

Bhutanese Democracy : Parallel Values

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Bhutan became a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008 with the first democratically elected government. Since then, three different parties have formed the government. Bhutan is heading into its fourth general election in 2023. One can safely say that we have come a long way in evolving our system of governance since 2008.

Bhutan is defining what it means to be a democratic state; one important indicator for the success of new democracies being that power is not consolidated with one party. Bhutan has succeeded in this, although there is a need for the opposition party to be more engaged. A free and fair electoral process without intimidation of the opposition party is a characteristic of a non-predatory State, according to Larry Diamond, 2008.

While system and structure are important milestones and foundations of democracy, values drive our policies, and it is equally important to discuss and debate these values. This can be formal and informal, and structurally or historically and culturally driven.

This article explores social justice and meritocracy that exist in parallel as formal values in the Bhutanese State. It aims to help understand the current democratic set-up through these values and what it entails in practice. Both values are core to Bhutanese governance because of cultural and historical perspectives but, at the same time, they are opposites in their essence, making it an interesting subject of inquiry to understand Bhutan's current governance system.

Depending on one's preference and ideological inclination, the interpretation of the core values of what constitutes a democratic form of governance might vary. However, the essential core values of democracy, such as liberty, justice, and equality, are considered the foundation of democratic principles.

For example, if one believes in liberalism, the inclination is to believe that "equality of opportunity" is justified on the essence of being an equal human being. If one believes in moderate socialism, then one tends to advocate for

“equality of outcome” on the basis that our social environment has a role to play in our abilities to achieve things – “the idea that one is born equally but made unequal by the social environment one is born and raised into”. In many ways, democratic countries are the reflection and collection of citizens who believe and have a preference for such values.

Social Justice

Social justice is loosely defined as fairness in the social aspect of our lives - the distribution of wealth and opportunities in a society that enables individuals to self-determine their full potential. According to Heywood (2003), social democrats and modern liberal thinkers refer to social justice as “an attempt to reconstruct the social order in accordance with moral principles that attempt to rectify social injustices”.

According to Aristotle, “just” would be that which secured and delivered happiness to the whole political community. In a sense, a just person reflected a just society that upheld the common good as the goal of the political community. John Rawls, in his theory of “justice as fairness,” states that inequality is justified so long as those inequalities lead to everyone’s advantage.

The core principle of social justice is for individual self-development. So the role of the State is to remove social conditions that might otherwise limit this development, or enable those that help. For Bhutan, social welfare in the form of free education and health care are two examples of enabling a social environment for its citizens for individual self-development.

Bhutan’s effort to measure its progress by Gross National Happiness (GNH), which is different from conventional methods, is in itself a telling policy on the State’s priority of human development and progress. Social justice is the underlying principle that drives the GNH philosophy. According to the Constitution of Bhutan, Article 9, Clause 7: “The State shall endeavour to develop and execute policies to minimise inequalities of income, the concentration of wealth, and promote equitable distribution of public facilities among people living in different parts of the kingdom.”

The main goal of the State in social democracy is to reduce social inequality by regulating the economy and providing social welfare schemes through a representative form of government. Germany, Sweden, and Denmark are

considered examples of social democratic states. For Bhutan, social justice is one of the most important values of democracy and the role of the State is to reduce social inequalities. Thus, it can be assumed that the type of democracy we have at present includes social democratic values.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, Article 9, Clause 20: “The State shall strive to create conditions that will enable the true and sustainable development of a good and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist ethos and universal human values.” During the third general elections in 2018, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party goal was to “narrow the gap” with a vision of an equitable society. Their main economic pledge was to create an “inclusive economy”. The current government’s tax revision in 2019 and its initiative on the Mines and Minerals Bill could be justified as its effort to narrow social inequality.

His Majesty’s “relief kidu” during the pandemic for people who have lost their source of income is a perfect example of a welfare scheme of a social democratic nature. Other examples would be the second government’s central school initiative and the current government’s free education for Classes 11 & 12 students. Both these initiatives were made to address inequalities directly or indirectly.

For example, the current government stated that the main reason for providing free education to Class 12 (by lowering the entry criteria to secure public financed schooling to 35%) was to reduce youth unemployment, since the unemployed youth population was highest among youths with a Class 10 qualification.

