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A jewel in the Himalayan crown

The measure of progress that Bhutan wishes to use is Gross National Happiness, which could be a package of self strength, economic well-being and social homogeneity, writes Devaki Jain

Suddenly the plane dipped, like a water bird, almost perpendicularly into the water. It was the aircraft landing in a little bowl surrounded by hills on an airstrip which looked as if it was no more than 100 metres. Flying into that bowl, one felt one could touch first, Mount Everest looking utterly graceful and sharp. Sites like the statue of liberty and the Empire State look absurd when you have a sighting of Mount Everest. Then there is the Kanchenjunga, a much wider snowed peak, extraordinary in its own way like a piece of unique architecture. A Picasso?

We landed in Paro, the only town with an airport (Thimpu is the capital about two or more hours drive away). The administrative headquarters of Paro district is a jewel from the outside like some of the mosques of Turkey. Entering the Governor's room was like going through the Ajanta caves, as all the walls were painted and each had a story to tell of Buddhist philosophy.

There was this huge wall painting in the corridor leading to the Governor's room, which had a Buddha of about six feet, painted and then the cycle of life and reincarnation as envisioned by Buddhist philosophy. I was taken aback to see a painting of a couple who were obviously copulating with a blanket on top of them and then next to that, a naked woman with a baby thrusting out of her backside. My friend, a sophisticated Bhutanese young officer of the administration, who had been educated in India in the best schools and colleges, said: "This represents our philosophy of being conceived, born and then becoming adult and then hell or heaven, depending on how you spend your life".

I had the privilege of visiting a farm house. There was only one woman there, aged above 60 and my escorts called her 'Amma'. Though the house had three stories, I was told there was nothing on the ground floor. If I wanted to visit her, I had to go to the first floor and the stairs were almost perpendicular, just no inches wide, made of wood and yet, not as comfortable as a ladder. Having climbed that, there were these four or five chambers, each with paintings on the wall. A veritable art gallery inside and outside. How could such discipline in the architecture be sustained, I asked. I was told that there was a law to punish those who did not build according to the traditional Bhutanese concept.

Similarly there were laws which insisted that men and women, especially if they are working in government, wear the traditional Bhutanese dress. All the knee length stockings that men were wearing looked fresh, no ladders and seemed to grip! Somewhat of a surprise, as most of my life knee length stockings which I had to wear in school always seemed to dribble down. So with curiosity, I asked "How come everyone is wearing such good stockings. What are they made of? Where do they come from?" The answer was, Thailand. And then it went on to say that most of our material including the textiles, with which we make some of our clothes when they are not pure cotton, comes from Thailand.

And indeed, that is what we found when we were in Manipur or Meghalaya that Thai fabrics and Thai readymades are more suited to those who lived in those areas and also because there was great ethnic similarity, a cultural homogeneity of a kind that is difficult to specify in academic terms.

One of our colleagues from outside Bhutan referred to what he called the Bhutan trademark and brand, Gross National Happiness, GNH. The concept of GNH as a substitute for not only Gross Domestic Product or Gross National Income but also what can be called the Human Development Report — has been an intriguing Bhutanese experience.

Intriguing as it is claimed that the Bhutanese are experiencing gross national happiness – and it's charm lies in its immeasurability; and the claim is that the citizens are experiencing a form of well being and connectivity amongst themselves and a sense of bonding through the 'preserved culture' that gives them a sense of happiness. Simultaneously, the measure of progress that Bhutan wishes to use is national happiness, which could be a package of self strength, economic well being and social homogeneity.

The Bhutanese government has decided to expand its tourism potential and invited the high-profile, what they call star hotel companies to open hotels in Bhutan. Tatas have already been signed up. They are very proud of the fact that they are taking the high-end hotels and want to stay with what is called high-end tourism. For example, they charge \$ 200 per day to those who require visas which fortunately Indians don't require. The building of these hotels and furnishing them would require enormous amount of imports of everything from steel girders to room linen to pipes and so forth. Therefore there would be an influx of contractors, engineers, service providers into this jewel in the Himalayan crown. It is difficult to imagine that the 'harmony' which in turn has been one of the basic foundations of gross national happiness could survive such an onslaught.

Two young judges of the Bhutanese high court, who I spoke with, seemed unperturbed even as they described with pride, the entry of these hotels and high-profile tourism. They argued that it would give employment to their young and ensure that some of their features were preserved. They were in fact looking forward to that world which comes with tourism.

This kind of change is the reality. It is difficult to imagine any country or even any social group at this time in the globe to try to 'preserve' the socio political culture of an economy. With the connected world and with the young people moving out of these cultural preserves for education into the world and electoral politics and international tourist traffic, one cannot keep that isolation.

Some aspects of the gross national happiness can be attributed to the fact that the economy in Bhutan is a subsistence economy. As we fly over Bhutan or drive through Bhutan, one only sees food crops being grown, mainly rice. This is a feature of all the countries, and when one sees land from a plane, for example, we see that people like to grow food first, and in mountainous areas, it is usually small plots in which they grow for self consumption. So rice is grown in every corner, even in small kitchen gardens for self consumption, in Bhutan.

With food, water, vegetables, poultry, animal all within reach in every homestead, and therefore none as they say is 'going to bed hungry', children looking solid, plump, climbing all over the mountains like goats, it is not difficult to understand why they have gross national happiness. In such circumstances, you neither want, nor are wanted. And that is the rub. I

have seen that kind of inward-looking economy of household level contentment on what can be called the basic minimum even in the earlier unmolested Narmada valley.

A household had access to food crops, vegetables, fruits, water. What people needed was education and health services and once that is proximate, it looks almost as if the world ends.

But the world doesn't end there as young people begin to taste the other side of such preserves. A taste of honey, it was once said and therefore Bhutan is on its way out. When it goes out, it will have in my view, a challenge to promote its trademark product, gross national happiness. Perhaps it will become an exportable, as it loses its tether on home ground.