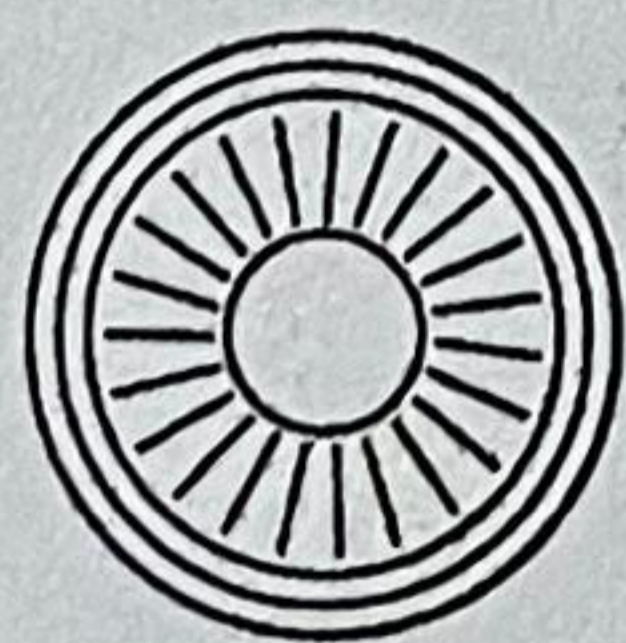
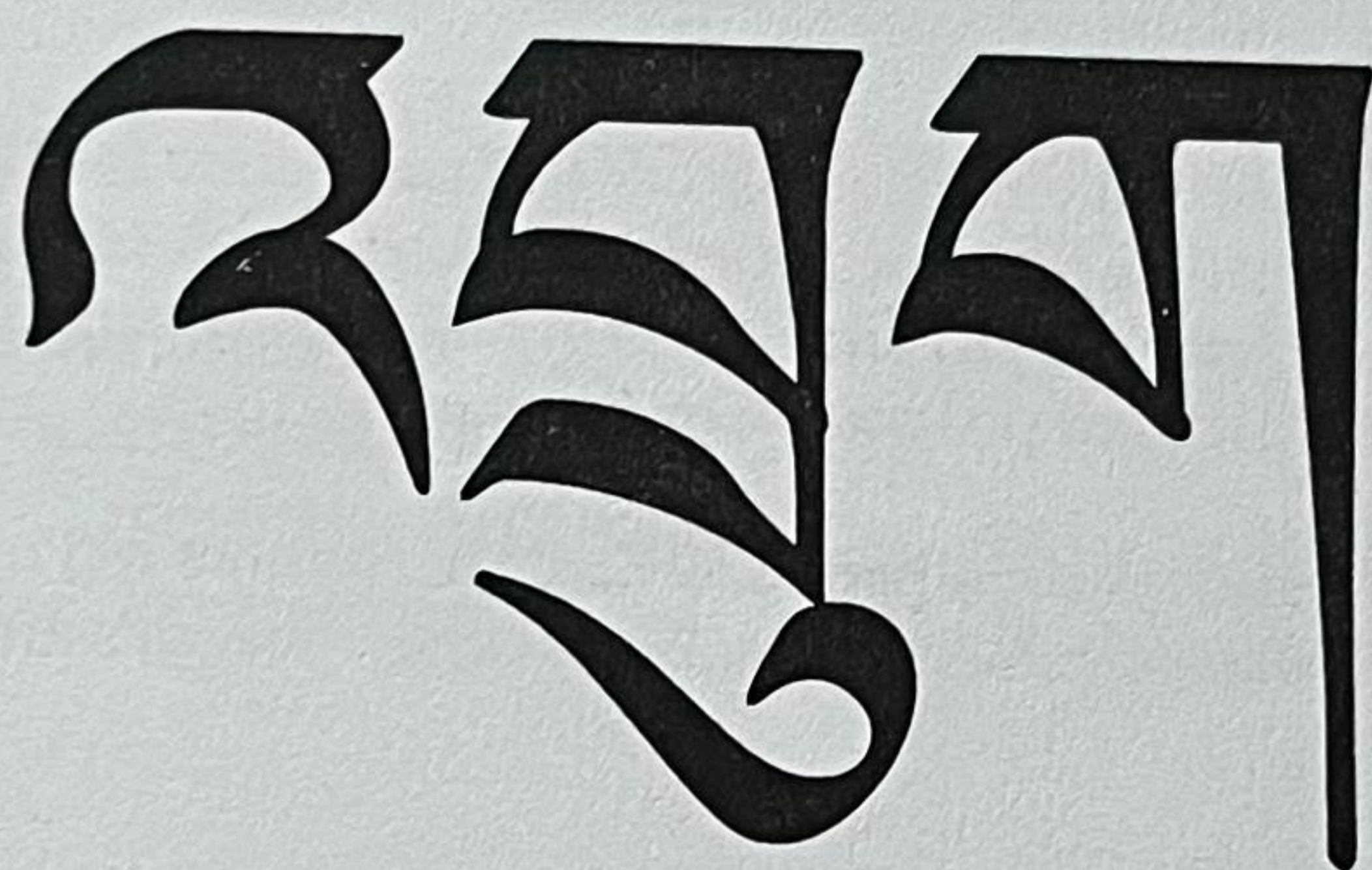


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Risk Factors Associated with Lifetime Prevalence of Suicidal Ideation and Attempts Amongst the Bhutanese Population

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Abstract

With statistics on suicidal death increasing, suicide has become a serious public health concern in Bhutan. In an effort to provide information for prevention and treatment strategies, this paper identifies risk factors associated with suicidal ideation and attempt. Analyses were carried out using cross-sectional data from the Gross National Happiness Survey 2015. The survey has a sample size of 7,153 collected via face-to-face interviews. The prevalence of lifetime suicidal thoughts and attempt were the main outcome variables. Independent variables include individual, and household level characteristics, and few other indicators on health and relationships. A multiple logistic regression was performed to explore the correlates and influencing factors. Lifetime prevalence of suicidal thoughts and attempt were found to be significantly greater amongst females (OR 1.653; 95% CI 1.252-2.181). On the contrary, middle (OR 0.430; 95% CI 0.294-0.630) and older (OR 0.168; 95% CI 0.078-0.363) age groups seem to be contemplating lesser on suicide as compared to the younger population (aged 15 to 24). Those who reported higher levels of mental distress (OR 1.06; 95% CI 1.036-1.087), scored lower in family relationship index (OR 0.743; 95% CI 0.704-0.784), and who displayed higher frequency of negative emotions (OR 1.061; 95% CI 1.029-1.095) were more likely to

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have ideated and attempted suicide. Likewise, suicidal behaviour was observed to be greater amongst those who reported some form of disability, lower number of healthy days, and those who had been a victim of crime. The findings have important implications for developing targeted interventions for suicide prevention and treatment. The study is, however, limited by its cross-sectional data design and a restricted set of predictors.

Keywords: suicide; suicidal thoughts; suicidal attempts; risk factors

Introduction

The World Health Organization [WHO] has identified suicide as the 17th leading cause of death among all age groups globally, and the second leading cause of death among 15-29 years old (WHO, 2017), making it a serious public health concern worldwide. Suicide is not an isolated process, but a continuous one starting from ideation, leading to attempt which then results in completion (Lweinsohn, Rohde, & Seeley 1996; Nock et al., 2008; Wasserman & Wasserman, 2009). All these stages are collectively referred to as suicidal behaviours (Shepard et al., 2015). Studies on the prevalence rate of suicidal ideation and attempt are a significant component of such behaviours (Borges et al., 2006).

Besides, the loss of human life, suicidal behaviour places heavy burden on a society in terms of mental health status, impaired physical health, poor quality of life for the concerned families and communities, and economic costs associated with care and productivity (Kessler et al., 2005). As a result, it has prompted a plethora of research devoted to understanding how such behaviours can be predicted and prevented (McKeown, Cuffe, & Schulz, 2006; Nock et al., 2008). These studies have identified a wide range of risk factors associated suicidal ideation and attempt mainly involving psychosocial,

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environmental, and socio-demographic characteristics (Peter et al., 2008). Psychosocial factors primarily include mental disorders and state of physical health, while environmental factors constitute external factors such as relationships (Yip et al., 2003). Socio-demographic characters on the other hand are mostly defined by gender, age, marital status, education level and income (Jeon et al., 2010).

Currently, suicide research in Bhutan is based primarily on mortality statistics. As a result, little is known about suicidal behaviours or its risk factors. Relying on statistics on suicidal rates alone may be reflecting only a portion of persons affected, as there may be a higher number of people who are undergoing suicidal thoughts and attempts. Hence, prevalence figures based on completed suicides may substantially underestimate the burden of suicidal behaviours on societal wellbeing and general health status. The identification of risk and protective factors for such behaviours is therefore, a critical component of suicide research. Further, to prevent suicide at an early point, it is vital to identify the risk factors that lead an individual to engage in ideation and attempt. Gaining a deeper knowledge on the associates will therefore, help enhance prevention efforts in Bhutan.

Objective

The main objective of the study is to ascertain risk factors associated with the lifetime prevalence of suicidal ideation and attempts.

Method

This study was carried out using cross-sectional data from the 2015 GNH survey. The data contains information from across

the nine thematic¹ areas of GNH including demographic² characteristics. A stratified four stage systematic random sampling design had been adopted to generate a sample size of 8871. Sample was estimated for both national and regional level representation. A structured GNH questionnaire³ was administered through Paper Assisted Personal Interviews (PAPI) and Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI). Survey witnessed a response rate of 80.63 percent resulting in a successful interview of 7,153 respondents. During the analysis, no replacements have been made for the item 'non-response'. Data analysis compared respondents who had suicidal thoughts and attempts with those who had not thought about suicide or attempted in their lifetime. Independent sample t-test was used to compare groups on continuous variables and contingency chi-square test was used for categorical variables. Factors significantly different between groups were included as independent variables in the multivariate logistic regression analysis, with absence and presence of suicidal thoughts and attempts as the dependent variables. Independent variables with low correlations were only included to avoid multicollinearity⁴. Estimations were made using StataSE 15. Due to limitations of the data and research design, there may have been important predictors that were not considered in the analysis. Other limitations

¹ Survey questionnaire has been designed to collect information across the nine GNH domains, namely psychological wellbeing, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience and living standards.

² Refer Annexure 1.

³ Questionnaire was administered as a face-to-face interview. Multi lingual interviewers were used to conduct interviews in various Bhutanese dialects. Around 85% of the interviews were conducted in complete isolation while the rest were carried out within a good distance from people. Survey questionnaire can be found here www.grossnationalhappiness.com

⁴ A pairwise correlation matrix in Annexure 2 indicates low correlation (<0.22) between the independent variables.

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include cross-sectional survey design and exclusion of respondents who were aged below 15 years.

Dependent variable

Two main outcome variables have been identified. For suicidal ideation, people were asked 'Have you seriously thought of committing suicide?', with a dichotomous response of 'yes' or 'no'. Suicidal attempt measure is structured the same way and is assessed through answers to the question, 'Have you ever attempted to commit suicide?'

Independent variable

It is beyond the scope of this paper to include each and every predictor found to be associated in literature. The choice of independent variables was made based on normative grounds, and availability of data. It includes indicators on health, relationships, work hours, and sleep hours amongst others.

Individual and household level characteristics: Individual level information incorporates age, gender, completed years of education, occupation, and marital status while household level characteristics are defined by region of residence (rural/urban), migration status, household income, household debt, household size and dependency ratio. These features were also included to account for confounding effect if any on the outcome variables.

Health: Both physical and mental health has been accounted for under the health component. As an indicator of physical health, number of healthy days has been computed by aggregating an average number of good physical and mental days experienced in the past one month. The level of distress that was measured by the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) reflected mental condition of the respondent. GHQ-12 index comprised of 12 questions, which investigated feelings, and behaviours related to mental health

experienced in the past four weeks. A score is derived from the sum of answers to the twelve questions which cover feelings of strain, depression, inability to cope, lack of confidence, and loss of sleep amongst others. Responses are made on a four-point scale of frequency of a feeling in relations to a person's usual state: 'Not at all', 'No more than usual', 'Rather more than usual', and 'Much more than usual'. The between-item validity of the GHQ-12 is high for this sample with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.82. A total score was obtained upon addition of the responses of the 12 questions. Disability was assessed from the answers to a set of questions evaluating difficulties faced by respondents across a list of conditions such as vision, hearing, speech, etc.

Emotional balance: Emotional balance constitutes positive and negative emotion indices. Positive emotion index was computed based on five emotions experienced over the past four weeks; compassion, generosity, forgiveness, contentment and calmness. Similarly, anger, jealousy and worry⁵ were aggregated to develop the negative emotion index score.

Personal relationship: There are two measures for personal relationship; family relationship index and social support. Family relationship index is computed using six questions on strength of ties within family; and social support represents the average number of people available for resort during sickness, financial and emotional needs and important events.

Community relationship: Strength of community relationship has been defined from three indicators: number of days volunteered, amount donated and the average number of days participated in socio-cultural activities in the past 12 months.

⁵ Factor analysis reveals a single factor comprising of anger, jealousy and worry.

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Spirituality: A respondent's level of spirituality is represented through the frequency of prayer recitation and meditation.

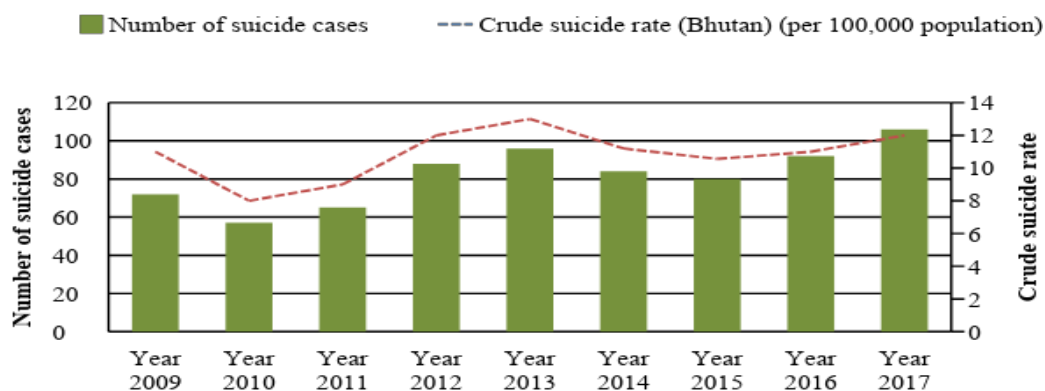
Work life balance: Associations of work life balance with suicidal thoughts are assessed through working and sleeping hours as reported by the respondents.

Victim of crime: To assess association of victimization with suicidal thoughts, an indicator specifying if the respondent had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months was used.

Results

Univariate analysis

Bhutan has witnessed a consistent rise in suicide rates as indicated in the figure below. Over the past five years, suicide mortality has increased by around 10 percent. Bhutan's crude suicide rate stands at 12 per 100,000 persons in 2017, greater than the global rate of 11.1 (WHO, 2017).



Data source: Ministry of Health

Figure 1: Crude suicide rate by year

The estimated lifetime prevalence of suicidal ideation in the overall cross-national sample is 4.6%, which corresponds to about 23,679 Bhutanese. Globally, lifetime prevalence rates are approximated at about 9.2% (Nock et al. 2008a).

