

NORTH STAR FOR THE NATION – Gross National Happiness, a Beacon of Hope for a Better World.
By Thakur S. Powdyel from *Bhutan – A Mosaic of the Dragon*

Every nation needs a dream to beckon it and to edify it to a purpose beyond the mundane and the momentary. Every person needs a vision that calls the mind to a realm that stays and satisfies. Every man, woman and child yearns for joy that 'stills the tooth that nibbles at the soul'.

It looks as though the Jewel of the Himalayas, the Kingdom of Bhutan, was destined to dream that dream, forge that vision, and communicate the eternal longing of the human heart. It fell on the youngest monarch in the world then, Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck, to articulate the fundamental truth about all human beings in all parallels and meridians we all look for happiness.

For a world long accustomed to measuring progress by the conventional yardstick of Gross Domestic Product, the idea of Gross National Happiness was an intriguing novelty, but some four decades since the new development paradigm was articulated, humanity seems to be listening. Having gone through a catharsis of sorts, a thirsty world is looking for a fresh breath of air, a new lease of life. The promise of unlimited progress accompanied by unlimited happiness seems more of a mirage.

Where did the rains start beating humanity? Is there an alternative to this headlong rush to an uncertain end? Gross National Happiness is a call to the rational principle of the world, an invocation to the humanity of the humans, an affirmation of the healing promise of nature.

Bhutan's over-arching development philosophy of Gross National Happiness is founded on the belief that:

- The ultimate desire of all human beings, regardless of time and space, is to be happy. It is, therefore, the responsibility of governments to create the necessary conditions to support the experience of happiness.
- The profound needs of human beings are not necessarily material or physical, but that there are other deeper dimensions of life - natural, social, cultural, spiritual, psychological, aesthetic, moral - that make life worthwhile and meaningful, and that they need to be nurtured.
- There is no necessary relationship between the level of material well-being and the level of happiness - they could in fact be antithetical to each other.
- The goal of life cannot be limited to an endless cycle of production and consumption, more production and more consumption...
- The conventional, linear, uni-dimensional measure of progress, otherwise called GDP, is too limited and reductionist, as it leaves out other significant, non-economic factors. Gross National Happiness is therefore, a more holistic, integrated, and balanced approach to development.

In honour, therefore, of the integrity of life and of society, Bhutan has made a conscious decision to harmonize the needs of the body with the yearnings of the soul. To this end, we have identified four principal domains otherwise called pillars to support the architecture of the Gross National Happiness programme.

1. Balanced and equitable socio-economic development,
2. Conservation of the natural environment,
3. Preservation and practice of culture, and
4. Promotion of good governance.

We believe that if we care enough and share enough all of us in the world will have enough. But since not all of us care and share enough, disparities arise resulting in resentment and unhappiness. It is, important, therefore, to ensure that the benefits of development are shared equitably amongst all regions and people.

Bhutan's concerted efforts at spreading development programmes and facilities around the country are intended to take services to the people at the grassroots level. The royal government's guiding principle

of equity and justice ensures that the minimum development programme including communication facilities, clean drinking water, electricity, education, health, agricultural services, among others, reaches all sections of the population. The goal is to ensure that every Bhutanese citizen has the basic economic security and social well-being to live a decent and fulfilling life.

Famed as one of the ten biodiversity hotspots in the world, Bhutan is home to some of the rarest animal, plant and bird species spread across a wide range of altitudes and vegetation types from the sub-tropical to the alpine. The wise policies of the royal government have ensured that economic gains that could accrue from the exploitation of our natural resources do not come at the cost of environmental sustainability. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan provides that at least 60% of the country should be under forest cover for all times to come. Bhutan could be the only country in the world today that has pledged to remain a net carbon sink in perpetuity.

For us, there is more to nature than meets the eye. Generations of our ancestors have depended upon the bounty of nature not only to meet their many physical needs, but also as the abode of myriad spiritual beings and guardian deities. We feel a natural connection with the infinite life-forms and derive support and sustenance from the natural environment. The sanctity and strength of this cooperation between the human and the natural is crucial for the sustenance of life and the experience of security and happiness.

Culture is to a people what the soul is to the body. It is the living, flowing breath of a community, the pulse, the guiding principle of a people. Culture is the statement, the orientation, the world-view of a nation. For Bhutan and the Bhutanese, culture is a very dear part of our life. It expresses itself in our customs and costumes, art and architecture, language and literature, songs and dances and sport, rites and rituals, prayers and worship, celebrations and observances, beliefs and superstitions, faith and philosophy, signs and symbols, sounds and silences. Culture gives us our identity as a nation and is vital for our happiness.

Good governance is a function of service and informs all other pillars. Our enlightened leaders have dedicated their entire life to the service of our people. The advent of democracy makes governance at all levels - individual, family, institutional, social, national - even more crucial as expectations rise and demands increase. We have to ensure that governance becomes an instrument of service and that Bhutanese democracy matures into a reasonable, respectable, and an honourable means of creating the essential conditions for the well-being and happiness of our people.

If a nation has a dream, it falls upon the noble sector, otherwise called education, to embrace and advance that dream. But just as GNH is a refreshing departure from the dominant economic model of development, so also the country's education system must follow a new paradigm that combines the need to sharpen brains and skills with the need to build faith and character. We have, therefore, launched a nationwide programme called Educating for Gross National Happiness to be achieved by nurturing Green Schools for Green Bhutan.

A green school engages and empowers all the elements of the learner including the natural, intellectual, academic, social, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic and moral, producing in effect a GNH graduate who displays the qualities of usefulness and gracefulness, and more! When such a graduate enters the larger society, he or she should be able to release much goodwill and positive energy and make the world a better place to live in. It is the vision of a more hearing, more seeing and a more feeling world built on a new ethic, a new educational civilization, if you will.

Gross National Happiness is the call of the North Star, vision of a life more beautiful, a world more meaningful. GNH is a dream, a plea, a prayer.

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