Bhutan

The pursuit of happiness
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Yes, the United States has a rival—and this isn’t a fairy tale

ONCE upon a time, in the high hills far away, was a magic kingdom with a secret. The people were poor, but, thanks to the secret, they were happy. They loved their forests and fertile valleys, their snow-capped mountains and gurgling rivers, their white-washed temples and red-robed monks. And they loved their king, for he was good and wise, and kept the secret well.

Since they were far away, not many people knew of their happiness. But the king in his goodness and wisdom decided this had to change. This made the people uneasy. And he wanted to give up many of his powers, which made them afraid. The king was married to four beautiful sisters and had many children. But he worried that future kings might not be as good and wise as he. So he wanted the people to rule themselves. To help them, he bequeathed the secret of his golden rule. And he gave it a name: Gross National Happiness.

Shangri-La-di-da

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is not in fact an idyll in a fairy tale. It is home to perhaps 900,000 people—estimates vary wildly—most of whom live in grinding poverty. It is grappling, like most other countries, with the boons and curses of globalisation, trying to preserve its own traditions while opening its doors to prosperity. Bhutan, however, is different in ways that draw both foreigners and the Bhutanese themselves into romantic flights of fancy about the country.
First, few places have been so romanticised as Shangri-La, or remained so backward and so isolated for so long. Serfdom was abolished only in 1956, by the third king in the present dynasty. After China’s crushing of an uprising in neighbouring Tibet in 1959, he went beyond the freeing of the serfs to embark on a tentative opening up. The fate of other Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms and theocracies—Sikkim (absorbed by India), Mustang (Nepal) and Tibet itself (China)—was warning enough of the perils of isolation. Bhutan, squeezed between two giants, agreed in 1949 that its policy would be “guided” by one of them, India. It still has no diplomatic relations with the other, China.

Bhutan's first paved road dates only from 1961. Before 1968 it had no banks. Until 1999, there was no television and no access to the internet. Thimphu still advertises itself as the world's only national capital without a traffic light.

Second, Bhutan has taken unusual steps to safeguard its heritage. Most visibly, weaving and costume are protected by rules making traditional dress compulsory in public places. Men wear a gho, a long one-piece robe belted and hitched up at the waist, leaving a big pouch in the upper folds. It looks a little like a dressing gown, but is typically worn with knee-length socks and sturdy lace-ups. Women wear the kira, a floor-sweeping straight dress topped with a blouse and short jacket. Both are elegant. Traditional architecture, too, is promoted. Even new houses are traditionally painted—white with ornate decorated window-frames, and the occasional mural, such as a big flying phallus, a symbol of a popular Tantric master, known as the Divine Madman, who made good use of his.

Third, there is Gross National Happiness. When, in the 1970s, Bhutan's fourth and present king said that he cared more about this than about Gross National Product, it seemed something of a throwaway remark. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who succeeded to the throne in 1972, is a moderniser like his father, but this seemed a simple statement of the obvious: that economic growth alone does not bring contentment. Over the years, however, the idea has taken hold. At home, Bhutan's rulers find it a handy excuse for some of their quirkier policies. Abroad, some development theorists have latched on to the idea as an alternative to the globalisers' creed of growth-oriented market economics.

So a new set of initials—GNH—is now used to abbreviate a small academic industry. At an international conference on GNH in Thimphu last February, 60 papers were tabled (available in all their voluminous glory here). Then, in June, Bhutan's prime minister, Jigme Thinley, based his annual report on the government's performance on the tenets of GNH.

Even in Bhutan, however, opinions differ about GNH. For its adherents, it offers a guide to policy that will enable Bhutan to pick and choose in the globalisation supermarket, modernising on its terms alone. Bhutan's experiment, in this view, also offers important lessons to other poor countries.

For critics, however, GNH is at best an empty slogan—one that risks “including everything and ending up meaning nothing”, in the words of Dorji Penjor of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, the think-tank that held the conference in February. At worst, say some foreign observers, GNH provides ideological cover for repressive and racist policies.

Some of GNH's exponents, such as Mr Thinley, seem a bit bemused by the vogue. He is no longer prime minister, a post that rotates each year among five of the ten-member cabinet. But, as home minister, he still sits in his gho and orange ministerial shawl in Thimphu’s 17th-century dzong, a fortress that serves as both monastery and government office. It is a suitable seat from which to expound on merging tradition with modernity.