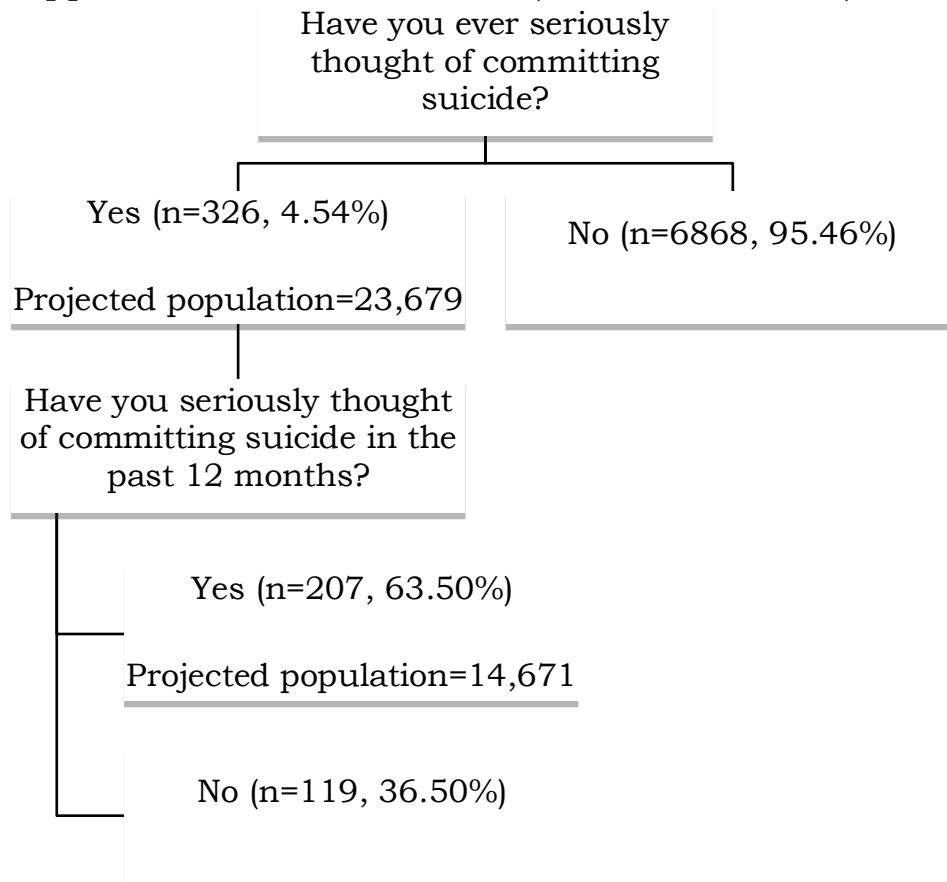


Figure 2: Prevalence of suicidal thoughts in 2015

Among those who have suicidal thoughts, the conditional probability of leading to an attempt is around 21% as shown below. Overall, in a sample of 7147, nearly 1%⁶ had attempted suicide in their lifetime. This approximates to about 4,879 Bhutanese. In 2015, the number of suicide completion cases

⁶ Overall suicidal attempt=68 /7147=0.95

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reported was about 98, so possibly around 2% of the attempted suicide may lead to suicidal death.

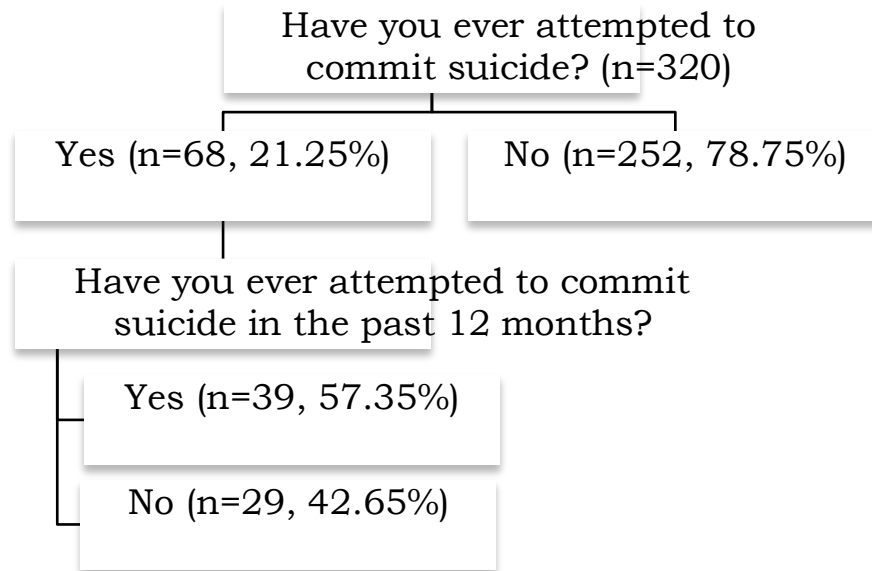


Figure 3: Prevalence of suicidal attempt amongst those who had suicidal thoughts⁷

The GNH survey questionnaire also collected information on the reasons why respondents had attempted suicide. Among the perceived causes, family relationship issues were the most common, accounting for 62% of attempts followed by psychiatric illnesses.

⁷ There were six missing values for suicidal attempt variable. As a result, the number of responses reduced to 320.

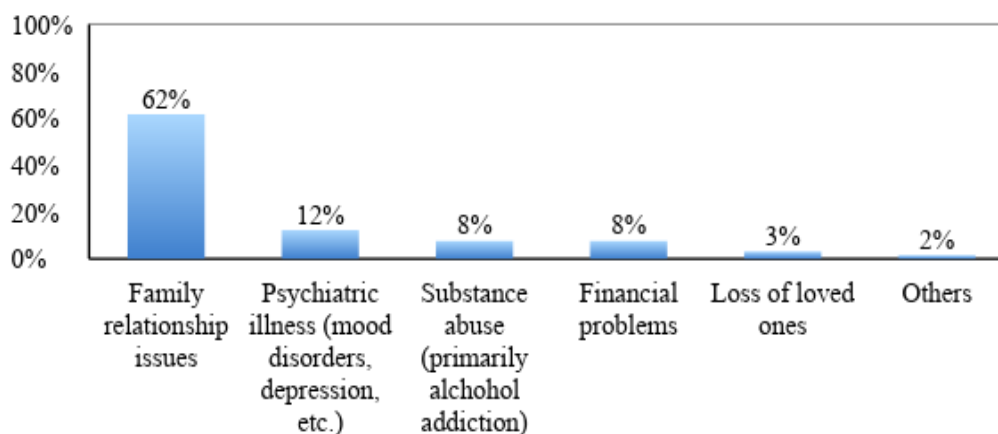


Figure 4: Perceived causes of suicidal attempt (n=65⁸)

Bivariate analysis

Prevalence estimates of suicidal thoughts show substantial variability across some of the factors. Preliminary analyses using t-test indicated significant difference across a range of socio-demographic variables as shown in Table 1. Respondents with suicidal thoughts were significantly younger, had higher frequency of negative emotions, experienced higher level of mental distress, and lower number of healthy days. Family relationship and social support were also observed to be significantly weaker for those who experienced suicidal thoughts. While, mean working hours were slightly lower for those who had suicidal thoughts, the mean sleeping hours was found to be higher. It was hypothesized that respondents who spent greater time in service of others or those who made more donations might lower the risk of suicidal ideation. However,

⁸ Of the total 68 respondents who had made suicidal attempts, only 65 provided reasons as to why they had attempted suicide.

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no significant association was found between suicidal ideation, and voluntary days or the amount donated to others.

Table 1: Difference in means of continuous variables between groups; independent samples t test

Variable	Suicidal thoughts		t value
	Present (n=325) Mean and SD	Absent (n=6828) Mean and SD	
Individual characteristics			
Age	35.07 ±13.75	40.55 ± 15.63	-6.21***
Years of education	3.91 ±4.98	3.63 ± 4.95	0.989
Household characteristics			
Dependency ratio	0.68 ±0.66	0.65 ± 0.66	0.863
Household size	4.493 ±2.23	4.76 ± 2.16	1.427
Household income per capita	58378.25 ± 218177.7	61008.41 ± 421914.2	-0.112
Household debt	54440.01 ± 353822.2	26366.77 ± 129289.4	-1.426
Emotional balance			
Positive emotion index	20.72 ±5.86	20.99 ±6.48	-0.717
Negative emotion index	13.36 ±3.87	11.3 ± 4.03	8.99***
Health			
Level of distress	12.42 ± 5.88	9.31 ± 4.75	11.389***
Number of healthy days	26.1 ± 8.83	28.47 ±5.05	-7.9***
Personal relationship			
Family relationship index	15.80 ± 2.73	17.32 ±1.37	-18.32***
Social support	12.87± 19.20	15.68 ±19.30	-2.569*
Work life balance			
Working hours	7.52 ± 3.73	7.99 ± 3.77	-2.189*
Sleeping hours	9.01 ± 1.799	8.78 ± 1.916	2.144*
Community relationship			
Number of days volunteered	9.99 ± 20.84	10.52 ± 22.10	-0.4242
Amount donated	5654.77 ± 14741.35	10234.64 ± 55936.3	-1.473
Participation in community events	8.87 ± 13.23	8.71 ± 12.61	0.233

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Chi-square test also revealed a significant association between gender and suicidal tendency. Suicidal thoughts were higher amongst females as compared to males. Likewise, there were significant differences amongst the groups on marital status. The prevalence of suicidal thoughts was higher amongst

unmarried adults. Suicide is an issue that affects people throughout the lifetime and across different age groups; however, the incidences associated to suicide are most frequent amongst the younger generation. In particular, the test showed, prevalence to be significantly higher amongst the younger age group (aged 15-24) as compared to older age groups. People in rural regions; those who are disabled and those who were victims of crime were more likely to have suicidal ideation in the unadjusted analysis. A higher proportion of people who slept more than 11 hours had suicidal thoughts as compared to other groups. There was no significant difference in reported suicidal ideation among participants with different level of education, and across farmers and non-farmers.

Table 2: Difference in proportions of discrete variables between groups; contingency chi-square test

	Suicidal thoughts		Chi Square	P-value
	Present (n=325)	Absent (n=6828)		
Gender				
Male	79 (2.66%)	2887 (97.34%)	41.293***	0.000
Female	246 (5.88%)	3941 (94.12%)		
Marital status				
Never married	63 (5.72%)	1039 (94.28%)	7.048***	0.000
Married	225 (4.17%)	5170 (95.83%)		
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	37 (4.54%)	619 (95.46%)		
Age group				
Young (<=24)	87 (7.60%)	1057 (92.40%)	34.964***	0.000
Middle (25-64)	225 (4.18%)	5164 (95.82%)		
Old (>=65)	13 (4.54%)	607 (97.90%)		
Literacy				
Literate	164 (4.49%)	3485 (95.51%)	0.0415	0.839
Illiterate	161 (4.59%)	3343 (95.41%)		

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Education level				
No education	184 (4.44%)	3962 (95.56%)	6.306	0.098
Low (1-5 years)	25 (3.51%)	687 (96.49%)		
Medium (6-10 years)	76 (5.70%)	1257 (94.30%)		
High (Above 10 years)	40 (4.16%)	922 (95.84%)		
Occupation				
Farmer	141 (4.13%)	3271 (95.87%)	2.541	0.111
Non-farmer	184 (4.92%)	3557 (95.08%)		
Employment status				
Employed	316 (4.52%)	6671 (95.48%)	0.322	0.570
Unemployed	9 (5.45%)	156 (94.55%)		
Disability				
Yes	65 (7.71%)	778 (92.29%)	22.099***	0.000
No	260 (4.12%)	6050 (95.88%)		
Region				
Rural	228 (4.45%)	4899 (95.55%)	0.3887***	0.000
Urban	97 (4.79%)	1929 (95.21%)		
Migration status				
Non-migrant	131 (3.72%)	3390 (96.28%)	11.773**	0.008
Intra Dzongkhag migrant	51 (5.56%)	867 (94.44%)		
Inter Dzongkhag migrant	141 (5.33%)	2505 (94.67%)		
Migrated from outside	2 (3.03%)	64 (96.97%)		
Frequency of prayer recitation				
Prayer recitation at least once a day	163 (3.85%)	4069 (96.15%)	11.902**	0.003
Few times a week/Occasionally	126 (5.69%)	2089 (94.31%)		
Never	36 (5.12%)	667 (94.88%)		
Frequency of meditation				
Frequency of meditation at least once a day	26 (4.99%)	495 (95.01%)	1.303	0.521

Few times a week/Occasionally	42 (5.21%)	764 (94.79%)		
Never	257 (4.41%)	5569 (95.59%)		
Victim of crime				
Yes	61 (11.03%)	492 (88.97%)	58.06***	0.000
No	264 (4%)	6331 (96%)		
Working hours				
<=9 hours of work	203 (5.18%)	3716 (94.82%)	9.132*	0.028
10=< __>9 hours of work	28 (3.23%)	840 (96.77%)		
12=< __>10 hours of work	60 (3.83%)	1507 (96.17%)		
>12 hours of work	34 (4.26%)	765 (95.74%)		
Sleeping hours				
<=6 hours of sleep	176 (4.28%)	3935 (95.72%)	7.858*	0.049
9=< __>6 hours of sleep	11 (2.90%)	368 (97.10%)		
11=< __>9 hours of sleep	103 (4.87%)	2013 (95.13%)		
>11 hours of sleep	35 (6.40%)	512 (93.60%)		

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Multivariate analysis

Multiple logistic regressions were run using a combination of various independent variables. Model 1⁹ explores the relationship of the four outcome variables (lifetime suicidal thoughts, current suicidal thoughts, lifetime suicidal attempt and current suicidal attempt) with individual and household level characteristics. Younger age group were found to be at a higher risk of both contemplating and attempting suicide in their lifetimes as well as in the past 12 months. Model 2¹⁰ include both significant and non-significant independent

⁹ Refer Annexure 3.

¹⁰ Refer Annexure 4.

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variables. Based on these models and bivariate analysis, for the final model as depicted in the following table, a multiple logistic regression was run with variables that indicated significant association. Few non-significant characteristics such as education and income were incorporated as control variables. Hosmer-lemeshow goodness of fit test was computed to assess model specificity. For both regressions (suicidal thoughts and attempt) of the final model, there were no evidences of poor fit, suggesting that the model was correctly specified.¹¹

Table 3: Logistic regression

Model 3	Lifetime prevalence of suicidal thoughts			Lifetime prevalence of suicidal attempts		
	Odds Ratio	95% CI		Odds Ratio	95% CI	
Female	1.653***	1.252	2.181	1.993*	1.041	3.818
Never married (baseline)						
Married	1.392	0.882	2.196	3.812**	1.448	10.039
Divorced/Separated /Widowed	1.308	0.716	2.388	2.272	0.617	8.365
Age group						
Young age (= <24) (baseline)						
Middle age (64=<__>=25)	0.430***	0.294	0.630	0.291***	0.148	0.576
Old age (>=65)	0.168***	0.078	0.363	0.161*	0.035	0.749
No education (baseline)						
Low (1=<__>=5)	0.874	0.556	1.373	1.429	0.630	3.241
Medium (6=<__>=12)	0.966	0.685	1.360	1.271	0.650	2.483
High (>12)	0.654	0.407	1.049	1.290	0.449	3.703
Disability						
Yes	1.655**	1.177	2.329	1.375	0.609	3.106
Household characteristics						
Non-migrants (baseline)						
Intra Dzongkhag migrants	1.408	0.987	2.009	0.516	0.204	1.307
Inter-Dzongkhag migrants	1.391*	1.062	1.823	0.806	0.448	1.451
Emotional balance						
Negative emotion index	1.061***	1.029	1.095	0.983	0.914	1.056

¹¹ Refer Annexure 6.

Frequency of prayer recitation						
Prayer recitation at least once a day (baseline)						
Few times a week/Occasionally	1.397*	1.080	1.810	1.298	0.746	2.259
Never	1.313	0.888	1.942	2.399*	1.136	5.070
Health						
Level of distress	1.06***	1.036	1.087	1.050*	0.999	1.104
Number of healthy days	0.979*	0.963	0.996	0.971	0.939	1.005
Personal relationship						
Family relationship index	0.743***	0.704	0.784	0.673***	0.619	0.734
Victim of crime (Yes)	1.721**	1.215	2.439	2.007*	0.987	4.084
Constant	2.378	0.701	8.061	4.082	0.452	36.877
# of observations	7136			7,064		
Wald chi2(15)	326.930			173.06		
Prob > chi2	0.000			0.000		

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Discussion

Results from the multiple logistic regression (model 3) confirmed previous findings (Kessler et al., 1999; Scocco et al., 2008), that women were more likely to experience suicidal thoughts. This is hardly surprising given the burden of distress that a woman experience. Bhutanese women¹² are undergoing greater psychological distress, which may precede suicide. They are also more likely to act upon the idea as chances of females attempting suicide were found to be significantly higher. However, it is vital to note that the suicide completion rate is greater amongst males (Lhadon, 2014). So, if women are more likely to suffer from mental distress, to experience suicidal thoughts and to actually attempt suicide, then how do we explain that suicidal deaths are higher for men? It may be a question of method used to complete suicide. Studies show that men prefer more violent methods (Michel et al., 2000) and are more intended on dying (Harris et al., 2018) than women.

