

Bhutan's Traditional Values and a Modern-day Harmonious Society

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One assumption is that traditional values are good for a harmonious society and that modern technology and individualism erode harmony. However, in the context of Bhutan, I would like to point out that our traditional values are good for all times to come, and that the modern-day focus on wealth and development is not antithetical to a harmonious society. We must value meritocracy, equity over equality, and a sense of fierce and relentless pursuit of capitalism.

To some extent, these are inherited from our age-old value system, providing both the inspiration and the safeguard for GNH. While I draw on our traditional beliefs to justify why creating wealth is good, even though not “equal or fair”, I also refer to our present-day case of public services like health and education, which are claimed as “equal and fair” but not “good and just”.

Similarly, the pull and the push factors for an exodus by our youth to Australia is a case of a success story, one that speaks volumes on equality of opportunities for our Bhutanese youth, compared with the past.

Currently, the question is how effective is GNH as a unique guiding development philosophy to achieve the vision of “a just and harmonious society”? Our vision of quadrupling our GDP and per capita income and propelling us into the club of developed nations within the next 10 years will not let us achieve equality in wealth, even though we have the strongest socialist policies. Even the most well-thought-out taxation plan for wealth distribution is not going to prevent this inequality.

For instance, the biggest reform and the increase in property taxes (over 1800% in some cases) in the past year has resulted in a direct increase in the revenue by only about Nu. 500.00 million (0.2% of the Nu. 240 billion GDP). Therefore, more than modern economic theories and frameworks, perhaps we should look at how traditional Bhutanese values can push us in creating more wealth.

For a Bhutanese, values like the law of karma or the accumulation of the merit system are indicative of a society that truly values meritocracy. We are taught to be compassionate and loving and hence always look kindly towards those who are less fortunate, or the “have nots”. Therefore, the society’s value system itself is predicated on the modern definition of a true and just society.

However, we see the disconnect with the vision when we interpret it in the modern dimension of equality in wealth or access to basic public services. This is more so because of our public policies that are either hatched in isolation or implemented in fragmentation. Even so, these contradictions and disconnect may in fact be necessary for our society over the next decade and are actually a necessary evil to really achieve a truly just and harmonious society. These values, organised in their hierarchies, have shaped the very fabric of our society from the 16th century onwards.

Let us look at one of the oldest and most influential institutions in Bhutan – the Buddhist heritage. Even here, there had always been hierarchy and meritocracy, including the creation and measurement of wealth. Citizens and followers were also encouraged to contribute and donate part of their wealth, with the belief that they will be richer in the instant future or in their next lives.

Carrying on this tradition even now, our central monastic body and various religious groups are in a frenzy to build monasteries, accumulate wealth, and spread their wings even beyond, in Australia and New York.

Our value, or the law of karma, therefore justifies the creation of wealth. Here, the concept is not very different from Max Weber’s famous theory on “The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism”¹, at a time when capitalism was looked at with suspicion in the Christian-dominated world.

Weber argued that when someone becomes rich, it is a manifestation of “God’s approval” for that person instead of something to be scorned at. Similarly, in Buddhist culture, we always explain the phenomenon of “more water where there is rain” by attributing our ability to become rich to past merits that we have accumulated. So there is nothing to be ashamed of in creating wealth but rather it is something to be proud of.

1 Weber, Max: The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of the Capitalism, (1904)

The other powerful reminder for our society is the concept of the “*phuentshok dezhi*” or the four stages of life. The first stage is the “*yonten dezhi*— knowledge or the education stage”, and the second one is the “*junor dezhi*— or the stage of creating wealth”.

In simple or shocking terms, I want to point out that having agreed on the national goal of creating wealth, “greed is good” and that “meritocracy will power growth but not equity”. Both these values will not deviate us from ultimately being a GNH society that is just and harmonious. I will now examine the question of justice and equity in the modern context.

In the next decade, as we focus on quadrupling our economy and entering into the league of the developed nations, we will not be able to focus on a just and harmonious society in the traditional sense. This might sound alarming, but it seems to be a necessary evil or the means for us to achieve our long-term goals.

Amongst many factors contributing to a just and harmonious society, let me also focus on one factor, equality of opportunities for “wealth creation” and access to basic needs (health care and education). This requires us to look briefly at major factors like democracy and participatory governance, social cohesion, and efficient justice systems. Here it helps to refer to a commonly agreed standard that exists rather than going into the philosophical discussions on the subject.

Let me pick two examples: Scandinavia and Singapore, both of which are probably rated as the most just and egalitarian societies. Both are rich, their people are well-educated and they have a highly transparent and efficient governance. Their basic needs are adequately met. Their citizens have equal opportunities to create wealth and realise their dreams of becoming rich through creative ideas, hard work, and passionate entrepreneurship.