Meritocracy

Since the introduction of modern education in Bhutan in the early 1960s, meritocracy has been a formal value propagated by the State, although specific mention of this is only in the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) mandate. The fourth mission of RCSC is to “continue to maintain a small, compact and an efficient civil service that is merit-based”.

Meritocracy is defined as the distribution of goods (wealth and opportunities) as an award based on an individual’s merit (talent, effort, and achievement). The underlying principle of meritocracy is formal equality, which states that humans are essentially born equal but with unequal talent.

The role of the State then is to provide equal opportunity to the citizen, the outcome being dependent on individual talent and effort. This is also a fundamental principle of liberal democracy that promotes individualism and individual rights above everything. The State's role is to then create an enabling environment that allows individuals to flourish on their own terms and conditions.

In Bhutan, the public administration system, the RCSC's core value is meritocracy. The entry process into the civil service and the performance evaluation of civil servants are based on a meritocratic system. The current reform, mandated on the civil service in the form of a "Royal Kasho", is a testimony to how meritocracy has had its challenges in Bhutanese society.

The Position Classification System (PCS) was introduced in 2005. One of the main goals of PCS was to link "job" rather than the 'grade' to financial incentives, and that the promotion system needed to be revised to reinforce merit and make accurate assessments of the performance of civil servants," according to Lhawang (2016). However, 80% of civil servants received 'outstanding evaluation' and this misplaced evaluation, which was far from reality, was considered one of the main challenges of the PCS system.

Lhawang (2015) describes the case of "compassion misplaced" as a result of living in a small and collective society. The Annual Performance Agreement (APA) and Individual Work Plan assessment (IWP) were introduced under the new Performance Management System in 2017 by RCSC to promote "merit, productivity, and equity", to ensure uniform rule on human resource management for a "small, compact, and efficient civil service". However, the Royal Kasho on civil service reform in December 2020 notes that the intention and the process of evaluation never aligned in practice.

Parallel Values – Meritocracy and Social Justice

Both these values of social justice and meritocracy cohabit in the Bhutanese governance system at present. These values, philosophically and ideologically, are a paradox but, like in any country, the reality of life and governance exist in a complex web of paradox. One of the main challenges the RCSC has had in realising the meritocratic goals of civil servants is the inherent clash of values of meritocracy and social justice.

The formal values (social justice) of the State and the society are embedded in “Buddhist ethos and universal human values”. GNH also has its root in this fundamental essential foundation of Bhutan while meritocracy, in many ways, is embedded in individualism and competition, which does not sit well with the intrinsic social values of the people and the country.

For example, in the earlier PCS system, when a supervisor civil servant had to evaluate a junior colleague on a scale of 1-4 for their annual performance that would lead to promotion and other opportunities, many evaluators would rate their subordinates uniformly, not reflecting their actual performance. Hence 80% of civil servants were rated in the outstanding category.

On the other hand, almost all the welfare schemes, big or small, in Bhutan in many ways use “uniformity” as a measure of good schemes. Any segregation of affirmative action for a particularly vulnerable group is frowned upon as discrimination. The example is again of the central school initiative of 2014 by the PDP (People’s Democratic Party) government. The central schools were established across all dzongkhags and every school-going child qualified for the incentive (food, clothes, and beddings) as a parameter for the “common good”.

The number of central schools increased from 24 in 2015 to 64 in 2019. It was estimated that per-child expenditure in central schools would be Nu.49,000 per year. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE) 2021 annual education report, there are 64 central schools out of 569 schools. In 2017, 19.4% of the total government budget was accounted for education, a 10% average increase in the education expenditure was accounted for from 2014 to 2017 as per MoE’s Global Partnerships for Education Report 2018-2021.

This was the same for free education for Classes 11 and 12 by the current government. There has been no study done on the impact of the central school and free education for Classes 11 and 12 initiatives, on whether these policies helped to make the society more equal or, at least, helped improve the quality of education.

One contrast example, where the ruling government tried to initiate “need” policy action, was on women’s representation in politics. There have been numerous debates in public and national forums on women’s representation

in decision-making bodies, but any discussion on “affirmative action”, such as a quota system, has been both publicly and nationally “frowned upon”.