¹² Women were found to be significantly distressed as compared to men as per 2015 GNH survey. Refer Annexure 5.

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It has also been hypothesized that men have a higher tendency to act without much thought about consequences (Cross et al., 2011), leaving them more vulnerable to the spur of the moment suicidal behavior. Other factors such as drug and alcohol use has also been linked with suicidal completion amongst men (Haw et al., 2005). For instance, strong correlations between intoxication and suicide among men have been established through various empirical studies. These acts might amplify the completion of a suicide. Clearly, more research needs to be done to understand this complexity. Overall, women are found to be far more vulnerable to experience suicidal thoughts, which also creates an opportunity for gender specific prevention plans.

With regard to age groups, occurrence rate of suicidal thoughts and attempts seem to mirror suicide completion rates (Lhadon, 2014). Similar to the many studies (Ma et al., 2009; Scocco et al., 2008), people belonging to the younger age group category are more likely to not only experience suicidal ideation, and plan an attempt but also complete suicide as compared to their older age counterparts. Therefore, it is wise to recommend that early and more advanced youth-centric interventions should be formulated to target younger age groups. Furthermore, it would also be effective to target suicide awareness to students who fall in the high school and college going age groups. The education sector should strive to mobilise resources to encourage conversations revolving around suicide prevention.

Risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts also was highest when respondents exhibited greater mental distress and poorer physical health. Studies reveal that the one's mental health status is a strong predisposing factor for suicide (Garlow et al., 2008). Findings from this study confirm this claim. The odds ratio in Table 3 indicates that people who have contemplated or attempted suicide experience higher levels of mental distress. As level of mental distress is found to be good predictors, early identification of people at risk could involve the use of instruments for assessing and screening mental

health status. Likewise, proper recognition and management of increased reported rates of depression or other psychiatric illnesses may help reduce suicidal deaths. Introduction of mental health literacy programs and resources, which are gender and age sensitive, are strongly recommended. The health sector may train more clinical professionals in the areas of psychiatry or clinical psychology, and ensure their equitable distribution in key health facilities across the country.

The presence of any disability was associated with an increase in suicide ideation. However, the likelihood was not found to be significant for attempted suicide. Disability in the data is not a category of disease but rather relates to physical, cognitive or mental condition that substantially limits the respondent from performing daily activities. These functional limitations have been found to be predictive of suicidal ideation. Furthermore, studies show that disabled people are often experience greater socially and environmentally induced depression than the average (Turner & Beiser, 1990) suggesting an increased potential for preventable suicide. People with disabilities represent a minor group for which often, neither suicidal rate data are collected nor targeted suicide research is conducted. It is suggested that suicide prevention services should be extended to meet the needs of those who are disabled. This involves better scrutiny of disabled persons' suicidal intentions, and providing adequate support for adjustment to those who are facing new or challenging disabilities.

Perceived family cohesion is a protective factor against suicidal ideation and suicidal attempt. This identification of a highly significant association with poor family relationship and suicidal ideation and attempt is a significant contribution to understanding the cause of suicide. It highlights the key role; a family plays in such behaviors. Findings from this extend previous findings (Ahookosh et al., 2017). Family relationship index remained significant even after adjusting for household income per capita as a measure of economic status. This may

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suggest that the ease of talking about problems or distress with family members has a protective effect. Familial resources such as encouraging a harmonious environment based on mutual respect and trust should be included as protective factors when implementing advocacy programs.

Logistic regressions from the current study also strongly suggest an association between suicidal behavior and victimization. Those who experienced victimization are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and over two times more likely to have made at least one suicide attempt in their lifetime. This may be explained by various factors such as physical, economical, psychological, and social consequences a victim may experience due to the crime. Studies show that a victim of crime may suffer from depression and self-destructive behaviors (Turner et al., 2012). This suggests the need for comprehensive victimization assessments especially among younger population who are believed to be at risk of suicidal ideation. Seeking explanations for the specific crimes such as sexual assault, bullying, physical assault etc., is beyond the scope of current study. Future research should attempt to better specify the type of crimes that strongly predicts suicidal ideation.

Negative emotions were significantly associated with suicidal ideation, suggesting that one way to intervene and prevent suicide is to understand the sequence of thoughts and feelings. Improving social support and emotional coping mechanism may be helpful for those at risk. Further studies need to be carried out to understand the underlying pathways from negative emotions to suicidal ideation. Results also indicated that daily prayer reciters were found to less likely to have suicidal thoughts as compared to those who recited few times a week or occasionally. Studies examining the relationship between suicidal behavior and prayer recitations are rare; however, it may be concluded that daily recitation of prayers could have a positive effect on one's mental wellbeing, and thus enhance the status of mental health.

This study did not find any role of several factors that are often claimed as risk factors of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Low economic status was not found to be associated with higher suicidal ideation and attempts. It is claimed that the role of income in suicide is in fact confounding (Bhugra, 2006). This raises a possibility that income per se for now seems independent from suicidal contemplation or attempt. Level of education did not reveal any association with the likelihood of ideation or attempt. Even working hours and sleeping hours were not found to have any predictive power. Although, the predictive power failed short of significance level in this study, there is a growing body of research emphasizing the quality and length of sleep in suicidal behaviors (Bernert et al., 2005). Single status (never married) was not found to have any role in predicting suicidal ideation but seems to be a risk factor for suicidal attempt. Perhaps, due to the cultural differences in other countries, many correlates that have been supported in previous studies were not found to be significant in the current study.

Conclusion

Suicide is preventable with effective interventions and strategies. Identifying groups vulnerable to suicide could be helpful to develop such plans. It is hoped that the information here can raise awareness, and evoke interest with regards to the serious public health, and community burden presented by suicide. Prediction models for assessing risk factors could be useful for early detection of high-risk groups. In future, a longitudinal study may be useful for determining causations. All gathered data are self-reports; future studies could concentrate on clinical features of sample. Likewise, there may still be some important factors that were not considered in the relationship to suicidal ideation and attempts.

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Annexure

Annexure 1: Data demographics

	Observations	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	2,966	41.47
Female	4,187	58.53
<i>Marital status</i>		
Never married	1,102	15.41
Married	5,395	75.42
Divorced	268	3.75
Separated	32	0.45
Widowed	356	4.98
<i>Educational status</i>		
No education	4,146	57.96
Low (1=<__>=5)	712	9.95
Medium (6=<__>=12)	1,975	27.61
High (>12)	320	4.47
<i>Age group</i>		
Young age (= <24)	1,144	15.99
Middle age (64=<__>=25)	5,389	75.34
Old age (>=65)	620	8.67
<i>Region</i>		
Rural	5,127	71.68
Urban	2,026	28.32
<i>Religion</i>		
Non-Buddhist	1,207	16.88
Buddhist	5,945	83.12
<i>Migration status</i>		
Non-migrants	3,521	49.24
Intra-Dzongkhag migrants	918	12.84
Inter-Dzongkhag migrants	2,646	37
Migrated from outside Bhutan	66	0.92

Annexure 2: Correlation between variables

Level of mental distress	Level of mental distress	# of healthy days	Working hours	Sleeping hours	Social support	Positive emotion	Negative emotion	HH income	HH size	Dependency ratio
1										
Number of healthy days	-0.2903	1								
Working hours	-0.0719	0.0879	1							
Sleeping hours	0.0948	-0.0624	-0.3305	1						
Social support	-0.0841	0.001	0.0037	-0.0443	1					
Positive emotion	-0.0625	-0.0208	-0.0258	-0.0339	0.0846	1				
Negative emotion	0.216	-0.1197	-0.0109	0.0221	-0.0259	0.3445	1			
HH per capita income	-0.0368	0.0117	-0.0197	-0.0359	0.0335	0.0038	0.0029	1		
HH size	-0.0179	-0.0017	0.0298	-0.0124	0.0663	0.0048	0.0715	-0.048	1	
Dependency ratio	0.0467	-0.0147	0.0405	-0.0116	-0.0135	-0.0227	0.0242	-0.038	0.2289	1

Annexure 3: Model 1

Individual characteristics	Prevalence of suicidal thoughts in lifetime			Prevalence of suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months			Prevalence of suicidal attempts in lifetime			Prevalence of suicidal attempts in the past 12 months		
	Odds Ratio	95% CI		Odds Ratio	95% CI		Odds Ratio	95% CI		Odds Ratio	95% CI	
Gender	1.902***	1.445	2.504	2.259***	1.565	3.263	2.33*	1.19	4.56	2.052	0.829	5.080
Female												
Marital status												
Never married (baseline)												
Married	1.193	0.754	1.889	1.34	0.767	2.345	2.68*	1.04	6.90	4.75*	1.103	20.502
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	1.700	0.951	3.037	1.86	0.904	3.845	2.853	0.85	9.60	4.215	0.707	25.148
Age group												
Young age (<=24) (baseline)												
Middle age (64=<=>=25)	0.381***	0.254	0.571	0.283***	0.180	0.448	0.302**	0.15	0.63	0.232**	0.092	0.583
Old age (>=65)	0.143***	0.067	0.305	0.127***	0.053	0.303	0.183*	0.04	0.83	0.154	0.024	1.008
Education level												
No education (baseline)												
Low (1=<=>=5)	0.801	0.510	1.256	0.77	0.444	1.330	1.478	0.63	3.45	0.973	0.286	3.314
Medium (6=<=>=12)	0.965	0.698	1.334	0.78	0.516	1.172	1.470	0.80	2.72	1.553	0.703	3.432
High (>12)	0.651	0.416	1.019	0.358**	0.190	0.678	1.099	0.42	2.88	0.474	0.076	2.972
Disability												
Yes	2.39***	1.747	3.262	2.396***	1.637	3.509	1.998	0.95	4.20	2.212	0.855	5.723
Household characteristics												
Region												
Urban	0.908	0.673	1.227	0.90	0.603	1.345	1.044	0.53	2.05	1.245	0.446	3.476
Migration status												
Non-migrants (baseline)*												
Intra Dzongkhag migrants	1.633**	1.149	2.322	1.541*	1.009	2.356	0.623	0.24	1.59	0.585	0.180	1.904
Inter-Dzongkhag migrants	1.573**	1.177	2.103	1.24	0.849	1.819	0.939	0.49	1.79	0.713	0.269	1.888
Household income per capita	1.000	1.000	1.000	1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.00	1.00	1.000	1.000	1.000
Household debt	1.000	1.000	1.000	0.999	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.00	1.00	1.000	1.000	1.000
constant	0.047	0.030	0.072	3.41E-02	0.020	0.060	0.005	0.00	0.02	0.003	0.001	0.015
# of observations	7151			7,084			7,079			7,079		
Wald chi2(15)	114.220			115.69			37.36			31.85		
Prob > chi2	0.000			0.000			0.001			0.004		

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
 * Category for those migrated from outside Bhutan has been excluded due to small sample size

Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation and Attempts

Annexure 4: Model 2

Model 2	Prevalence of suicidal thoughts in lifetime				Prevalence of suicidal attempts in lifetime			
	Odds Ratio	95% CI			Odds Ratio	95% CI		
Individual characteristics								
Female	1.672***	1.267	2.208		2.00*	1.058	3.811	
Never married (baseline)								
Married	1.506	0.943	2.404		4.040**	1.590	10.266	
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	1.398	0.755	2.589		2.405	0.662	8.737	
Age group								
Young age (<24) (baseline)								
Middle age (64=<__>=25)	0.439***	0.296	0.653		0.285***	0.146	0.557	
Old age (>=65)	0.160***	0.073	0.348		0.147*	0.031	0.703	
No education (baseline)								
Low (1=<__>=5)	0.866	0.548	1.370		1.340	0.571	3.145	
Medium (6=<__>=12)	0.948	0.665	1.351		1.157	0.571	2.343	
High (>12)	0.636	0.390	1.039		1.088	0.353	3.350	
Disability								
Yes	1.642**	1.167	2.313		1.343	0.586	3.079	
Household characteristics								
Urban	1.037	0.763	1.409		1.498	0.745	3.012	
Non-migrants (baseline)								
Intra Dzonkhag migrants	1.382	0.959	1.992		0.497	0.188	1.310	
Inter-Dzonkhag migrants	1.384*	1.029	1.863		0.741	0.377	1.453	
Household income per capita	1.000	1.000	1.000		1.000	1.000	1.000	
Household debt	1.000	1.000	1.000		1.000	1.000	1.000	
Emotional balance								
Negative emotion index	1.063***	1.032	1.097		0.985	0.916	1.060	
Frequency of prayer recitation								
Prayer recitation at least once a day (baseline)								

Few times a week/Occasionally	1.423**	1.091	1.856	1.223	0.705	2.122
Never	1.338	0.898	1.993	2.29*	1.073	4.894
Frequency of meditation						
Frequency of meditation at least once a day (baseline)						
Few times a week/Occasionally	1.052	0.611	1.812	3.035	0.617	14.930
Never	0.826	0.514	1.326	1.919	0.423	8.703
Health						
Level of distress	1.058***	1.033	1.085	1.048	0.996	1.103
Number of healthy days	0.980*	0.964	0.997	0.973	0.940	1.007
Personal relationship						
Family relationship index	0.745***	0.706	0.788	0.672***	0.613	0.738
Social support	0.997	0.990	1.005	1.001	0.988	1.014
Work life balance						
Working hours	0.978	0.944	1.012	0.985	0.916	1.060
Sleeping hours	1.001	0.942	1.062	1.074	0.962	1.198
Victim of crime (Yes)	1.744**	1.232	2.470	2.019	0.988	4.125
constant	2.949	0.695	12.513	1.181	0.065	21.586
# of observations	7117			7,045		
Wald chi2(15)	342.480			193.940		
Prob > chi2	0.000			0.000		

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

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Annexure 5: Mental health across gender

GHQ-12 score categorized	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Severe psychological distress	35.38	64.62	100
Some mental distress	34.57	65.43	100
Normal mental wellbeing	42.25	57.75	100
Total	41.47	58.53	100

Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 15.3756$ Pr = 0.000

Annexure 6: Logistic model for suicidal attempt, goodness-of-fit test (Table collapsed on quantiles of estimated probabilities)

Dependent variable	Suicidal thought	Suicidal attempt
Number of observations	7136	7064
Number of groups	10	10
Hosmer-Lemeshow $\chi^2(8)$	13.78	4.61
Prob > χ^2	0.0876	0.798

Bhutan's Faustian Bargain?⁺

William J. Long*

*Bhikkhus, there are two kinds of happiness. What two? Worldly happiness and spiritual happiness. These are the two kinds of happiness. Of these two kinds of happiness, spiritual happiness is foremost.*¹

*While seeing things clearly, the wise one knows both kinds of happiness. The other is not worth a sixteenth part of the bliss of blamelessness.*² -- Shakyamuni Buddha

Introduction

Two decades ago, Bhutan opened to the outside world and created a mixed market economy directed toward the pursuit of greater Gross National Happiness (GNH) for its citizens, not merely an expansion of Gross National Product (GNP). A mere ten years ago, Bhutan underwent a political transformation: transitioning from a monarchy to a constitutional democracy.

In many respects, these changes have been remarkably successful. Across many domains of gross national happiness—standard of living, education and health—Bhutan

⁺ Faust is literary character based on a historical figure who appeared in the writings of Christopher Marlowe and later in a play by Goethe among other renditions. Faust is a successful yet dissatisfied scholar who makes a pact with the devil exchanging his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. The term “Faustian bargain” generally refers to a short-sighted exchange of immediate material benefits at the expense of more enduring spiritual riches.