**Happiness has four legs**

Mr Thinley is suspicious of efforts to turn GNH into a science, or to devise indices measuring happiness along
the lines of the UN Development Programme’s human-development index (which ranks Bhutan 134th out of 177 countries). Yet he has done more than any other government minister to underpin the king’s insubstantial aphorism.

He says there are four “pillars” to GNH. The first is “sustainable and equitable socio-economic development”. Revealingly, some at the conference modified this to “economic self-reliance”. Bhutan’s economy is tiny, and its foreign links tinier still. Subsistence farming still sustains some four-fifths of the population. The priority remains road-building. Even the main “highway” from Thimphu to Paro is in many places only wide enough for one car. Mr Thinley boasts that motorable roads now connect all but one of Bhutan’s 20 districts, though many villages can still be reached only on foot.

In 2003 Bhutan’s total exports, almost all of which went to India, were worth just 5,700m Bhutanese ngultrums (about $120m). Electricity generated from Bhutan’s rivers accounted for about half the exports. The other sources of foreign exchange were, and are, aid—especially from India—and tourism. About 7,000 tourists visit each year. They are charged at least $200 a day, shared cosily between the government and private travel agents. The only foreign investment of note is in two smart resorts.

Yeshey Zimba, the trade minister, says the government no longer limits the number of visitors. It regulates itself, thanks to the difficulty of getting to Bhutan. Mr Zimba is, by local standards, an ardent supporter of globalisation: “There is nothing we can do to prevent it.” Indeed, Bhutan is embracing it, and trying to join the World Trade Organisation. Nobody seems quite sure why. Mr Zimba argues that it is like the United Nations, which Bhutan joined in 1971: “Everybody is a member.”

The second pillar is the pristine environment. Bhutan is one big, mountainous forest. Only 16% of its land is arable, so there is pressure to fell trees and sell timber. Ministers worry that logging could swiftly turn the fragile ecology into a “mountain desert”, and a law requires the proportion of tree cover to be kept above 60%. In fact, the tree cover is spreading, having increased from 64% to 72% of the country in the past ten years, says Mr Thinley.

Similarly, few of Bhutan’s mineral resources—coal, possibly tungsten, and limestone suitable for cement—have been dug up. The hydropower projects are mostly “run-of-the-river” schemes with far less impact on the environment, and far less human displacement, than huge dams would have.

This wonderful record has a cost, of course, and, as a guide to policy, it is where GNH parts company from GNP. Yet it is in the third pillar—the “preservation and promotion of Bhutan’s culture” that things start getting really tricky, and one group’s GNH starts looking like another group’s grief. Nobody could quarrel with Bhutan’s wish to preserve its unique cultural heritage. But what is it?

For most Bhutanese, the cultural inheritance is dominated by a strain of Tibetan Buddhism. Bhutan was unified in the 17th century by a Tibetan lama. It has thousands of temples, an “altar room” in every home, and many boys still become monks for life. Officially, the number is actually growing.

Bhutan, however, has many ethnic groups, some of them migrants. Though Hindu Nepalese started migrating to the fertile south of Bhutan in the late 19th century, the big influx of economic migrants came in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in the late 1980s, the government started pushing “one nation, one people” as a principle. The dress rules appeared. Nepali, which was taught as a third language (after the national tongue, Dzongkha, and English) in some schools, was dropped from the curriculum. Nepali-speaking southerners had to produce documents to prove their citizenship. Some protested. Some were expelled. Others fled.

Between 1988 and 1993, thousands of Nepali-speakers left Bhutan, many ending up in refugee camps in Nepal, which now house about 100,000 people, a tenth of whom were born there. A further 20,000-30,000
are believed to be in India. Efforts to agree with Nepal on the fate of those in the camps are subject to endless delays and bickering.

The issue has been costly for Bhutan. Its image is dented. Shangri-La seems less alluring if its bliss relies on keeping an eighth of the 1990 population in a grim exile. Some aid donors, such as the Dutch, have turned off the tap in protest.

Many of the "refugees", claims the government, were recent illegal immigrants; some had never been in Bhutan; most had emigrated of their own accord and forfeited citizenship, for which they would have to reapply. Of the 12,000 in the camps whose status has been "verified", Bhutan admits only that 297 were expelled. Some 75%, it claims, left voluntarily and the rest were non-Bhutanese.

