

Preface

A Just and Harmonious Society

At a time when much of the world interpreted the purpose of development as economic development, Bhutan offered a higher goal for human development – happiness. The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), adopted by Bhutan as a measure of the development process, is now a globally known expression.

The theme for the Autumn 2024 issue of The Druk Journal is drawn from the credence that, for humankind, happiness is a more holistic vision for development. The premise is that, while the pursuit of happiness may be a personal quest, there can be no real happiness without the family, community and society. From this, we draw the concept of a contented nation.

Thus Bhutan’s vision for nation-building - “A just and harmonious society” (His Majesty The King – 2015, 2016) – is the theme of the 20th issue of The Druk Journal.

The Promise

There are different interpretations of happiness because there are different circumstances in different countries for different people. For Bhutan, His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who coined the phrase in 1979, has explained that happiness in Gross National Happiness is not temporary pleasures, but the deeper sense of contentment.

The discussions and arguments presented in the articles emphasise that there are numerous terms that broadly convey the same promise: Inclusivity, equality, equity, non-discrimination, and fair services. They are all generally in the context of universal human rights as it is internationally understood.

The world is committed to “leaving no one behind”. This is a promise of development, progress and prosperity adopted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signed by 193 countries of the United Nations. It is a pledge to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, and end

discrimination. Together with inclusion and participation, accountability and transparency as the guiding principles, it prioritises the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society.

Equality is imperative in moving towards substantive equality of opportunity and outcomes for all groups. Equity is fairness in the distribution of costs, benefits and opportunities. Non-discrimination is defined as the prohibition of discrimination against individuals and groups on the grounds identified in international human rights treaties. Inclusion is a universal human right - to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, medical or other needs. (UNCEB, 2017).

The Reality

The intention behind this pledge of inclusion is necessary and noble; the promises are articulate. Yet human society is more fragmented than ever. The gaps between different groups of people continue to widen and inequality is becoming more visible at the global and national levels. The aspiration to bring the “haves” and “have-nots” closer together is a broken promise.

We live in a world where a few individuals plan holidays to the moon while hundreds of millions have no safe drinking water, personal security, or self-esteem and dignity. The SAARC region boasts thousands of millionaires and billionaires but struggles to provide one meal of *dhal-bhat* (dhal and rice) a day for hundreds of millions of people.

The Vision

The vision of a future Bhutan is that within the sovereign, peaceful and prosperous nation exists a just and harmonious society. Such a vision is as pragmatic as it is wise and lofty. A just and peaceful society is as real as the Last Shangri-La is a dream. A just and harmonious society has universal charm, appeal and relevance.

GNH as a development goal, and Bhutan’s historic transition to democracy, are both vital elements of “a just and harmonious society”, a vision of profound perspective.

The concept of a just and harmonious society does not come from a specific body of political thought or social theory but is what every human society pursues. It is a vision shared by intellectual giants of the past and prophets of the future. For Bhutan, it implies a transformation of a deeply traditional populace into a modern society, which is a balance of cutting-edge technology and a progressive work culture with a value system that is profoundly humane.

The focus is on community and interdependence as opposed to individualism. The concept of the common good requires individuals to fulfill their moral responsibility to give back to society. The emphasis on the redistribution of resources, wealth, and income, if viewed as Buddhist political theory, is that one's responsibility outweighs the individual's rights in society. The Buddhist concept of justice, in the perspective of interdependence, is the earning of merit for all living beings.

Can Bhutan Achieve This?

A just society, based on legal and Buddhist jurisprudence, can be defined by rights, fairness, virtuous actions, and moral values; it ensures the protection of everyone's civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights. These rights include the right to life, the right to free speech, the right to vote, and the right to a fair trial.

A just society is one in which each person is socially and economically secure, and where the state is politically, legally and administratively inclusive and fair. The rule of law leads to good governance, which would further lead to transparency, fairness, and impartiality in the working of the government and the realisation of all our short- and long-term national goals.

Means must be found not only to increase per capita income, but to distribute such improvements, and the society's resources, more justly to all, firstly to those most deserving. Economic injustice magnifies instability, so "just" is an expression of stability.

A just and harmonious society is critical for political stability. The list of values is long: non-violence, peaceful co-existence, compassion and tolerance, values that are vested by natural and framed laws for the "common

good". His Majesty emphasises unity, harmony, integrity, trust, justice and peace for a strong civil society.

This comes at a time when Bhutan is experiencing an unprecedented out-migration of citizens seeking employment in other countries. Most Bhutanese believe that the "pull factor" for the out-migration of Bhutanese is employment and higher earnings, but there are some who point out the "push factor" as the inequalities of a hierarchical society. A society that has existed as an extended family in a benevolent Monarchy feels the stress of inequities in opportunities that favour the wealthy section of society.

"Our nation has seen great socio-economic growth but it is more important that we have growth with equity. We must raise, with all our efforts, the less fortunate so that they may, at the earliest, begin to partake in the opportunities brought by modernisation and progress. We must never forget that, for lasting peace and happiness in this world, the journey forward has to be one that we must all make together." (His Majesty The King - National Day, 2012)

In Bhutan's context, we also understand the values placed on co-existence of all life, and that what we do today will have an effect on, or bring about conditions for the future.

The GNH interpretation of the Royal vision of "a just and harmonious society" places upon the state the mandate to create the right conditions for well-being and happiness. Good development means promoting collective happiness as its ultimate value, a notion often advised by His Majesty The King:

"Time is slowly telling us that there can be no lasting individual success without success as a community and there cannot be lasting national progress and success if it does not fit into a future of global peace, harmony, and equality. The world must progress together or fail together." (His Majesty The King – India, 2009)