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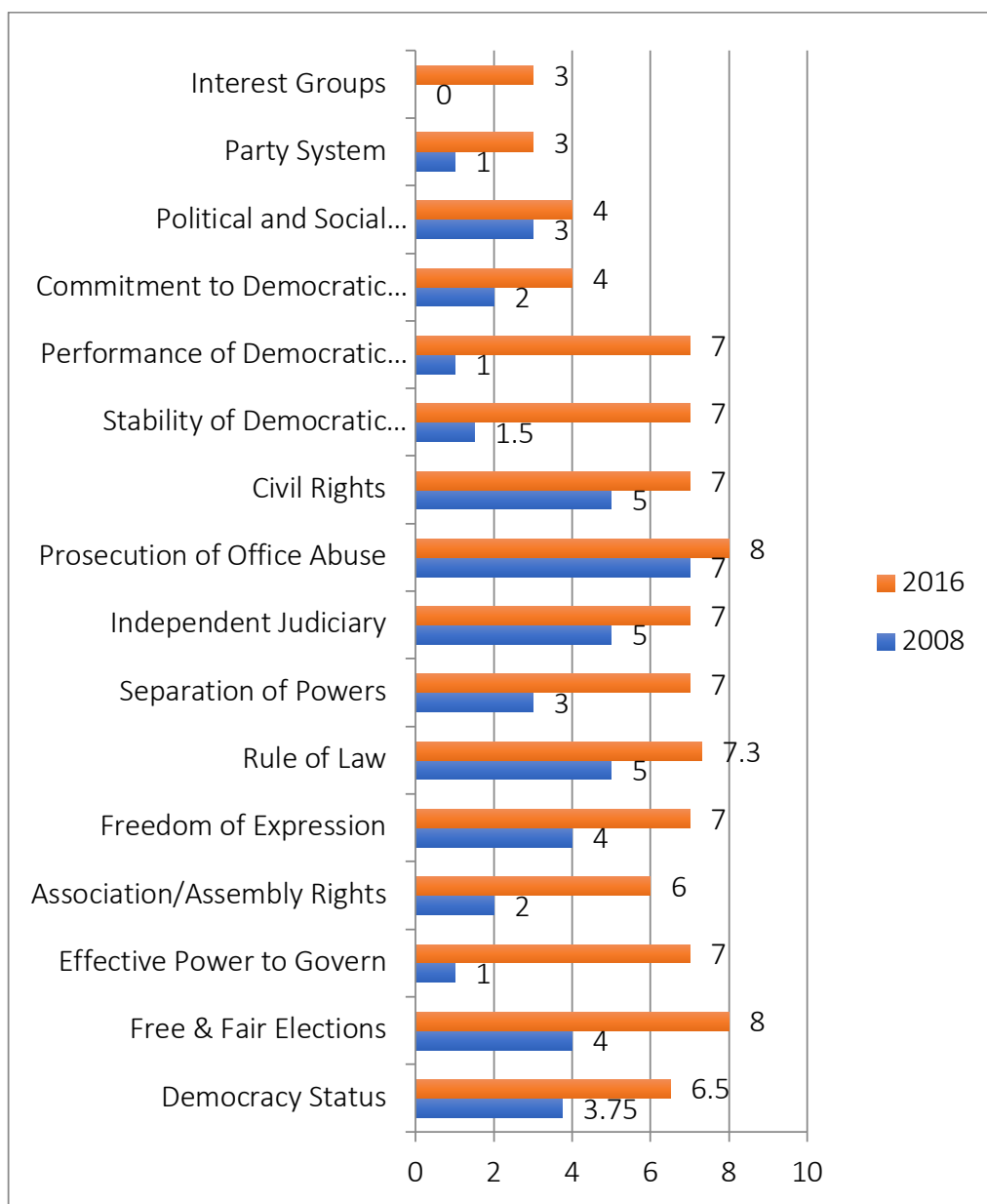
¹ A.N. 1:81.

² A.N. II:62.

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has made significant progress and has done so with policies consistent with Buddhist principles that emphasize equality, poverty eradication, full employment, provision of essential human needs and protection of the natural environment. For example, gross national income per capita in purchasing power parity terms increased from US \$3591 in 2000 to US \$7176 in 2014; poverty levels fell from 23.2% in 2007 to 12.7% in 2012; expected years of schooling for children entering school increased from 7.6 years in 2000 to 12.6 years in 2014; and, life expectancy rose from 52.4 years to 69.5 years during that period (UNDP, 2015). Despite rapid growth, Bhutan remains carbon negative and over 72% of the country's land area is covered in natural forests (up from 66% in 2000) (UNFAO, 2016). The World Bank Survey of Bhutan concluded, "The Kingdom of Bhutan is considered a development success story with decreasing poverty and improvements in human development indicators" (World Bank, 2016). Reflecting these trends, the GNH Survey reported that overall national happiness was measurably, if modestly, on the rise in Bhutan from 2010 to 2015. The GNH Happiness Index for the population increased nearly 2% when all domains were accounted for equally.

Equally impressive, Bhutan has quickly transitioned from an essentially authoritarian system of government to a recognizable democracy with uniquely Buddhist and Bhutanese features. The legal and institutional basis for democracy has taken root in Bhutan. Most state institutions associated with democratic governance are performing well, especially the Parliament, Judiciary and independent constitutional agencies. Non-state actors such as the press, civil society organizations and political parties which are also critical to democracy, are at an early stage of development and may need to increase their capacities to play a significant role in Bhutan in coming years.



Graph No. 1: Bhutan's Transition to Democracy, 2008 and 2016

Source: BTI, 2008, 2016.

A statistical comparison illustrates the overall progress that Bhutan has made in transitioning to democracy and, as they say, saves a thousand words. Graph No. 1 above reflects

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Bhutan's aggregated transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system of government as well as Bhutan's performance across 15 specific variables related to the elements of democratic consolidation.³ Recognizing that no one sure method measures democracy and democratization, the graph below gives a credible landscape view of the process.

While Bhutan's democracy is far from perfect or as well rooted as many older democracies, in ten short years it has made remarkable strides in transitioning into a functioning democracy.

There is a shadow over this otherwise sunny picture, however. The latest 2015 Gross National Happiness Survey shows a significant decline in the country's spiritual wellbeing relative to the 2010 Survey. This important trend may be overlooked or under-appreciated because the GNH survey's methodology weighs each of nine different domains⁴ of citizen satisfaction equally in determining the country's overall happiness index, and hence the decline in spiritual wellbeing is offset or masked by gains in other domains of happiness such as health and living standards. The methodological choice of weighing each of the nine domains of happiness equally is, as will be discussed below and suggested by the quotations above, problematic. This methodology privileges individual choice as to what constitutes the components of happiness over any other value, and is a decidedly Western, not Buddhist, approach to weighing happiness. According to Bhutan's own stated Buddhist principles and beliefs that originally animated the GNH development strategy, not all "happineses" are created

³ The data are taken from two detailed longitudinal studies in the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), which analyze and evaluate, on a ten-point scale, to what extent 129 developing countries are steering social change toward democracy. Available online at www.bti-project.org/en/index/.

⁴ These domains are: psychological wellbeing; health; time use; education; cultural diversity and resilience; community vitality; good governance; ecological diversity; and, resilience and living standards.

equally. Wellbeing that comes from within is a higher form of happiness than enhanced material comforts or improved external conditions. Applying Bhutan's Buddhist values and the foundational meaning of GNH to the survey's domains would prioritize the spiritual dimensions of happiness relative to the material.

Applying Bhutan's Buddhist approach to happiness would question whether it is sound to treat the "Psychological Wellbeing" domain of the GNH Survey, which encompasses spiritual happiness, as only one of nine equally important domains. This domain of happiness is, according to Buddhism and the founders of the GNH strategy, the most important dimension of happiness, and other domains of happiness are only lesser forms of happiness in themselves and important as conducive conditions for this higher form of happiness. This Buddhist understanding of happiness is what makes GNH unique, and what makes Bhutan's national goal and state identity distinctive. If Bhutan is declining in this dimension of happiness, even if it is succeeding in other measures of happiness, then the GNH experiment—to develop both spiritually and materially—is, at best, only half won. If Bhutan cannot maintain its happiness in the Buddhist sense, then providing improved material conditions is a laudable and necessary achievement, but short of the exceptional development goal Bhutan had set for itself.

This article raises, but does not attempt to answer, the following question: "Is Bhutan sacrificing its spiritual wellbeing, the deeper, more meaningful dimension of happiness for a Buddhist nation, in exchange for advancements in its material, or worldly happiness?" Or, in short, has Bhutan struck a Faustian bargain by opening itself to the forces of globalization, thereby foregoing spiritual wellbeing for increased material comforts.

I suggest that this is a critical question for Bhutan to examine because the country's unique Mahāyāna Buddhist values and

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culture are what make Bhutan, Bhutan. Bhutan is a country of less than one million people sandwiched between China and India with over 1.2 billion people each, or, as they say locally, “Bhutan is a yam between two boulders.” If the spiritual dimension of GNH is sacrificed to more conventional material dimensions of wellbeing, then Bhutan is not just experiencing a loss in a domain of happiness that could be offset elsewhere, it is in danger of losing its core values that shape its unique identity and that are critical to its sovereignty.

To understand this potential dilemma facing Bhutan, it is important to understand first the Buddhist meaning of happiness as compared with Western definitions of wellbeing, and to understand how this Buddhist understanding of happiness was the underpinning for the Bhutan's pursuit of gross national happiness as the touchstone of its political and economic policies in the first place. The following sections briefly address these two topics. I then elucidate in detail the current trends in Bhutan's spiritual happiness.

A Buddhist Understanding of “Happiness”

“Happiness,” in the Bhutanese Mahāyāna Buddhist sense of the term, has a meaning distinct from Western conceptions of happiness. In Buddhism, genuine happiness does not equate with Western notions of hedonic (“feel good”) pleasure or the concept of overall life satisfaction used by Western social scientists. Nor is the Buddhist notion of happiness fully analogous to Aristotle's notion of happiness as eudemonia, the sense of deep contentment arising from living a virtuous life (although moral discipline and virtue are the foundations for higher forms of happiness in Buddhism).

In Buddhism, true, lasting happiness is a state of mind and therefore can only be obtained by understanding, purifying and controlling the mind, not merely improving one's external

circumstances.⁵ Understanding, purifying and controlling the mind requires three related practices: (1) developing moral maturity through mindfulness of one's ethical responsibilities; (2) reducing and eventually eliminating negative emotions of hatred, greed and ignorance,⁶ and replacing them with positive emotions of equanimity, compassion and generosity that allow for contentment and peace of mind;⁷ and (3) developing "wisdom," which is an understanding of how ourselves and all things truly exist, that is, realizing the fundamental Mahāyāna Buddhist ontology of no-self, impermanence and interdependence. By developing compassion and wisdom, one can abandon self-grasping and self-cherishing (the pervasive delusions that are the root cause of all unhappiness), liberate oneself from suffering and enjoy an inexhaustible source of happiness that comes from within. Enduring happiness is not principally about securing ever better external conditions because happiness is the product of an internal state of mind. Happiness requires mindfulness in conducting one's activities to ensure that they are virtuous and meditative concentration, which connects practitioners to their pure Buddha nature and to the true nature of reality (emptiness). This connection or "awakening" is, for Buddhists, the authentic source of peace and happiness.⁸

Buddha's teachings do not ignore the need for material comforts or good external conditions as these assist one's practice and provide a lesser form of happiness in themselves.

⁵ A discussion of a Buddhist theory of the mind is beyond the scope of this article, but for working purposes, mind, in Buddhism, is a non-material continuum of awareness or consciousness that includes all concepts or discriminations and all emotional states.

⁶ These delusions are known as the "three poisons" or root delusions that contaminate the mind but are not an intrinsic part of the mind.

⁷ The positive emotions of generosity, patience and compassion are part of the six "perfections" of the bodhisattva's path.

⁸ Mindfulness and meditative concentration are two broad categories of innumerable instructions of Buddha designed to eliminate suffering and achieve happiness.

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Buddha instructed that society should be organized to provide these conditions for all. Government policies, no matter how charitable or enlightened, however, cannot directly make its citizens happier in the Buddhist sense. The state's responsibility is to provide the best possible conditions to contribute to mental development for the greatest number of people given available resources. It is the job of government to remove obstacles that inhibit an individual's progress toward enlightenment and to reduce unnecessary suffering. This responsibility is what makes happiness a political and socio-economic project, as well as an individual goal, and justifies the state's pursuit of GNH.

It is essential not to lose sight of this Buddhist understanding of happiness and the role of the state in it to appreciate the original and deeper meaning of pursuing gross national happiness. The Buddhist philosophical and soteriological understanding of "happiness" is what makes the pursuit of "gross national happiness" unique, and why it is not merely one of many multi-dimensional measures of development as it is usually seen in the West, and, increasingly, in Bhutan. Former Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Y. Thinley, summarized the notion of genuine happiness from a Buddhist perspective: "We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds" (GNH Centre, 2014). Most Western observers neglect the deeper meaning of Bhutan's national goal because they apply Western understandings of happiness to their analysis of GNH. As professor Ross McDonald noted, it is "very easy to miss the deeper [meaning] implied by GNH thinking and to completely miss the fact that we missed this" (McDonald, 2010, p. 616).

A Brief History of the Evolution of “Gross National Happiness”

The idea that political and economic policies of the state should be directed toward maximizing the happiness of its citizens (understood as described above) is not new or recently manufactured in the history of Buddhist philosophy or in the history of Bhutan. The principle of pursuing GNH comes directly from the 2500-year-old teachings of Buddha on how to overcome suffering and find happiness and the role of good governance and material prosperity in that process. GNH also encapsulates the core value that has guided Bhutanese society for centuries. Dasho Kinley Dorji, journalist and former Secretary of Information and Communications for Bhutan observed, “GNH is not a sudden concept and it is not as if in the 1970s, the King suddenly had a brand-new idea. It is really the expression of the Bhutanese system, of the values and social and economic arrangements we have had for centuries ... values that come out of Buddhism” (Dorji, 2010, pp. 104-105). Earlier, the Third King speaking in the 1960s said as much when he remarked that the goal of development should be to “make people prosperous and happy ... a holistic view of life and development is called for that augments equally people’s spiritual and emotional wellbeing as well. It is this vision that Bhutan seeks to fill” (Evans, 2013, p. 642).

Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s,⁹ the Fourth Majesty in a public interview remarked that, “The pursuit of Gross National Happiness is more important than the pursuit of Gross National Product” (Ura, et al., 2015). What was new in “Gross National Happiness” as Bhutan’s enounced development goal was the clever and concise phrasing of this concept in a way that captured this deeply felt principle for the

⁹ The exact date of the King’s quote is not certain. Some claim the King made this remark in 1974, others say in 1979, still others the early 1980s (Munro, 2016).

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Bhutanese and attracted the attention of the global community. This comment held special meaning for Bhutanese and later struck a chord in the West when it appeared in the global media in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰ The King, by removing the word “product” and replacing it with the word “happiness” was offering an alternative model of development that would make the end of government policy happiness, not material output, in consonance with Bhutan’s Buddhist beliefs. Michael Rowbotham asserts that substituting a single word “happiness” for the word “product” “injects humanity, in all its rich complexity, into economics” (Rowbotham, 2013, p. 175). The change in phraseology is said to have put people, not output, the Centre of development (Brancho, 2013), and it made interiority (happiness), not external conditions, the starting point for assessing development (Hargens, 2002).¹¹

Bhutan’s most important economic policy body at that time, the National Planning Commission, explained Bhutan’s independent path, “Simply imposing development models from outside which do not take religion and tradition into account will only serve to diminish existing culture [and] meet with limited success” (Wangmo and Valk, 2012, p. 56). Bhutan was

¹⁰ The King’s quote appeared in an interview with the Financial Times of London in 1986 and the first multilateral discussion of GNH allegedly occurred in 1998 in Seoul at the Asia-Pacific Millennium meeting sponsored by UN Development Programme (UNDP). Since that time, GNH has been the subject of many governmental and non-governmental conferences and was discussed at the United Nations in 2012 as an alternative government paradigm.

¹¹ To appreciate the uniqueness of Bhutan’s GNH strategy, it should be compared with the dominant development model of the late 20th century, neo-liberalism, which accentuated many of the features of 19th century laissez-faire economics. The goal in neo-liberalism is expanding GNP and creating a surplus for investment for more output and to service foreign-held debt (Williamson, 1990). Neo-liberalism recommendations included fiscal discipline (austerity) to reduce budget deficits, tax reform, market-based interest and exchange rates, open trade and foreign investment, privatization of state industries and protection of property rights. Preservation of spiritual, cultural or environmental values did not figure into the equation

clear that its development model differs profoundly from the Western GNP growth model: “Our approach to development has been shaped by beliefs and values of the faith we have held for more than 1000 years firmly rooted in our rich tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The approach stresses not material rewards, but individual development, sanctity of life, compassion for others, respect for nature and the importance of compromise” (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission, 1999, p. 19).