While they fare better on their Gini coefficients, they also realise that it is inevitable that Paretos law will eventually favour the top 20% with more than 80% of the wealth. Therefore, modern capitalism is proven good for both, irrespective of their basic value system and the way their societies are organised.

Similarly, some of the most undemocratic and unjust countries in the

world are bedrocks of capitalism but of the powerful few. It is just that the majority of the population is equally not privileged enough for the time being. We can look at countries like China, North Korea or Saudi Arabia that are run by autocratic regimes but practice the most vibrant capitalism at the State level.

It has already been established that democracy and development are not necessarily correlated.² We can also stretch the argument that democracy may not be correlated to a just and harmonious society. Bringing back the example closer home to Bhutan, let us break down a few of our domestic policies aimed at “equality and fairness” which has indeed resulted in the opposite effect.

Take the health care system. We are so fortunate that we get free health care. Basic Health Units are set up across the country and pharmaceutical products are freely distributed over the counter. Even the labourers from India can have free access to the health care system in Bhutan.

However, access to quality services is questionable. The moment someone has to travel to the national referral hospitals, it is extremely difficult to ensure “equality and fairness”. This is a classic case of where equality does not guarantee equity. The free health care policy has guaranteed equal access for all citizens but then the outcome of services obtained by an individual is vastly different.

This unequal access and information asymmetry in the system thereby results in a better outcome for those “haves” as compared to the “have nots”. This is because our policy also does not offer the option of paying for better services, even if those “haves” are willing to do so.

Next is education. We have achieved 100% primary enrolment and over 15% tertiary gross enrolment ratio. This number again is misleading. A few privileged families can send their children abroad, but other families will have to settle for our schools in the country. This is again because of how we are interpreting and implementing the constitutional mandate of free education.

2 Adam Przeworski: “Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World”, (New York University, 2000).

This has resulted in compromising the quality of education and ensuring that we go by the lowest common denominator instead of the highest common factor. It takes policies that are not equal and just to create high-quality institutions, pretty much like wealth generation cannot be done equally.

For instance, 26.96% of the human resources development (HRD) budget in 2023 in India went to the famous Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs) and 3.35% of the budget went to the Indian Institute of Managements (IIMs) which comprises a mere 1.18% and 0.12% of the student populations respectively among the state colleges. Collectively, the top select colleges and institutions with just 13,000 students were given a budget of over INR 41.35 billion while the rest of the 98% of the government institutions were left with the other 50% of the budget. No wonder these institutions are among the top in the world.³

On the other hand, an equal capping fee of Nu.89,000.00 per student in the Royal University of Bhutan is a fraction of that cost, but also it will be a long time till our College of Science and Technology (CST) catches up with the IITs. Hence, we require practical policies, not just “fair and just” policies.

What does the phenomenon of the exodus to Australia tell us on the question of a just and harmonious society? I would like to argue that while the phenomenon has both pull and push factors contributing to it, the overall assessment is the result of a success story. This, in fact, is the trend towards a more equalising situation compared with that of the past.

The pull factor of a better economic opportunity has always been there in places like New York, where we had a constant group of Bhutanese working for the past three to four decades. Similarly, for education, only a few lucky ones with scholarships and family funding were able to go abroad to study or to work.

However, thanks to the general economic improvement, thousands of families from average-income households were also able to send their

³ IITs, IIMs, NITs have just 3% of total students but get 50% of government funds, Kritika Sharma, The Print: 30 July, 2018 10:07 am IST

children abroad, because of the ability to get education loans or make other arrangements of informal borrowing from their relatives who have already migrated. Therefore, the human aspiration seems to be to do better by migrating away from a situation where everybody is equally poor or without any future opportunities.

The push factor has also led to the dislocation of various posts in the civil service, which otherwise is looked at as a permanent lifetime post for a privileged few. Therefore, one can argue that both the push and the pull factors have guaranteed more equality when it comes to opening access to an average youth who would like to seek opportunity abroad and also opened access to now other aspirants to the coveted position in the civil service.

In fact, during one of my village tours, one of the ladies actually commented that now they are not looking for equal and balanced development in the traditional sense, where they expect the government to take the highways and the luxury hotels from Thimphu to the remote villages. She, in fact, prefers that her children also get the opportunity to go to Australia rather than spend the rest of their lives in the villages.

While we may imagine that there might be an equilibrium state called a just and harmonious society, what we actually need is a society that is dynamic and resilient to be able to adapt to changing times. In the case of Bhutan, we are looking at a future that is both exciting and challenging.

Led by His Majesty, we are anchored deep in our traditional values, which are good for all times to come. We must value meritocracy and equity over equality, and a sense of fierce and relentless pursuit of capitalism. We must be a society that puts into practice what it claims as its values. When compassion is there to ensure that no citizen is denied the basic services and the opportunity to succeed in life based on meritocracy and the law of karma, we are truly a just and harmonious society with all the glaring inequalities that might stare at us on a daily basis.

References

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