

Gross National Happiness: a respite from a biblical economy or attaining Utopia ?

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The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is coming of age. As a western-minded individual, with a rather material, rational and even dialectal way of thinking, I do not presume that I may reach the holistic intellectual and spiritual heights necessary to treat the issue. However, I dare to raise a single, more mundane point, which the concept of Happiness in the Bhutanese context, will have to pass as one of its most severe tests.

Due to its innate tenet of noble material sufficiency, Buddhism has hardly felt the need to develop any economic theory on its own - beyond the economic thought of a rather egalitarian economic subsistence (paradoxically, this is exactly where its overwhelming philosophical strength rests). Let us compare it to Christianity: with its "go and conquer the world", Christianity has served as a basis for the economic thinking of both the individual ownership on the means of production and the surplus production. That resulted in a highly resilient system of capitalistic market economy as a base of western (Christian) civilization and individual-oriented values. Islam also nurtured its own economic pattern (e.g. financial system). And this contrasts with the ancient Hindu caste system, which to a large degree predetermined the social division of labour (and wealth) and branded its own economic paradigm. But in the world increasingly dominated by the western, basically Christian individualist consumerism, epitomized by Bretton Woods levelling paradigms, Buddhism is rather vulnerable to the assertive, at least partly psychological challenge, of material wealth beyond the basic needs, i.e., subsistence. Thailand is quoted here just as an example. So far, Buddhism has not incorporated an answer to this challenge.

To put it in more practical terms: The era of surplus production induced the market as a new social and economic category. The market functions on the principle of competition – and where there is a competition, there are winners and losers. How does one define the Happiness of a market loser (I recall the tearful face of the Japanese bank manager (Yamaichi Securities) who had to confess that his bank filed for bankruptcy)? How is GNH consistent with growing surplus production, its increasingly uneven distribution, the underlying (and alien) novelty of private, individual ownership of the means of production? How does one prevent the GNH concept from being compared to the Eurocommunist approach of the “Socialism with the human face” in the seventies – the one in which the competition would produce only winners and whose failure (together with the so-called real-socialism of the Soviet Union type) prompted Fukuyama to declare the end of history? Or just plainly: is GNH possible in an exogenously conditioned economic setup with biblical origins?

The achievement of GNH can not be sought through any of the existing economic concepts of development. There is still no theory of development that can encompass that goal, without mainly resorting or falling back to the basic satisfaction of material needs of well-being in various degrees – what is, I assume, just one ingredient of Happiness. What I argue is, that there must be a key to the GNH concept and its economic implications at the philosophical, even theological level. And it will be no western economist, development worker or scholar who may provide an answer. It is most likely that the Buddhist theoretical discourse and a wider debate would have to provide the new economic GNH foundation. It is the worldly challenge that the sheltered buddhist teaching will have to stand up too. It would have to come out of its recluse, encompass the scholarly views on the secular side, to involve academia and research - if we want to provide the philosophical and theological base for the small Bhutanese answer to the current dictate of financial and real markets of the global village. A small, endogenous Bhutanese answer with Kanjur origins.

Bhutan is endowed with (of course very judiciously utilized) development grants and loans – which are however a shield of only a temporary nature (and further exogenously conditions the economic setup). The real quest for Happiness and its tool, the GNH concept, will have to stand the harsh, real-time proof on its own – sooner or later.

As long as her own brand of (Buddhist) economic philosophy is not sketched, Bhutan will have to linger along the path of globalization – if wanted or not. And the choice will be rather between Keynes and Friedman than between Gross National Product and Gross National Happiness – however ingrained with Asian or any values we may believe them to be.

Gross National Happiness: on attaining Utopia

In the first section I dared to argue that GNH seemed superficial - as long as it was based in the plainly Christian (biblical?) economic set of western values of private ownership of means of production and market competition. I would like to raise a further issue – the one of what is necessary for a society and its subjects to be happy, and what may hamper their happiness.

I would find it difficult to dwell on the definition of happiness itself. Probably it is even not at all necessary to define this basically relative or even agnostic term (and even less to measure it) in order to discern the ability of a particular society to provide for it to itself and its subjects. At the end, this is what matters to all of us as social beings.

But before this, a small diversion: it is interesting to note how young Bhutanese thinkers now attempt to quantify and rationalize the category that even most of the western schools of thinking acknowledge as being transcendental. They attempt it with the very extraneous tools of rational thinking, being currently imposed upon the nearly archetypal Buddhist society (of which they themselves are part): the traditional society being strongly exposed to the exogenous process of developmentally induced globalization, i.e., westernization. Disciples of Descartes in Guru Rinpoche's realm? Maybe in the years to come, Bhutan will be no longer so unlike other

countries as it is now? Here is the root of my thesis: that happiness has to do with opportunities at its base.

I agree, this in itself is already a western notion – but already endorsed by most eastern thinkers. The more opportunities a society may offer to itself and in a sequence to its subjects, the closer it may come to term happiness. Further on, the provision of reasonably well distributed opportunities the society has at its disposal in various areas, to the broad cross section of its subjects, may foster the attainment of social happiness. This means that the society may, by consciously shaping its own setup, offer conditions for happiness – but most probably not more than that. It may provide for happiness – but it can not (and should not) provide the happiness itself. A society, or more precisely: its polity, (unless it is of the Orwellian 1984 type) would be overtaxed by deciding what happiness is – and would overtax its subjects by deciding for them how happy they are. The happiness is just the inner feeling with which we may individually respond to the outer world – or we may not. It is not like personal income tax.