Bhutan’s GNH approach to national development challenged many tenets of economic orthodoxy, most importantly the assumption that increasing material output and consumption automatically equates with increasing levels of human happiness (Upreti, 2016). Buddha directly rejected this idea and taught that a singular focus on material acquisition and consumption (the growth model) leads to dissatisfaction and unhappiness, not enduring and meaningful happiness. The wisdom of this teaching was clear to Bhutan: by pursuing GNP growth at all costs many countries had lost their cultural identity, spirituality and environmental integrity and a deeper sense of happiness. In 1990, the Fourth Majesty explained: “Our country has an ancient and unique cultural heritage which we wish to preserve as we feel that this is vitally important for a small nation like ours. We do not wish to be swept away by the tide of materialism and consumerism. We are determined to preserve our rich spiritual and cultural values and traditions. At the same time, we must achieve a high level of economic growth with equality to improve the quality of life of our people” (Kuensel, July 2, 1990, p. 1).

Although the pursuit of GNH encapsulated Bhutan’s response to globalization and asserted its own unique approach to modernization and development, Bhutan was not rejecting the forces of globalization wholesale, but it also was not accepting them uncritically. Bhutan’s leadership believed it would be essential to maintain a balance between materialism and spirituality while opening itself up to greater external

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influences to secure the benefits of Western science, technology and management. Bhutan sought to extract from Western development models what it believed was relevant and good and to harmonize these concepts with its cultural, political, religious and socioeconomic traditions, much like its experiment with constitutional democracy.

In contrast to a growth at all cost model, GNH envisioned controlled economic growth, which, if kept in its proper place in the hierarchy of society's values, can support societal wellbeing. Bhutan's economic planning committee wrote, "Economic growth is essential to support and nurture the spiritual and social needs of the community. If growth is combined with equity, it can support social harmony, stability and unity" (Royal Government of Bhutan Ninth Five Year Plan, 2003, pp. 4-6). Growth must be subservient to happiness as a national priority, however. Dasho Kinley Dorji (2004) explains, "GNH is not against change but propounds control of change at a manageable pace and with the right priorities. It insists on judicious balance of tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism, all within a pristine environment. It is an expression of the deep-rooted value system on which Bhutanese social, economic and political systems were built ..." (p. 6). Affirming its belief in a hierarchy of values, Bhutan asserted that when material and spiritual values come into conflict, "We have deliberately chosen to give preference to our understanding of happiness and peace, even at the expense of economic growth, which we have regarded not as an end in itself but as a means to achieve improvements in the wellbeing and welfare of the people" (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, p.19).

Pursuing its distinctive course of development was not just a policy preference; it was believed essential to the country's very existence. Dasho Kinley Dorji underscored the importance of GNH to Bhutan's survival: "We will never be a major economic or military force so we decided our strength must lie in our identity, our cultural identity. We must be different from other

billions of people in the region or we will be swallowed up” (Dorji, 2010, pp. 103-104). Bhutan’s Constitution provides, and its political elite repeatedly states, that Bhutan’s sovereignty and its national survival depend on the preservation of its unique identity, which is a product of its culture, particularly its Buddhist values. Therefore, Bhutan rejects as its national goal any idea that contradicts what it considers the real source of wellbeing and the true purpose of the state. The King reminded his citizens of the responsibility they had to seek development according to their own values, “Nor must we ever lose sight of the fact that our nation is the last standing independent Mahāyāna Buddhist kingdom in the world. We are the sole surviving custodians of a social and cultural system that extended beyond the Eastern Himalayas to embrace a large part of Eastern and South East Asia. The world has been impoverished by the loss of the social and cultural system which is today unique to Bhutan and where it both survives and flourishes” (Upreti, 2016).

Originally, GNH was a widely-understood concept with deep spiritual roots, rather than an academic construct or a highly specified or quantified model for policymaking. As originally conceived, it was a philosophical principle that was considered “non-quantifiable” (Evans, 2013; Givel, 2015). GNH was meaningful to the Bhutanese because it captured what the Buddha taught as the true meaning and destiny of human life and it was powerful as a national aspiration because people intuited its deeper meaning. This is not to say that the average Bhutanese would explain the meaning of the GNH in philosophic or salvific terms. To a lifelong Buddhist this is self-evident truth, just as a Western “person on the street” takes subject-object dualism for granted, even if that person cannot offer a philosophical grounding for their belief.¹²

¹² A recent dissertation by Dr. Kent Schroeder documents the power of implicit, internalized GNH values in Bhutan. His study considered the integrity of GNH

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Until the year 2000, the concept GNH was an unstructured expression of Bhutan's worldview and development philosophy. The notion was shared by the country's leadership and civil service but was not formalized as a policy guide or index of any kind. Looking back at this earlier period, the Centre for Bhutan Studies and Gross National Happiness Research (CBS/GNH) concluded GNH policymaking "depend[ed] on people who were working almost subliminally, or unconsciously. There were neither doctrinal positions to follow nor managerial formats like goals, strategies and indicators to be adhered. These were to come later. ... It depended on the people who had intuitively internalized it. ... It is arguable that intuitive internalization is superior to bureaucratic institutionalization." (Ura, 2015, p. 6).

To concretize and operationalize the concept in measurable terms both for Bhutan's policy planning and implementation and for wider legitimacy of the concept, Bhutan overcame its reluctance to develop quantitative indicators of happiness and began to specify the elements of GNH and the means for their measurement with increasingly complexity (Givel, 2015). The first effort to enumerate GNH as a concept was to describe it as a broad strategic framework for development resting on "four mutually supporting pillars:" sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; environmental conservation; preservation and promotion of culture; and, good governance (McDonald, 2010). What was faulty in the early architectural

directives from their initial national policy pronouncement to their subsequent local implementation in four distinct policy areas. He discovered that, despite frequent political conflicts and confusion within the policymaking and policy implementation process, "policy outcomes that result is often a reasonable reflection of the original GNH policy intentions." He found that the influence of common Buddhist values—harmony, balance, interdependence and sustainability—shaped interactions and implementation, mitigated conflicts and resolved inconsistencies and that Buddhist inspired cultural values that underlie GNH have often played the key role in generating policy outcomes consistent with GNH policy intentions (Schroeder, 2014).

metaphor was that “pillars” do not support themselves or each other but, to continue the metaphor, must rest on a “pedestal.” The unstated pedestal, of course, was Bhutan’s Buddhist worldview and ethics. To illustrate, the pillar of equitable social and economic development is grounded in the Buddhist principles of equality and dignity of all persons and the priority placed on eliminating the suffering of those most in need. The environmental pillar is based on the emphasis on harmony between mankind and nature and the interdependence and non-hierarchical nature of the relationship among all sentient beings. And good governance is rooted in the Buddhist belief that government, in whatever configuration it might take, should be judged by its virtue and ability to serve to reduce its citizens’ suffering and remove obstacles to mental cultivation and higher levels of happiness. Ross McDonald, who wrote extensively on GNH at that time, recognized that the metaphor of four mutually supportive pillars was lacking: “The real foundation of happiness is a widespread morality and if this is indeed the case, then Bhutan’s [Four Pillars] model is incomplete in its failure to explicitly recognize the fundamental importance of this factor in determining the subsequent quality of cultural, governmental, environmental and economic interaction” (McDonald, 2005, p. 31). Bhutanese parliamentarian Pema Tenzin, made the same point. He argued that for the Four Pillars to be operationalized as a vision of practical development, “we will need to consider religious values, because they can provide the inner strength and guiding principles for living and can motivate development activities” (Tenzin, 2004, p. 555). Nevertheless, with the advice of interested international experts, the four pillars evolved into nine domains of life that were thought to be equally important to happiness and this methodology of equal weighting of domains was built into the methodology for conducting the five-year national surveys of happiness.

To create measurable standards for policymaking and credible metrics for domestic and international audiences, the quantification of GNH began in earnest in 2006. Proponents of

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quantification argued that as GNH became a quantitative measure it could more easily be institutionalized in government policy, both in legislation and within the bureaucracy and by local governments charged with implementing GNH projects. To serve as a guide to policy, a quantitative measure would facilitate judgments about the strength or weakness of a domain over time and across region and sub-populations to permit tailoring of the appropriate policy response and to gauge the overall status of happiness in Bhutan. That year, the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), which later became the Centre for Bhutan Studies and Gross National Happiness Research (CBS/GNH), an independent think tank working with the government's GNH Planning Commission, developed and administered a survey to gather data on the happiness of the nation, first on a limited basis in 2008 and then nation-wide in 2010, with the intent to conduct a full survey after every five years.

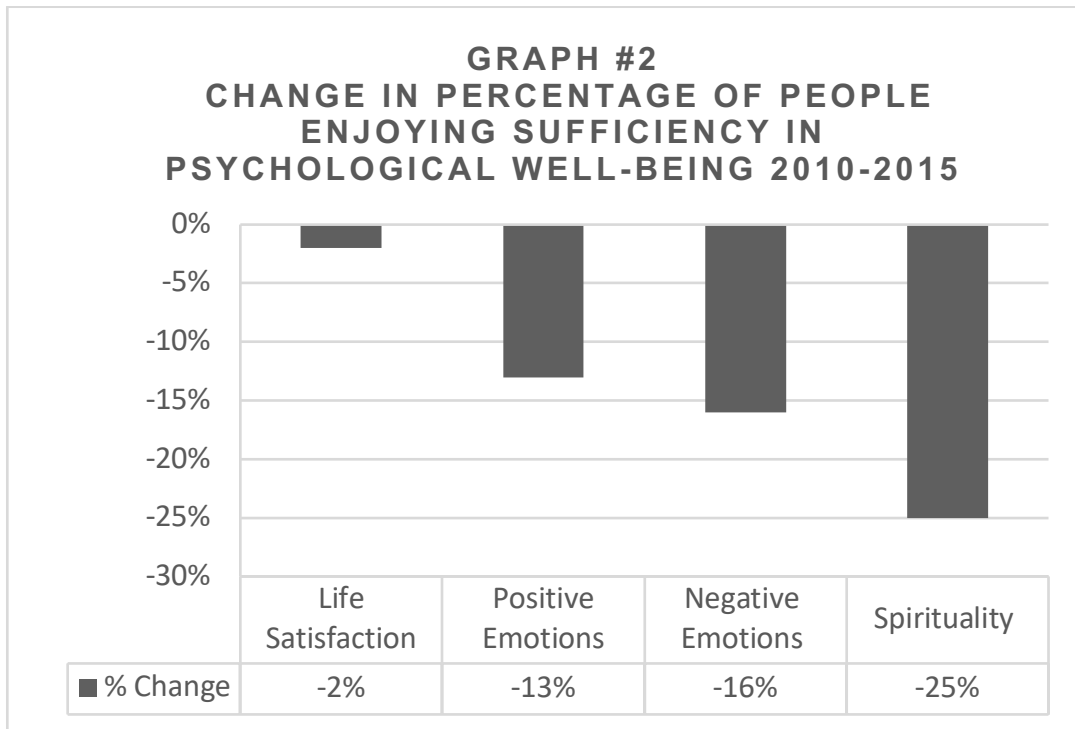
The nationwide survey included 124 questions and interviewed one percent of the entire population. The responses to the questions would ultimately be used to generate a GNH Index that measured the status and progress of society's happiness in the nine domains and in total. The specific findings contained in the GNH Index were to be used by government planners and policymakers to create and assess policies in each domain and at all levels of government to most effectively promote national wellbeing. Considering this survey, the Government would design policies directed to areas and populations of need, thus deploying its limited resources in the most effective way possible to alleviate obstacles to a conscious inner search for contentment. CBS/GNHR Director Karma Ura proposed six uses for the Index: (1) setting an alternative framework for development; (2) providing indicators to sectors to guide development; (3) allocating resource in accordance with targets and GNH screening tools; (4) measuring people's happiness and wellbeing; (5) measuring progress over time; and, (6) comparing progress across the country (Ura, 2015).

A Closer Look at Trends in Bhutan's Spiritual Wellbeing

As noted above, by many measures, Bhutan has been successful in providing the political, social and material conditions that are associated with good government and economic development consistent with its Buddhist values and its accomplishments are truly laudable. But, it is another question to ask whether these changes have made its citizens happier in the Bhutanese Buddhist understanding of the concept. To explore this question requires an emphasis on a subset of the results contained in the 2010 and 2015 GNH surveys—the data in the domain of “Psychological Wellbeing.” Despite its Western and secular terminology, “psychological wellbeing” probes the populations’ internal state, or happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term. A more accurate term for this domain would be “quality of mind.”

If one focuses on the survey measurements that track psychological wellbeing, happiness in the Buddhist meaning of the term, the trend nationally is downward. Bhutan’s material and social progress has coincided with a decline in its mental wellbeing and its deeper sense of happiness. During the period 2010 to 2015, the domain of “Psychological Wellbeing” suffered statistically significant declines in the percentage of the population achieving sufficiency in each indicator; Life Satisfaction, Positive Emotions, Spirituality and Freedom from Negative Emotions as seen in Graph No. 2.

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Graph No. 2: Change in people enjoying sufficiency in psychological wellbeing 2010-2015

To appreciate what lies behind this decline in inner wellbeing, it is necessary to unpack the GNH survey data that measures happiness in a Buddhist sense.

Trends in the Three Dimensions of Higher Form of Happiness

The three steps to higher forms of happiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism are: (1) developing equanimity, (2) replacing negative thoughts and feelings with positive ones (particularly, developing compassion), and (3) seeking and realizing wisdom by understanding the interdependence and impermanence of all phenomena. When the GNH Survey data are examined according to these categories, the data reveal that the population is not making progress on the stages of the path

that lead to higher forms of happiness. I consider each of the three steps in turn.

1. Developing Equanimity

In Buddhism, a contented, non-distracted and balanced mind that keeps material life in proper perspective comes from practicing moral discipline and right view. Having a balanced mind, one without excessive worldly concerns or grasping at material objects, allows one to overcome daily anxieties, frustrations and worries and allocate more of one's energies to the pursuit of higher forms of happiness, the minds of compassion and wisdom. Achieving this balanced mind is known as "developing equanimity" in Buddhism, and it is the first step along the path to the higher forms of happiness. The mind of equanimity is likened to a well-prepared field in which love and compassion can grow. Equanimity also reduces distractions in the mind, which facilitates the meditative concentration needed to realize wisdom, the highest form of happiness. Under the indicator of "Negative Emotions" the GNH Surveys asks about the frequency of negative distractions in the respondent's mind that prohibit the development of equanimity through the following question:¹³

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience worry or stress?"

Graph No. 3 illustrates the increase in worry and stress from 2010 to 2015, which inhibits the development of equanimity.¹⁴

¹³ Answers were scaled from 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

¹⁴ Methodological Note: The data used throughout this chapter were provided directly by the Center for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. The Center kindly shared their original data and reports that were used to run analysis and comparisons for this article. Questions in the 2010 survey about negative

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Further insight into the level of equanimity of the population can be found under the indicator, "Positive Emotions." The GNH survey assesses the affirmative development of equanimity through the following questions:¹⁵

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience calmness?"

"During the past few weeks, how often do you experience contentment?"