Many north Bhutanese insist the government had to act. The country risked being swamped, they say, by Nepalese who could wander over the open border with India and occupy Bhutan's most fertile land. In their camps the Nepali-speakers may hang portraits of Bhutan's king. But, it is said, once they are securely in Bhutan, the portraits are those of the king of Nepal. Some foreigners in Thimphu, while not defending the government's means, have some sympathy for the ends. Others deplore continued the discrimination against Nepali-speakers.

**And now, traditional television**

Mr Thinley insists the idea of GNH is inclusive. Nepali is spoken in the National Assembly. The one newspaper, *Kuensel*, a weekly, appears in English and Nepali as well as Dzongkha. But, besides "preserving and promoting" Bhutan's culture, the government is also defining, limiting and sometimes even inventing it. Some "traditions", such as the requirement that everybody should wear a long shawl (whose colour denotes the wearer's status) when visiting government offices or temples, are fairly recent discoveries. In September it was decreed that any women wearing their scarves draped over one shoulder were flouting a two-shoulder custom. Last year the Dzongkha Development Commission coined 400 new words to help a liturgical language cope with the modern world.

Who controls the past, as Big Brother knew, controls the future. Bhutan is a friendly and engaging place but there is an Orwellian tinge to its government. Last month it became the first country to ban tobacco. Citizens must return to their village each year to obtain their identity card. Those who travel abroad surrender their passports on return and can reclaim them only by going to Thimphu.

All that could perhaps change with the building of the fourth of Mr Thinley's pillars, good governance. Democracy, for now, is of the trickle-down variety. In 1981 the king introduced 20 district committees, elected by households. Ten years later decentralisation was extended to 201 committees representing "blocks" of villages, elected by individual voters. Reform is now to be entrenched in a new constitution. In January the king will tour the country, drumming up support for this—a document that will take away much of his power.

Sonam Tobgye, the chief justice and chairman of the drafting committee, admits many are uneasy about the changes—especially the replacement of the king's role as ombudsman, to whom everybody has the right of appeal, with a supreme court. Some in the Thimphu elite fear electoral democracy, worrying that it may one day threaten their interests in favour of the poor rural majority. They also fear the emergence of political parties, which may form along ethnic or regional lines. Some hope that party politics can be avoided in favour of civilised debate and continued consensus. Mr Tobgye, though, is adamant: "Democracy can't work without parties.”
The chief justice is also an optimist, arguing that you “must trust human beings; with friction there is energy.” Until recently, Bhutan’s rulers showed little such trust. Like over-protective parents, they shielded their people from evil influences.

The big exception is television. Until 1999 there was none, except for a lucky few with secret satellite dishes or video-players. Then, when Bhutan started producing its own, very limited, television programmes, it also opened up to cable operators. In an unusual big bang for such a cautious regime, viewers suddenly had access to a full 46 channels, offering everything from news to near-naked fashion models to wrestling.

Sok Sian Pek, who conducted a “media impact study” for the communications ministry, says television has wrought huge changes in the towns. People adjust meal-times for their favourite programme. Most popular are Indian soap operas (understanding of Hindi is spreading fast). Ms Pek scoffs at those who blame television for rising crime, but does detect concern at the changes in family life it has brought.

Similarly, Karma Phuntsho, a Bhutanese scholar of Buddhism at Cambridge University, laments the consumerism sweeping Bhutan. People, he says, are becoming restless and materialistic. “The invisible culture is at stake.” In Thimphu’s bars, young people are glued to Spanish football matches, or listen to pop music (performed by young men in ghos), or play video games in a dingy arcade. Many carry mobile phones, introduced last year. The shops are small, but full of imported goods. Traffic lights will surely come. In its capital at least, Bhutan, sad to say, is becoming more like everywhere else.

GNH, in one sense, is an expression of that nostalgia, and an appeal for alertness about what might be lost under the incoming tide of modernity. But an 80-year-old woman in a village near Paro has a different perspective. Asked about the changes she has seen, she can think of nothing bad to say about them: electric light, which came ten years ago, is better than a smoky kerosene lamp; taking a bus up the new asphalt road, down which all those evil influences roar, is better than walking along a muddy path. The good old days? Bah.