One of the PDP’s pledges during the second election in 2013 was to “establish a 20% quota for women in Parliament and local government”. However, this was never realised during their term. The PDP government had proposed a reservation of 30% seats from 47 seats in the National Assembly during its winter session in 2014. The proposal was declined on the grounds that there were other means of enhancing women’s participation in elections, and that the current election laws were not against women, despite the statistics suggesting otherwise. The women’s representation has increased from 8.3% in the 2013 election to 15.2% in 2018. However, this is far less than the global average of 20% women in Parliament.

Like any young democracy, such policies dissipate as soon as it comes, leaving a lot of unintended side effects. For example, the central school initiative is no longer implemented as initially planned and the Classes 11 and 12 free education initiative had issues with recourse and budget implications for the state.

A good question would be what will happen to the vulnerable group of students when the government stops such initiatives? What does this mean for our future goal of the common good? And ultimately, what does common good mean for us as a society?

Conflicts Arising from Parallel Values in Existence

From the above account it must have been apparent that we have not been excelling in either of the value implementations, but that is not the point of discussion here. What is important is what we make of the paradox and our future endeavours for achieving GNH goals through the democratic form of governance.

With both social justice and meritocracy, it is apparent that there is an underlying current at play in the system, formally or informally. In the case of meritocracy, we see how our communal values of “compassion” make us look out for each other, because the importance of our interdependence has overshadowed the formal meritocratic structure. Our “informal” communal value has come into direct collision with the formal meritocratic structure.

The principle of meritocracy is driven by individual merit, but because of unequal natural abilities and efforts some will become more prosperous than others.

At the heart of meritocracy is competition, based on one's talent and effort. Individuals who are talented and put in the effort, will achieve the success of their own will, and the role of the State is to foster these individual talents and efforts. From this perspective, one can see that Bhutanese communal values that promote interdependence and looking out for each other are at odds with competition and the individual talent and effort argument.

Studies done in public administration on informal norms shed light on why certain noble initiatives do not work in practice, due to a clash in core values. In the Bhutanese case of meritocracy, it can be said that this clash of formal and informal norms made it challenging for meritocracy to thrive. However, it does not mean that meritocracy is unsuitable for the Bhutanese system of governance. RCSC needs to explore a creative way to shield the well-intended meritocratic structure and process from the social values.

For the central school initiative and free high school policy, the “uniformity” argument in the social welfare schemes has had challenges for a developing country like Bhutan in terms of resources, not to mention that this breeds and reproduces evasive views of “entitlement” in all sections of society. Our lack of definition on what constitutes social justice, or our tendency of a “one size fits all” policy, because it is easy and popular, has been a major challenge for Bhutan.

According to John Rawls' “difference principle”, material inequalities are justifiable when they work to the advantage of the lesser well-off people in society. He advocates progressive taxing of the rich section of the society to provide for the “needs” of the socially disadvantaged group of people. From the social justice point of view, such discrimination is necessary, based on the “need principle”. The State is responsible for providing this need for the “less well-off” section of the society, to enable them to fully develop themselves.

We can all agree that no one wants to be born poor or discriminated against. If one is, then it is the responsibility of the State to create an enabling

environment to address inequities. However, in the Bhutanese context, a “difference principle” for need based action is almost seen to be against the ideals of social justice or common good, if you apply it to the central school initiatives and women’s representation in decision-making. I am, at this point, almost tempted to state that our social justice is also driven by formal equality principle rather than the principle of equity, and that common good stands for treating everyone “equally and in uniformity”.

The Education Blueprint 2014-2024 identified socio-economic background as one of the challenges to accessing education. Apart from remoteness and inaccessibility, poverty was one of the main reasons for school drop-outs. Hence recommendations to improve access to education for children in remote areas were made.

Also, the blueprint points out a significant difference in students’ performance due to disadvantaged backgrounds, both rural and urban. A recommendation on access to special education needs was also made. However, Bhutan, as a nation, is yet to define what constitutes a “vulnerable” group in our society.

It is interesting to note how social justice is clearly understood as uniformity and meritocracy clashing with Bhutanese communal values. Both the principles, if used well and with caution, can to some extent co-exist. However, for this to happen, there is a need for open dialogue and discourse on our GNH values. What does fairness and justice mean in this context? What are the contradictions that instigate healthy debate in a democracy?

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