Accordingly, the actual setup or shape of the society (not only the *prima facie* setup) in various areas and on its various levels already defines the society in terms of its closeness to happiness. Because for the particular member of the society, it is mostly its true setup that defines what access to opportunities the member may or may not truly have.

If we talk of a *prima facie* setup: The triadic nature of western (Christian) democracy (the separation of the societal organization in the legislature, executive and judiciary) is currently at the root of most social arrangements throughout the world. The idea emphasizes the separation of the legs of the triad - which have to be represented by different social subjects, i.e., elements. This is supposed to provide a sort of checks and balance and prevent the significant misuse of power by one social group only. While there is a lot of merit in the triad idea, it is based on a rather single approach that the society is ruled by laws (created by legislature, executed by the executive and overseen by the judiciary) only.

But society is not only ruled by formal laws – and here is where the actual setup of society becomes interesting. A myriad of dynamic and intersecting spiritual, intellectual and materialistic interests, categories and social currents, representing those interests and categories, shape a society. There are many of them: politics, religions, churches, economies, ethnicities, traditions etc.

Just as in the triad of western democracy, it may be argued that the even spreading of opportunities as a precondition for social happiness requires social equidistance of these interests and categories. They should be rooted in different fractions and currents of the society – in order to provide for a balanced, holistic society. History offers plenty of frightening examples for what happens when this equidistance is not ensured and one social fraction assumes several roles leading to the hegemony of one fraction over the whole society.

How does Bhutan fare in terms of social equidistances? How does Bhutan distribute her opportunities? To start with: it may be argued that Bhutan moves quite firmly on the road of establishing the triad of western-like democracy. Maybe even more than it would admit to itself. Those (Westerners) studying the current status of affairs alone, may disagree: the legislature, the executive and the judiciary are still somehow a far cry of western democratic ideals (if they are the ones Bhutan should go for at all). But the trend towards the democracy triad is what matters: and this one has been irrevocably set in motion and is already producing tender but visible results.

But there will be a large obstacle on the road ahead. Parallel to the establishing of a western capitalist (biblical) economic setup (for which apparently no alternatives have been provided so far), the inevitable process of Bhutanese political differentiation is looming on a not so distant horizon. One may sincerely hope that this differentiation will also follow the western pattern of political polarization. Because the western polarization pattern develops along the usual fault lines of classes in capitalist (admittedly, mostly nation-state) societies, for which adequate “fault line management”

institutions (like chambers and trade unions) have already been devised. This is strongly opposed to the usual developing world pattern of political polarization along other social fault lines (like ethnicity, color, creed, clan or caste) – for which no successful institutional setups have been devised so far.

A Bhutanese onset of political differentiation along ethnic fault lines (or some other latent ones, like religious) would considerably diminish the choice of social opportunities to the society – and would accordingly impair the attainment of social happiness. Such differentiation may quite easily take root in the currently purported uneven distribution of opportunities among ethnic and even religious groups in Bhutan's ethnically and religiously diverse society. This is the GNH danger number one.

In the society somehow shy or unaccustomed of critically analyzing and scanning itself (or shy or unaccustomed of being critically analyzed and scanned by outsiders) it may be controversial to analyze the power relations beyond the *prima facie* system of governance. But one perceivable imbalance in the mentioned, ideal social equidistance is of paramount importance in the Bhutanese context when the distribution of future opportunities is concerned.

The issue is that the “economy”, or for that matter the accumulative, surplus producing economic establishment in Bhutan is still vested in the elite (elite by descent i.e. by clan) who are on their part still too close to “governance”. This has as a result the uneven distribution of opportunities and the growing gaps in wealth distribution in the society. The wealth, accumulated with the usual means in the usual setup of western values are being unambiguously adopted in Bhutan, and tend to be consumed and put on display in terms of the usual western values consumerism. This bodes badly for the even distribution of happiness. This provides too few opportunities for the inclusion of the current mainstream subsistence in the future mainstream market (surplus producing) economy. The vantage points of the emerging capitalist economy are already occupied by the elite – and, as

history learns, the elite will hardly vacate them on their own. This creates a sort of social hierarchy based on ownership and adds another, rather new social fault line in the so far rather egalitarian society: the fault line between the rich (the elite) and the poor. This is the GNH danger number two.

However, as with so many things in Bhutan, even this trend is just germinating. The “governance” has still got the chance to moderate the process, to attempt the more even spread of ownership on surplus value production and accumulation among society and to stronger distance the “economy” from itself – and as a result more evenly spread opportunities in the society.

A conclusion on a more general note: reluctantly or not, one has to acknowledge that the Marxist utopia of a working society in which all give according to their means and take according to their needs (meaning also the equal distribution of opportunities) comes pretty close to the gross nationally happy society – or the other way round. However, no society in the world and in the history has ever reached the intellectual, i.e., spiritual level and the material base required for that. Arguably, the utopia might be realized only in the moment when the whole humanity reaches necessary spiritual and material degree of development. A real utopia – even in Buddhist terms.

Until then, everyone shall have to produce and sell as much as one can – and hopefully be able to buy most of what one needs. And maybe be happy to live in the society that provides for opportunities to make one’s own choices in the process. At this moment in the history, we can not ask for more. Neither in Bhutan.

Though: carefully balancing her triads and other myriads, patching up her fault lines wherever she can and ubiquitously spreading social opportunities at her disposal, maybe Bhutan can show us in which utopian direction a small real terms step can be done today. And remain a bit unlike all other nations. We shall wait – and be maybe a bit more happy. Very individually – and all without measuring it.