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WHAT CAN INDIA LEARN FROM BHUTAN?

History

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"I believe that we have a lot to learn from Bhutan," the Ex P.M. of India, Mr. Manmohan Singh said while welcoming Bhutan Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley, who delivered the fourth Prof. Hiren Mukerjee Memorial Annual Parliamentary Lecture on "Gross National Happiness: A Holistic Paradigm for Sustainable Development" on December – 21st, 2011, in New Delhi. The lecture was peppered with Bhutan's success story on measuring the happiness of its people. "Fifty two per cent of Bhutan citizens are happy while 45 per cent are very happy. Only 3 per cent are not very happy," he said. The tiny nation has a big lesson to teach a development hungry nation. Mighty India should learn anything from little Bhutan?

For centuries until the 1960s when roads made the country accessible to the outside world, Bhutan was known as a forbidden land. Its isolation was not a deliberate political or historical choice but a consequence of its geography. Compared to its neighbors, Bhutan's population density is quite low—about sixteen persons per square kilometer. Bhutan is still a predominantly agrarian country, with 79 percent of the population dependent on agriculture

for its livelihood and all Bhutanese owning their own land. However, because of geography, only about 8 percent of the land is arable. Forest covers approximately 72 percent of Bhutan's territory, and perpetual snows cover nearly 20 percent.

Bhutan aspires to be a country where development is holistic, inclusive and sustainable. It proposes an inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic development. It calls for a new global economic paradigm founded on environmental sustainability and social equity to promote happiness and wellbeing of all forms of life on earth. The aspiration comes from the visionary statement "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product" first enunciated by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan in the early 1970s, long before sustainable development became a global agenda.

Bhutan is the only country to have officially adopted gross national happiness instead of the gross domestic product as the main development indicator. In 2006, based on a global survey, *Business Week* rated Bhutan the happiest country in Asia and the eighth-happiest in the world. Bhutan's GNH Index is a multidimensional measure and it is linked with a set of policy and programme screening tools so that it has practical applications. The GNH index is built from data drawn from periodic surveys which are representative by district, gender, age, rural-urban residence,



etc. Bhutan embraces a development philosophy that it calls "Gross National Happiness" (GNH), which focuses on 72 "happiness indicators" including the mental health of its citizens, pollution levels, the crime rate, and income distribution. Bhutan's gross national happiness index that bases itself upon equitable social development, cultural preservation, conservation of the environment and promotion of good governance has lots to teach us in India. India can take a leaf out of Bhutan's experience in measuring national welfare through the unique Gross National Happiness index.

The kingdom of Bhutan today has 72.5% of its total land area under forest cover, much of which is primary forest. The kingdom's rich forest cover and its high GHG sequestration potential and its wealth of floral and faunal biodiversity are the results of His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's enlightened policy on nature conservation.

In 2008, Bhutan made the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck transferred most of his administrative powers to the Council of Cabinet Ministers and allowing for impeachment of the King by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly. It has an annual budget of about \$13.7 million (1.8 percent of GDP).

Tourism is another area in which India can learn a lesson or two from Bhutan. Today Bhutan attracts more than 100,000 foreign tourists a year and they have brought with them foreign exchange and modern ideas but because of the Bhutanese government's emphasis on preservation of the country's culture and its environment the degradation that has happened in popular Indian tourist destinations is not evident. Bhutan's extensive forest cover, rich biodiversity and clean water resources are the major tourist promoters.

The standing army numbers about 16,000 and is trained by the Indian Army. It also has no air force or army aviation corps. Bhutan is sandwiched between the two most populous countries on our planet, China (actually Tibet) and India. Yet as neighbor countries have been subsumed by these two Goliaths (China – Tibet; India – Sikkim and Ladakh), Bhutan has remained independent and in its history has never been successfully invaded. It is the only country to have successfully banned smoking and the use of tobacco-related products. Bhutan's state religion is Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism is the second-largest religion.

There are numerous “small” things that Indian leaders need to learn from their counterparts from the “little” Himalayan kingdom. Some of them are simplicity, courtesy, frankness, approachability and humility. The children of the royal family attended state-run schools. If true, it said a lot about the commitment to the fraternal and egalitarian aspects of democracy on the part of even the royalty in that country. In India, leaders are treated more as a privileged lot. Bhutan might be a small country but it has a large heart and India has a lot to learn from it.

It is undoubtedly a difficult paradigm to follow given our size, complexity and also the vastly different aspirations of the youth in this country, which would perhaps dismiss such goals as deluded and impracticable for a modern industrializing economy with ambitions to become a global superpower. But for the newly elected PM, facing intense pressure from industry and global investors to deliver GDP growth at any cost, Bhutan's inclusive approach provides a valuable framework for keeping social, human, environmental and economic rationales at the forefront of public policy, than merely chasing a captivating GDP number come what may.



A major reason for Bhutan's smooth and successful development was that Bhutan possessed a powerful vision, which evolved from the country's unique historical, geopolitical and sociological circumstances and determined the broad framework, how to proceed. Climate change and global warming are significant challenges that the world, particularly the developing and least developed countries, face this century. Although LDCs like Bhutan contribute the least to global warming, they will nonetheless be seriously affected by the impacts of climate change. So big countries like India should realize that climate change is not just an environmental problem but a serious challenge to sustainable development and the livelihood.

More than a thousand years ago, the great Indian teacher Padmasambhava came to the remote part of the eastern Himalayas now known as Bhutan. Although Padmasambhava (or "Guru Rinpoche," as he is known in Bhutan) was not the first Buddhist teacher to come to this part of the Himalayan region, his presence proved to be a defining and lasting influence on the life and culture of Bhutan. Laws preserve the cultural traditions that give Bhutan its distinct identity. They encourage all Bhutanese to wear traditional dress in public (which helps keep alive important weaving traditions) and strictly regulate the preservation and practice of Bhutan's superb architecture and traditions. Regular government and monastic patronage and large projects for the restoration and renovation of dzong's monasteries, and other historic structures guarantee that traditional artists and craftspeople maintain the highest standards.

The first international visit of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bhutan can be a great blessing if our development driven leader becomes a willing student. the Himalayan kingdom's unique

people-centric growth model could still teach Perhaps the leaders of the world's largest democracy has something to learn from the leaders of the world's smallest. A sense of humour, may be?

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