 'idea' in order to set up an impregnable insulation against the vulnerabilities that stand to violate its prized sovereignty that the Kingdom has long guarded, so zealously, ever since its inception as a State. The latter reflects an ambitious attempt at social constructivism at the international level that is intended to effect a change in the predominant global discourse of development such that it is brought to conformity with the Kingdom's strategic requisites while at the same time catering to key global concerns of the present age in an appealing manner so that GNH can effectively acquire the competence to inform and eventually displace the existing development discourse as the preponderant 'inter-subjective consensus'.

GNH and Bhutan's Strategic Interests

Until the latter part of the 20th century, the Kingdom of Bhutan maintained an isolationist policy towards foreign countries and towards world politics at large. In this long period, the Kingdom was striving to establish lasting internal stability and peace. It began to open up very gradually since around the 1960s. It secured membership of the UN by 1971 and joined other regional organisations and expanded bilateral relations with other countries from this time. (Long, 2019) The need to open up was not entirely voluntary. It was motivated by the geo-strategic threats posed by China's incursions along a disputed border with Bhutan that pushed the latter to seek closer ties with India. Simultaneously, the Kingdom started opening up to the world on the economic front as well. However, it was well aware of the implications of the onslaught of market forces for their unique culture, the environment and natural resources and the well being of their people at large. According to the Report submitted to the UN General Assembly, the current model of development is bound to produce ecological crisis, degrade distinctive cultures, precipitate a crisis of governance and undermine human well being. While these concerns are worrisome for all countries across the globe, they're particularly alarming for Bhutan because the survival of that country critically hinges upon the preservation of its natural environment, its unique cultural identity and rich spiritual values derived from Buddhist ethos. The Kingdom's political sovereignty depends on all of these. But there is little that Bhutan could do to prevent these fears from materialising once it opens up its economy to the global economy, given that its military and economic resources are meagre and the nation cannot survive without allowing integration with the global capitalist economic network and market forces admit no ethical limits to commodification. It was in this context that the Kingdom

spearheaded initiatives at the UN to push for transformation of the very paradigm of thought within which the predominant global discourse of development has been based.

Attempts to Alter the Global Discourse on Development

According to Social Constructivism, the world exists only in the form of an “inter-subjective awareness, or a common understanding among people; in that sense the system is constituted by ideas, not by material forces.” They argue that “Ideas must be widely shared to matter” “If the thoughts and ideas that enter into the existence of international relations change, then the system itself will also change, because the system consists of thoughts and ideas.” (Sorensen, 213)

Bhutanese domestic economic policy has prioritised the pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH) over Gross National Product (GNP), the latter being made subservient to the former. According to the GNH paradigm, economy is a tool of society instead of it being the other way round. The pursuit of economic growth cannot be allowed to undermine non-economic values such as culture preservation, environment sustainability and human well being and interdependence with all other living species. Such non-economic values ought to enjoy equal worth and priority in policy making.

However, Bhutan’s alternative approach to development is bound to perish if it is pitted against the conventional understandings of sustainable development that continue to place highest priority on material growth itself, albeit with reformist adjustments made to limit the extent of environmental damages. The Kingdom held that “...applying the GNH philosophy in practical terms in its own development process is a difficult challenge because Bhutan still has to function in a GDP-based world. To take just one example, Bhutan pledged at the Copenhagen climate summit to remain a net carbon sink in perpetuity, but global greenhouse gas emissions will still melt its glacial lakes and cause grievous flooding in its vulnerable valleys. And so, we have come to realise that we cannot achieve our GNH vision alone, and have humbly asked the global community to share our vision and join Bhutan’s effort to forge a new development path.” (Report, 2)

As such, it is argued that the Kingdom has embarked on an ambitious bid to assume and exercise a soft, ideational form of power that stands on its own might since it lacks the foundation of being a nation that is powerful in the conventional terms of possessing huge military and economic might that would ensure that its views and ideas are heard and influential in world politics. In other words, Bhutan’s push for a New Development Paradigm resembles a bid to achieve an ideational hegemony premised entirely on the might of the idea that it advocates, rather than pushing it on any other material basis. In such a context, the success of Bhutan’s endeavour rests on it being able to speak to the interests of other nations as much as its own. The Kingdom has attempted to ingeniously appropriate the opportunity afforded by the rising global concerns against the neo-liberal model of development, especially in terms of its adverse impact on the environment and equity, to plant the seed of an altogether new paradigm of development that would no longer pose a threat to its sovereignty in ways that the existing model does. Scholars have delineated core features of the new paradigm of development that can be seen to be clearly compatible with the requirements of Bhutan, a

country that is struggling to strike a difficult balance between preserving its distinctive cultural and political arrangement in a world whose values are powerful and markedly at odds with their's. For instance, whereas material wealth is top priority of conventional development, NDP prioritises life above all. Again, where market based development promotes increasing the dissolution of borders, "New Paradigm economies must organize territorially as subsystems of their bioregional eco-communities with protective boundaries required at every level of organization—from the household and community to the region and nation—to maintain the integrity, coherence, and resource efficiency of their internal processes and to protect the social units they define against intrusion by social and economic parasites." (Korten, 9) Yet another difference consists in that the conventional model of development fails to fetter the market forces. But according to NDP, "In a democratic society, the only legitimate role of a corporation is to serve, not to rule. It has many obligations to society, but no rights beyond and independent of the rights of living persons and human and natural communities." (Korten, 9) NDP also offers a solution to the challenge of a lack of responsibility that often accompanies market based development due to concentration of ownership in a few hands. "By contrast, the structures of the New Paradigm system support equitable, responsible ownership participation by people who have strong roots in the place where they live and a natural interest in the health of its air, water, soils, and other natural systems. This means that those who make the decisions bear the consequences of their decisions—along with neighbours who share in the decision-making and are in a position to each other accountable." (Korten, 11)

Conclusion

As it began to relax its isolation from the world around the 1960s, one of the greatest threats to Bhutan's sovereignty came in the economic realm, from predominant model of capitalist development. If global markets were to be given full access, cold calculations of profit would have become the means through which Bhutan's culture, environment and politics would have been taken over. A country that has guarded its sovereignty so zealously ever since its inception, could never let that happen. But it also lacked the conventional resources to check that. It was in this context that the concept of GNH came handy. How? It redefined development in a way that stopped economics being prioritised over politics, culture and environment. It asserted that economics should rather be brought under these and made to serve these rather than it being that these being exploited to serve economics. The world lauded this as reflecting Bhutan's commitment to environment, culture and human well being. However, as this paper argued, Bhutan promoting GNH at the international level reflects an equally powerful strategic rationale aimed at insulting the country's sovereignty that risked being undermined through the inroads on the economic front. It is argued that Bhutan approached this defensive strategy in a creative manner, by resorting to a soft, ideational form of power as it clearly lags behind in terms of the conventional modes.

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