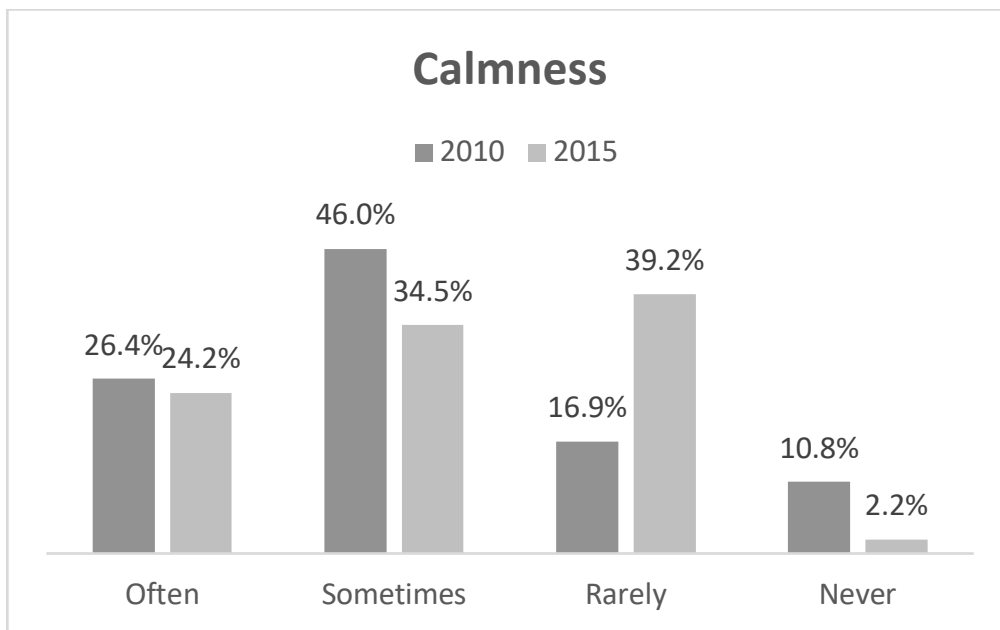
and positive feelings as well as spirituality were asked as multiple-choice questions each with four possible answers (Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never). However, questions in the 2015 survey were asked as multiple-choice questions with 7 possible answers (few times a day, once a day, few times a week, once a week, once or twice a month, not in the last month or never). To run comparisons, specifically for negative and positive feelings, this study used the 2010 matrix as it could clearly explain the trends, and the 2015 data could be collapsed accurately in to four categories. To match the comparison categories, the 2015 data was collapsed in the following manner:
Few times a day + once a day = Often
Few times a week + once a week = Sometimes
Once or Twice a month + not in the last month = Rarely
Never = Never

¹⁵ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.



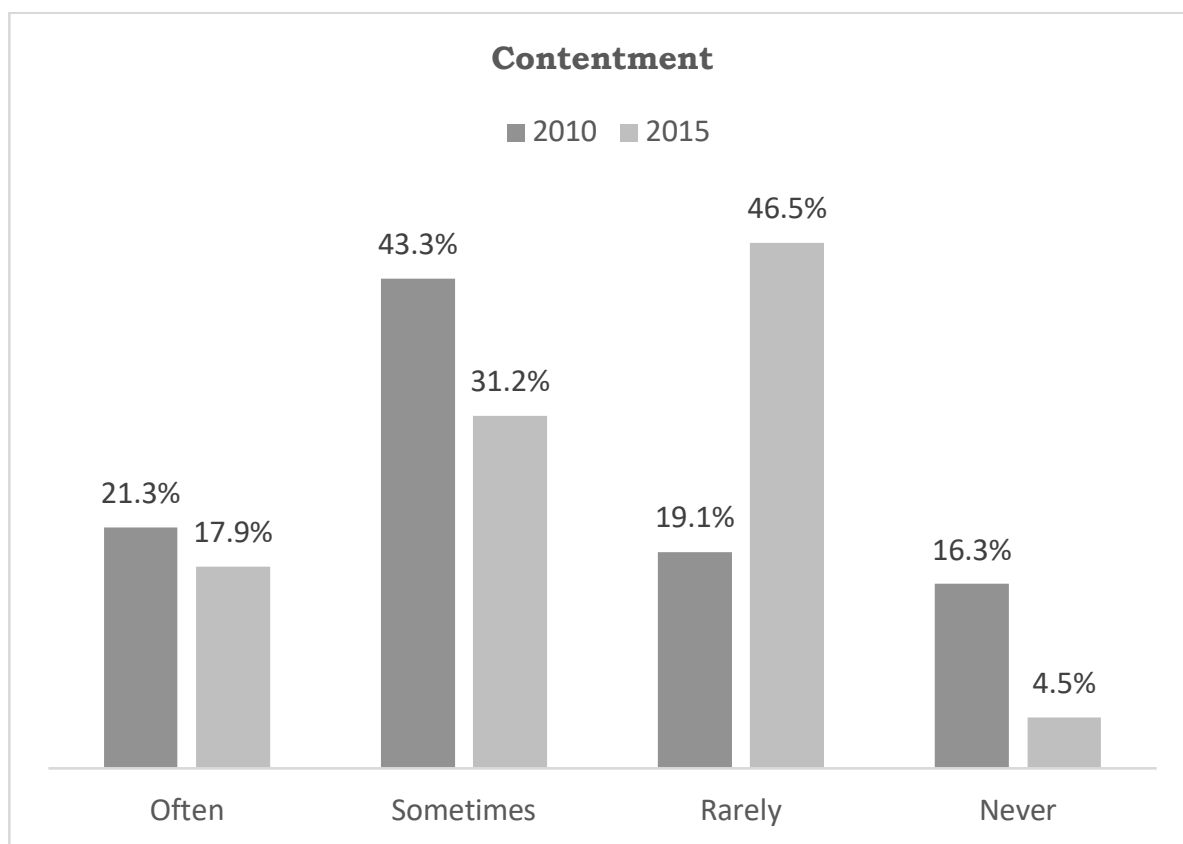
Graph No. 3: Impediment to Equanimity: Stress/Worry 2010-2015

Graphs No. 4 and No. 5 illustrate the frequency of the experience of equanimity by the population, which has declined from 2010 to 2015.



Graph No. 4: Equanimity: Calmness 2010–2015

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Graph No. 5: Equanimity: Contentment 2010–2015

2. Replacing Negative Emotions with Positive Emotions

Step two in achieving the higher forms of happiness involves reducing negative emotions and replacing them with positive ones. Negative emotions and thoughts are considered delusions in Buddhism, states of mind that are un-peaceful, uncontrolled and likely harmful to the individual both in a karmic sense and regarding an individual's immediate happiness. The practices of mindfulness, contemplation and meditation are designed to help train the mind to inculcate affirmative emotions.

There are various lists of negative emotions or thoughts in Buddhism, but the primary ones are the “three poisons” of

anger, desirous attachment and self-grasping ignorance.¹⁶ Other secondary delusions that flow from these three include pride, jealousy, miserliness and others.¹⁷ The GNH survey does not probe all these emotions, but it does assess some of the important negative emotions through the following questions:¹⁸

“During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience selfishness?” (i.e., self-grasping ignorance);

“During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience jealousy?” (a consequence of desirous attachment and self-grasping); and

During the past, few weeks, how often do you experience anger?

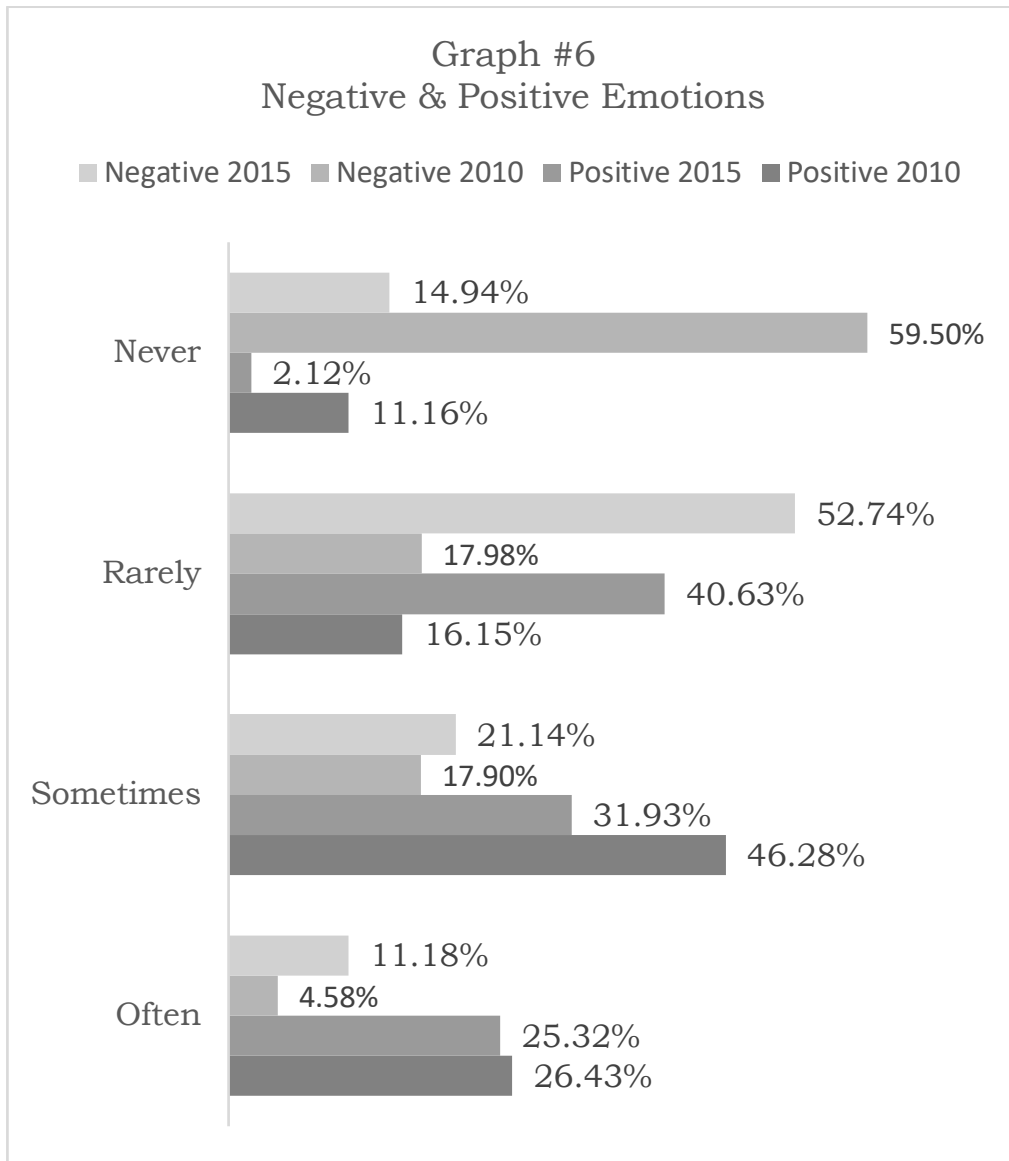
In general, the Bhutanese are experiencing negative emotions with greater frequency, as seen in Graph No. 6.

¹⁶ Buddhism identifies six “root delusions:” desirous attachment, anger, deluded pride, ignorance, deluded doubt and wrong view.

¹⁷ From the three root delusions, 20 secondary delusions arise: aggression, resentment, spite, jealousy, miserliness, concealment, pretention, denial, self-satisfaction, harmfulness, shamelessness, inconsideration, dullness, distraction, mental excitement, non-faith, laziness, non-conscientiousness, deluded forgetfulness and non-alertness.

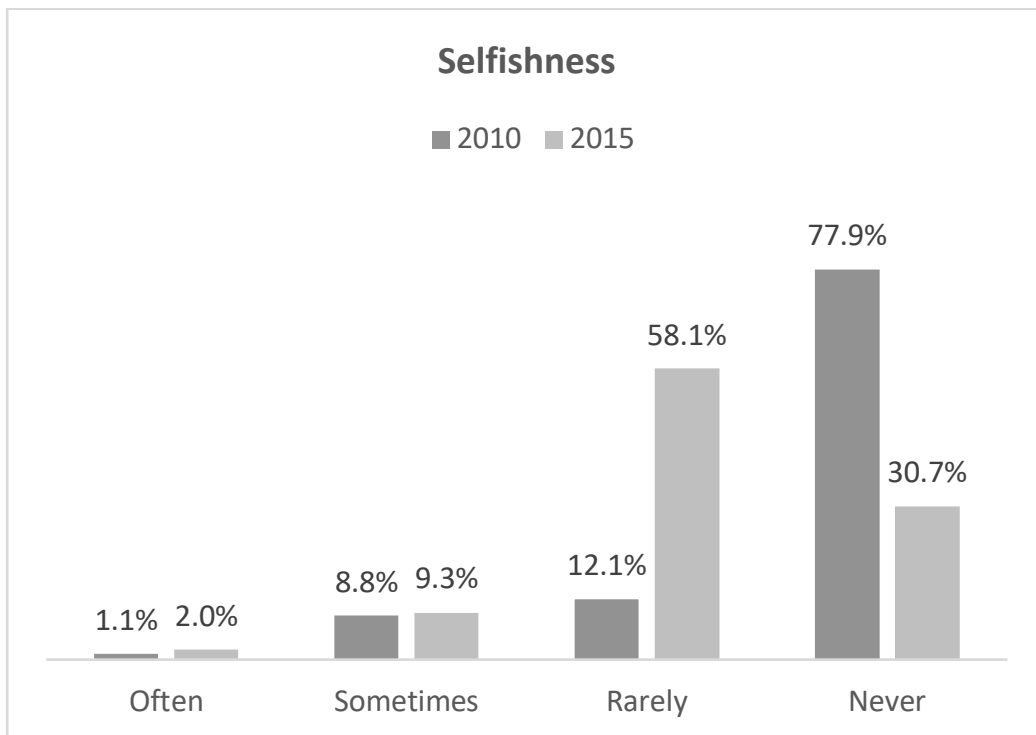
¹⁸ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (a few times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

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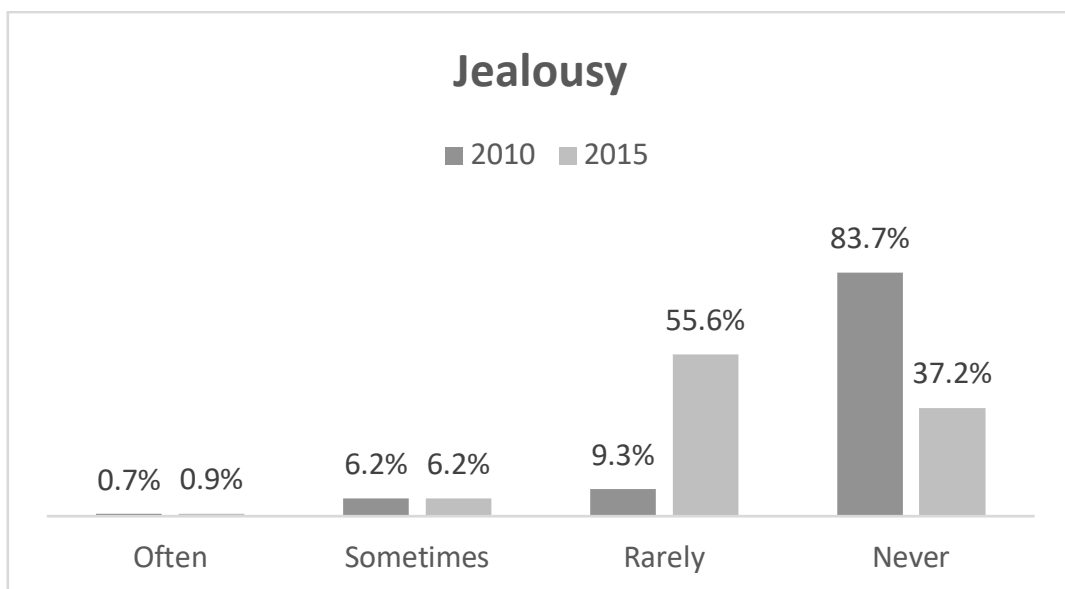


Graph No. 6: Negative & positive emotins, 2010 and 2015

Regarding the specific mental “poisons” of selfishness, jealousy and anger, comparing survey results in 2010 and 2015 reveal an increased experience of all three negative emotions. See Graphs No. 7, No. 8 and No. 9.

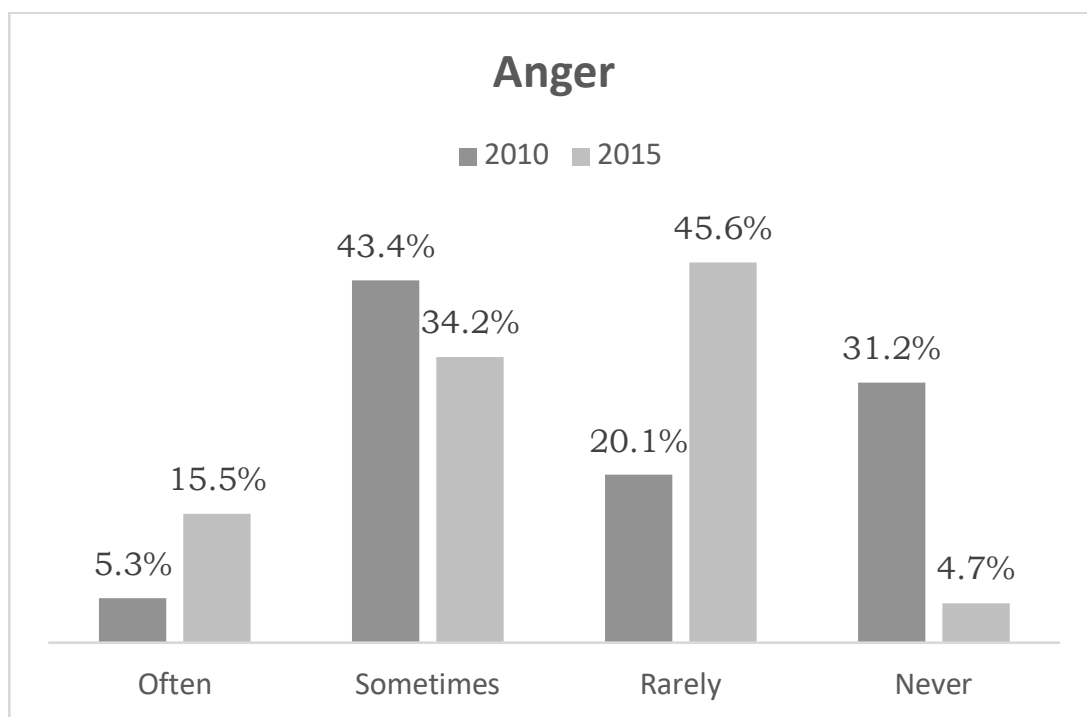


Graph No. 7: Negative Emotions: Selfishness 2010–2015



Graph No. 8: Negative Emotions: Jealousy 2010-2015

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Graph No. 9: Negative Emotions: Anger 2010 –2015

Similarly, there are many lists of positive emotions or virtuous mental states in Buddhism that are to be cultivated for greater happiness.¹⁹ In the Mahāyāna tradition, the most celebrated minds in addition to the mind of equanimity are love, compassion and sympathetic joy in others good fortune (the opposite of jealousy). The development of compassion is particularly beneficial because it is the foundation for developing the enlightened mind of bodhicitta—a mind, motivated by compassion for all sentient beings that spontaneously seeks enlightenment for their benefit. This great or universal compassion is a mind that wishes to liberate all living beings from their suffering. It combines cherishing love for all sentient beings (as opposed to our usual self-cherishing)

¹⁹ In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the most well-known virtues to be practiced are the “Six Perfections” of a bodhisattva: giving, moral discipline, patience, effort, mental stabilization (concentration) and wisdom.

with the recognition of their pervasive suffering in saṃsāra, i.e., birth, aging, sickness, dissatisfaction, etc. A loving attitude combined with a recognition of pervasive suffering constitutes the “heart of compassion.” In addition to compassion, in both the Pāli Canon and in the Mahāyāna tradition, giving with pure motivation (dāna) or generosity also ranks among the highest virtues. Giving, in Buddhism, takes three forms: providing material things, offering protection from suffering (giving “fearlessness”), and teaching or giving the dharma (the highest form of giving because its value is not limited to one lifetime alone).

Regarding the status of Positive Emotions, the GNH Survey asks the following questions:²⁰

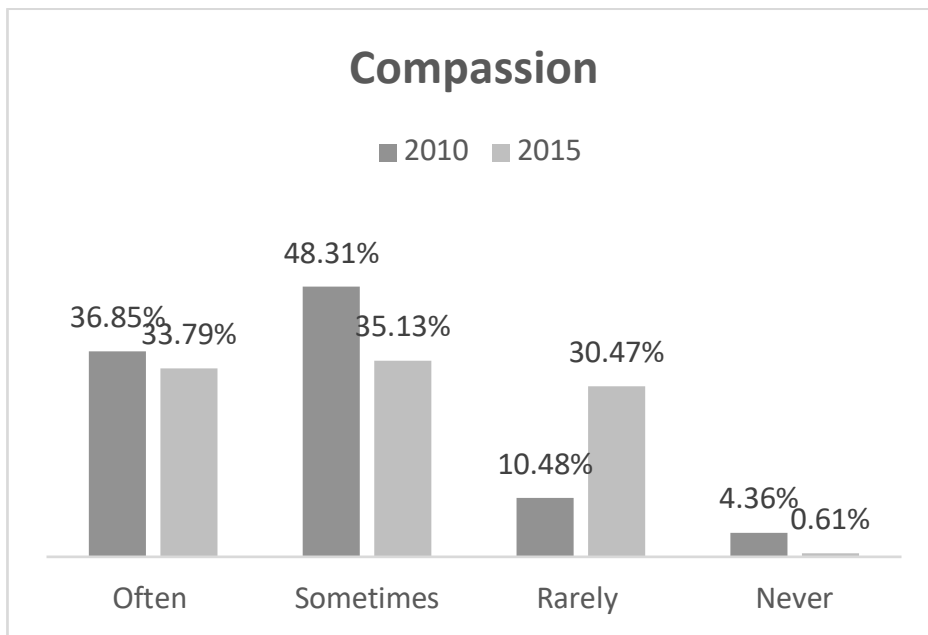
“During the past few weeks, how often do you experience compassion?”

“During the past few weeks, how often do you experience generosity?”

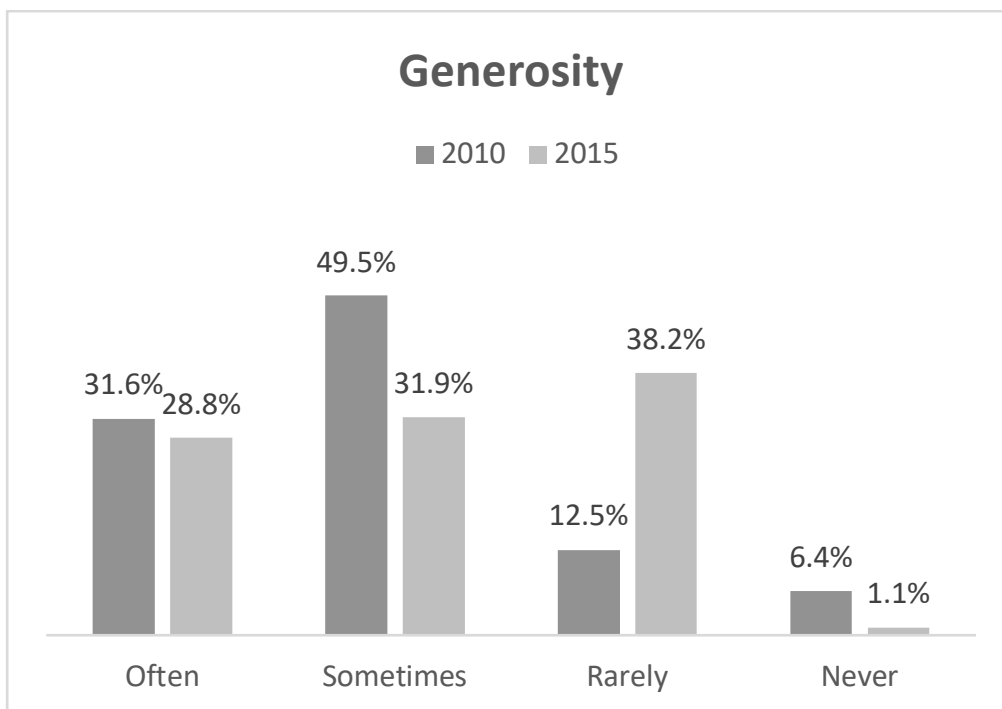
Comparing survey results from 2010 to 2015 reveals a decline in the populations’ frequency of experiencing these positive emotions. See Graphs No. 10 and No. 11.

²⁰ Answers were scaled 1 (often) to 4 (never) in 2010, and 1 (several times a day) to 7 (never) in 2015.

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Graph No. 10: Positive Emotion: Compassion 2010–2015



Graph No. 11: Positive Emotions – Generosity 2010 – 2015

3. Wisdom Practice

In Buddhism, the highest form of happiness comes from attaining wisdom, realizing the true nature of oneself and reality that provides liberation from suffering and, in the Mahāyāna tradition, when combined with compassion, encourages an individual to help all others reach the same state. The method of developing this special wisdom comes from mindfulness of karma and one's ethical responsibilities, contemplation on virtuous teachings (the dharma) and meditation (repeated and deep familiarization of the mind with the truth). The GNH Survey does not ask respondents to assess the status of their wisdom directly, but instead asks about their opportunity to practice mindfulness (of karma), pray (contemplate) and meditate. In other words, the Survey inquires how often they are practicing the methods for obtaining wisdom through the following questions:

“Do you consider karma in your daily life?”;²¹

“How often do you recite prayers?”;²² and

“How often do you meditate?”²³

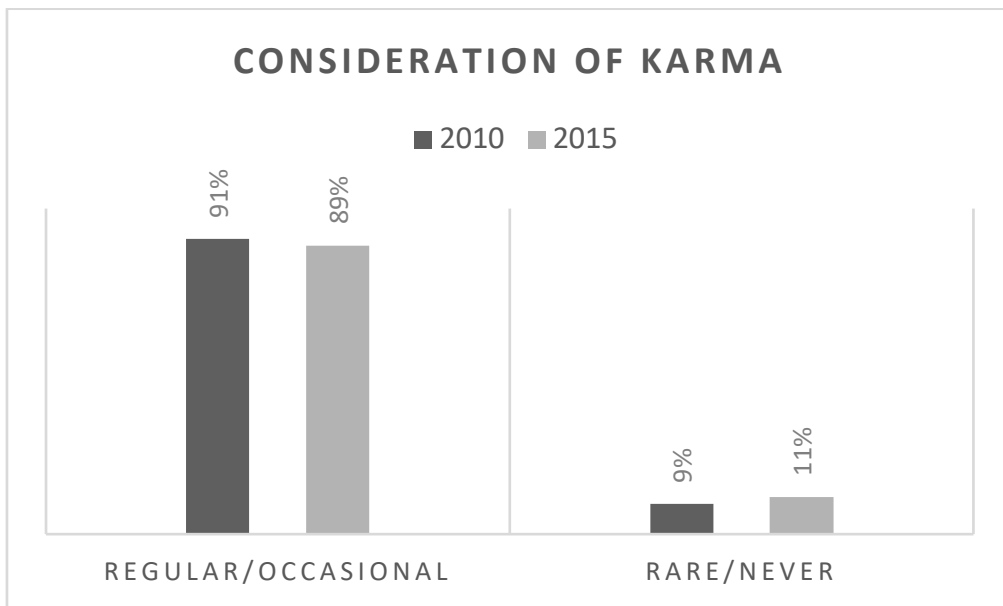
Comparing survey results from 2010 to 2015 regarding wisdom practices, reveals a decline in the frequency of praying and a very slight decline in mindfulness of karma and meditation across the population. See Graphs No. 12, No. 13 and No. 14.

²¹ Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (always) both in 2010 and in 2015.

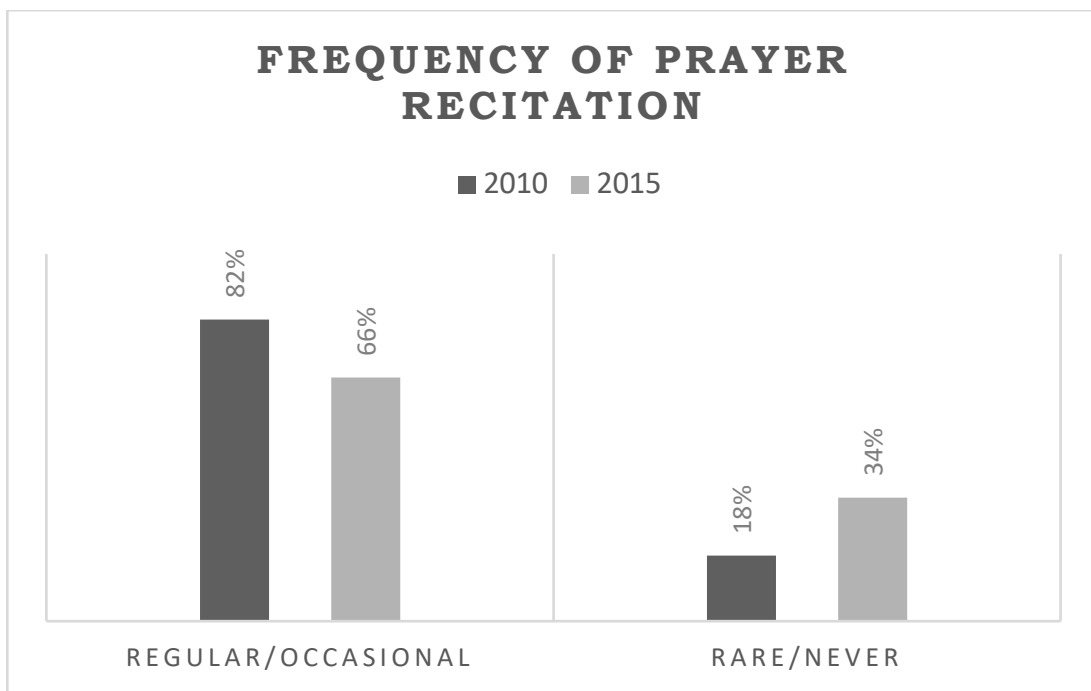
²² Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (regularly) in 2010, and from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a day) in 2015.

²³ Answers were scored 1 (not at all) to 4 (regularly) in 2010, and from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a day) in 2015.

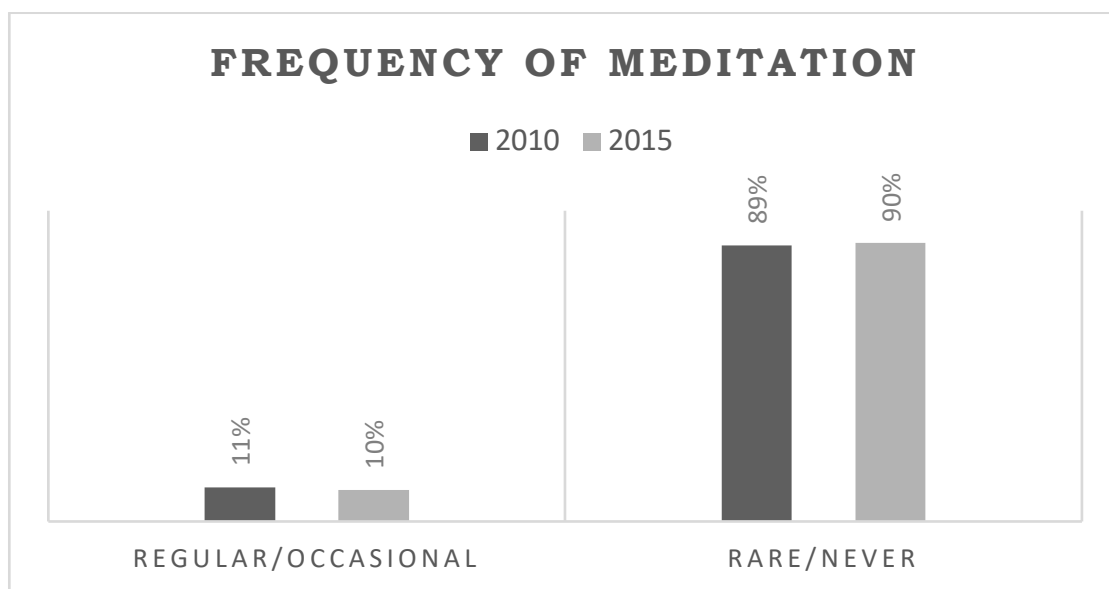
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Graph No. 12: Consideration of Karma 2010–2015



Graph No. 13: Prayer Recitation 2010–2015



Graph No. 14: Frequency of Meditation 2010–2015

Summation

When viewed through the lens of Bhutan's Buddhist values, the trend in the population's experience of the higher forms of happiness has declined noticeably in the short period of five years. Levels of worry and stress have increased and calmness and contentment levels have fallen. The experience of the negative emotions of selfishness, jealousy and anger are more frequent and the experience of positive emotions of compassion and generosity are rarer. Prayer recitation is down and recognition of the ethical responsibilities of karma and meditation practices that lead to wisdom are beginning to decline. Regarding wisdom practices generally, one could say that the population continues its practices much as before but gets much poorer results in terms of equanimity and positive minds. Overall, Bhutan's population is experiencing a significant decline the higher forms of happiness as it modernizes and achieves success in many of the other GNH domains.

Conclusion

Some observers believe that Bhutan's current leadership is aware of this trend but has already turned away from the traditional meaning of GNH to focus on material and social dimensions of wellbeing. In a recent publication, Wolfgang Drechsler concludes that GNH has become secular as it has been modernized and internationalized (Drechsler, 2016, p. 16). One interviewee described the problem of declining spirituality to me as "boring," as there is nothing that can be done to stop it (Interview data, 2017). If so, perhaps the trade-off of traditional notions of happiness for material advancement has already been made, i.e., Bhutan's Faustian bargain.

Others maintain that the recent decline is likely a temporary phenomenon, that this decline may underestimate Bhutan's spiritual robustness and that policy measures can reverse any near-term deterioration in spiritual happiness. One observer cited the popularity recent public lectures by Bhutan's spiritual leader, the Je Khenpo, and the prevalence of Buddhist programming on radio and television as evidence of the country's spiritual enthusiasm. The point is made that the very forces of global communication that threaten Bhutan's traditions—YouTube, Internet, television—have been used to translate traditionally rarefied Buddhist teachings from classical Tibetan to Dzongkpa and English and make them accessible to laypeople (Interview data, 2017).

Some analysts note that Bhutan has experienced remarkable changes during the period 2010-2105, including democratic transition and consolidation after a century of monarchy and rapid growth in its economy and global connectedness. They believe that Bhutan will absorb these changes over time without the ongoing loss of its spiritual wellbeing. The shock of democracy and greater openness over the period of 2010 to 2015 may normalize and stabilize in terms of its effects on spiritual wellbeing. Future survey data may reveal a rebound

in greater feelings of equanimity and positive emotions once some of these political, economic and social changes are digested.

It is also possible that surveys, by their individualistic method of gathering data and the impersonal summing and manipulation of atomistic responses, may be missing something about Bhutan's collective consciousness, that Bhutan's spiritual strength is greater than the sum of its parts. Bhutan is a far more communal society than most in the West and its attitudes, opinion, and actions are shared and shaped by the family and village and a long national history. This local, regional and national zeitgeist may not necessarily be fully reflected in the tally of individual responses.

Furthermore, Bhutan is a self-confident country that does not see itself as a passive subject buffeted by the forces of globalization. Because of its improbable birth and survival as a nation, Bhutan considers itself to be "auspicious," a Buddhist term used to mean that the Bhutanese and their unique culture have had and will continue to experience fortunate conditions that will allow them to flourish (Interview data, 2017). Many in Bhutan believe that the country can push back against influences that it judges as detrimental to its society through conscious policy choices that neutralize or counteract pernicious forces.

There is some evidence for this assertion. For example, Bhutan's Parliament is debating ways to improve values education in its schools and there are proposals to allow the monastic community to make its facilities increasingly available to lay people—particularly teachers and civil servants—for extended visits and short-term retreats to strengthen traditional values. More ambitious still are early designs to improve the mindfulness, positive emotions and wisdom of the population through government-supported meditation retreats as part of the next five-year development plan. This initiative envisions supporting up to 10,000

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meditators a year for a three-year solitary retreat in Buddhism where one studies all the stages of the path and receives systematic training in advanced meditation techniques designed to attain high realizations to allow the graduates to serve as exemplars to the wider society. The outcome of these policy initiatives is uncertain, but they counsel caution in extrapolating only one possible trajectory for Bhutan's spiritual future. The recent survey data point in a direction that is troublesome, but not inevitable.

Bhutan 12th five-year plan, 2018-2022, will develop and later monitor policy performance for its fidelity with GNH principles. These policies initiatives will, for the first time, track the nine-domains of the GNH survey with individual ministries taking the lead in devising and implementing policies designed to strengthen wellbeing in their domain. Likely, the Home Ministry will be responsible for the domain Psychological Wellbeing, and it will merit watching to see how, in policy terms, Bhutan attempts to improve conditions that support its populations' spiritual wellbeing and to what effect.

Ultimately, the aim of the GNH Survey is to generate discussion and reflection on what brings the citizens of Bhutan happiness. The recent decline in spiritual wellbeing, if accurate and if it continues, could constitute an existential threat to Bhutan's unique culture and core beliefs that define it as a nation. Whether this threat is real, its significance, and the appropriate response, if any, are essential questions for Bhutan to consider.

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Rhetoric and Reality of Doklam Incident

Jigme Phuntsho⁺

Doklam standoff which took place between the armies of India and China was a major clash between the two Asian giants. The incident lasted from 18 June to 28 August 2017. For the first time, Bhutan was involved in a conflict between its two neighbours. Exchange of fiery rhetoric characterized the incident, besides unprecedented scale of military drills on both sides of the border, and speculations of an imminent war. The standoff was resolved for now, but the issues related to border dispute continue to emerge, raising the concern for a similar face-off at any time. This article discusses the events that unfolded in the course of the Doklam standoff based on online news articles and a few reports posted on the internet.

Background

On 16 June 2017, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China began to build a road in Doklam, an area disputed by Bhutan. The area is called Doklam¹ by Bhutan and Dong Lang by China.² The Indian border troops interrupted the work two days later, and this led to a standoff between armies of the two countries. The so-called Doklam standoff lasted for 73 days. Although such incidences are not uncommon along the 3,488 kilometres of unsettled boundary between India and China, the Doklam incident is described as the biggest border conflict after the 1962 border war. What was significant for Bhutan was that the Doklam conflict took place in an area contested by Bhutan. Any use of force would have had a significant impact

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¹ In Tibetan and Dzongkha, it is written as 'brog lam, which literacy means "nomad's road".

² In the Chinese official statement released on 5 August 2017, the area is first referred to as "Dong Lang area (Doklam)".

on Bhutan's security and sovereignty. For the first time Bhutan was directly involved in a conflict between its two neighbours.

In an interview given to the *Asian News International*, the Chief of Indian Army General Bipin Rawat stated that India is "fully ready for a two-and-a-half front war".³ Several news reports referred to the statement as one of the starting points for the India-China war of words. The statement was read as being directed towards China, Pakistan and internal insurgencies.⁴ This interview took place on 9 June 2017 before the Doklam conflict began, and there was understandably no mention about Doklam in that interview. However, on 29 June 2017, the Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian described Rawat's remarks as "extremely irresponsible", and urged India to "stop clamouring for war" and learn "historical lessons",⁵ referring to India's defeat in the 1962 war. This statement was made in context of Doklam issue.⁶ The reply to the statement then came from Indian Defence Minister Arun Jaitley on 30 June 2017. He said "India in 2017 is different from India in 1962."⁷ By then, media outlets were flooding with news about Doklam.

The following events were often cited as triggers to Doklam standoff: the visit of Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in April 2017 to Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state disputed by

³ Minnie Chan, 2017; Jiangtao, 2017, wrongly reported this as being said by General Rawat during an inspection of the disputed Sikkim border. For details see Shi Jiangtao, China, India border dispute bubbles over once more, but no one is quite sure why, *South China Morning Post*, 6 July 2017.

⁴ Indian Army prepared for a two-and-a-half fronts war: Army Chief, *The Times of India*, 9 June 2017.

⁵ Shi Jiangtao, 2017.

⁶ Learn from 'historical lessons', China warns India as Army Chief Bipin Rawat says 'ready for war', *The Indian Express*, 29 June 2017.

⁷ India of 2017 different from that of 1962: Jaitley to China, *The Times of India*, 1 July 2017.

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China;⁸ India's refusal to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);⁹ Chinese President Xi Jinping's attempt to boost nationalist sentiment ahead of the 19th Communist Party Congress,¹⁰ and Chinese attempt to weaken the close ties between India and Bhutan.¹¹ While these and several other events might have contributed to the standoff, India and China's race for regional domination and the balance of power in Asia are being seen as major forces behind their aggression.

The former Indian Ambassador Ashok Kantha and the former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran described the Chinese action as a part of a larger pattern of their behaviour citing similar instances in the South China Sea. Ashok Kantha described Chinese construction activities as a deliberate action to change the facts on the ground.¹² Likewise, Shyam Saran (2017) described Chinese action as a "cabbage strategy", which he explained as follows:

One layer after another you keep opening. None of the singular moves are serious enough to attract opposition but then, cumulatively, you come to a point where it has actually

⁸ China accuses Indian border guards of crossing into its territory, *South China Morning Post*, 27 June 2017; Restraint needed in border dispute between China and India, *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017; Devirupa Mitra, Six expert views on how India should look at the latest border standoff with China, *The Wire*, 5 July 2017a.

⁹ Mohan Guruswamy, China's border row with India points to mutual distrust – economic and trade ties notwithstanding, *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017; Arnab Sengupta, How Hindu nationalist agenda is linked to Doklam standoff, *The Quint*, 27 July 2017; Mitra, 2017a.

¹⁰ Cohen & Dutton, How India border standoff gives China a chance to burnish its global image, *South China Morning Post*, 21 July 2017.

¹¹ Cohen & Dutton, 2017; Mitra, 2017a; Soutik Biswas, Why is the India-China border standoff escalating? *BBC*, 20 July 2017; A. K. Bardalai, Doklam and the Indo-China boundary, *Journal of Defence Studies*, 12 (1), January-March 2018, 5-13.

¹² See Sushant Singh, Two perspectives on Doklam standoff (interview), *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

changed their entire security situation. It is very hard to reverse.

Both described India's reaction to the Chinese action at Doklam as unexpected and a cause of disappointment and anger for the PLA.

Following the standoff, China temporarily barred Indian pilgrims from entering Tibet via the Nathu-la pass, citing "security concerns",¹³ and announced that re-opening the road would depend on "whether the Indian side could correct mistakes in time",¹⁴ and called on India for an unconditional withdrawal of her troops.¹⁵ China said that it had shown utmost goodwill over the prolonged military standoff with India but warned that its restraint had a bottom line¹⁶ and that "it is easier to shake a mountain than the PLA."¹⁷

The world witnessed the height of fiery rhetoric exchanged between India and China in one of the longest standoffs in Doklam. There was a high chance for this rhetoric to culminate into a full-scale war. Surprisingly, however, the standoff did not result in any visible impacts on its economic and the people-to-people relationship. India and China recorded the highest level of trade in 2017 at USD \$84.5 billion; a Hindi movie called 'Dangal' became a big hit in China; and a China-

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ The pass was opened for Indian officially-organized pilgrims in 2015. The opening of Nathu-la pass in 2015 was described as a sign of the two sides' acknowledgement of the fact that the Sikkim section of boundary has been demarcated by the Chinese side. For detail see Mu Xuequan (Ed.), China says Nathu-la pass 're-opening depends on the Indian side', *Xinhua News Agency*.

¹⁵ Pull back troops from Doklam with 'no strings attached': China to India, *The Times of India*, 2 August 2017.

¹⁶ K J M Varma, Doklam Standoff: China Says Its Restraint Has a 'Bottom Line', *The Wire*, 4 August 2017.

¹⁷ Shubhajit Roy Apurva, Doklam standoff: Have taken measures, pull out or we step up deployment, China tells India, *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

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based Xiaomi became the single largest mobile headset provider in India during the same year.¹⁸

Three positions

All three countries have released official public statements that reflect the respective governments' stance on the conflict: Bhutan on 29 June 2017, India on 30 June 2017, and China on 5 August 2017.¹⁹

Royal Government of Bhutan, in its short press release,²⁰ pointed out that the Chinese road construction from Dokala in the Doklam area towards the Bhutanese army camp at Zompelri is a direct violation of the written agreements of 1988 and 1998 signed between China and Bhutan where the two sides have agreed

... to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary.²¹

Bhutan urged China to maintain status quo in Doklam area as before 16 June 2017. A protest was earlier lodged through its embassy in New Delhi on 20 June.

The following day, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a seven-point press release. It stated that India was

¹⁸ India and China must be frank with each other to prevent another Doklam, ambassador warns, *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2018.

¹⁹ Chinese government has in fact spoken about their position on the issue much earlier during the regular press conferences.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017.

deeply concerned with Chinese action because “such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.” It was also mentioned that Indian personnel in coordination with the government of Bhutan has “approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo.” The press release explained that the Chinese action was in violation to the 2012 agreement which states that “the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries.” It also mentioned about the status of China-India border in that sector.²²

Where the boundary in the Sikkim sector is concerned, India and China had reached an understanding also in 2012 reconfirming their mutual agreement on the “basis of the alignment”. Further discussions regarding finalization of the boundary have been taking place under the special representative frameworks.²³

A month after the official statements of Bhutan and India were released, China finally issued a massive 15-page written statement on 5 August 2017.²⁴ In that, China repeatedly referred to the “Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet” signed in 1890 to justify her claims to Doklam, and the “road building on its own territory” the statement read, “is aimed at improving local transportation, which is completely lawful and legitimate.”

China accused that the Indian border troops had trespassed more than 2,000 meters from the tri-junction boundary into the Chinese territory and that India should “immediately and unconditionally withdraw its trespassing border troops back to

²² Ministry of External Affairs, 2017. Recent Development in Doklam Area.

²³ Ministry of External Affairs, 2017. Recent Development in Doklam Area.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 August 2017. The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops.

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the Indian side of the boundary.” This was the prerequisite for resolving the current conflict and India had no legal basis to interfere according to the press release.

The statement explained that the China-Bhutan boundary issue was one between China and Bhutan, and it had nothing to do with India.

As a third party, India had no right to interfere in or impede the boundary talks between China and Bhutan, still less the right to make territorial claims on Bhutan’s behalf. India’s intrusion into the Chinese territory under the pretext of Bhutan had not only violated China’s territorial sovereignty but also challenged Bhutan’s sovereignty and independence.²⁵

All three governments had each issued a statement until 28 August 2017. A very late official response from China in writing is indeed noteworthy. A little more than a month period was a long delay since such standoffs normally last less than a month. While these statements helped understand respective government’s position on the conflict to a great extent, they are ambiguous and incomplete with rooms for different interpretations. For instance, the Indian government justified its basis for intervention using the 2012 agreement signed with China. But, not a single word was mentioned about this in the massive document issued by China. On the other hand, Chinese assertion is fully based on the 1890 Convention to which India did not make a single reference. China also did not mention about the 1988 and 1998 agreements with Bhutan, which Bhutan used to protest against the Chinese road construction. Thus, to fill up the gaps left by these statements,

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 August 2017. The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops.

media houses picked up the opportunity to take their own biased positions on the issue, further clouding the reality.

Bhutan-China Border Disputes

Bhutan has border disputes with China in two sectors: in the north covering 495 square kilometres and, in the west, covering 269 square kilometres. Doklam is a part of the latter sector that includes Dramana, Charithang, Sinchulung and Doklam in Haa and Paro. Talks for border settlement between the two countries started from 1984. Since then, 24 rounds of border talks have been conducted between the two countries. The contents of the talks are kept secret but the protracted nature of the talks indicates major disagreement as pointed out by Tsering Shakya,²⁶ a prominent historian and scholar on Tibet.

Many sources pointed out that the border settlement between China and Bhutan almost came to an end in 1996. During the 10th round of talks, it was reported that China had offered a 'package deal' settlement whereby China would concede the 495 square kilometres of land in the northern sector of Bhutan in return for the 269 square kilometres in the western sector which includes Doklam. But, Bhutan didn't accept the offer. Many argue that Bhutan couldn't accept because it would not be in India's interest to lose this strategic area to China.²⁷ On a side note, this incidence indicates strongly that Doklam is of great interest to China as it is ready to sacrifice almost double the size of land area (though disputed) for Doklam. However,

²⁶ Tshering Shakya, Bhutan can solve its border problem with China – if India lets it, *South China Morning Post*, 22 July 2017a.

²⁷ See Shakya, 2017a; Mitra, 2017a; B.R. Deepak, The Doklam standoff: what could be done, *South Asia Democratic Forum Comment N.98, 2017*; Amy Kazmin, 'China and India rivalry smoulders in Bhutan', *Financial Times*, 13 August 2017; Praveen Swami, 'Behind the ongoing standoff in Doklam, century-old manoeuvres of geostrategy', *The Indian Express*, 24 July 2017.

such a ‘package deal’ approach for settlement of boundary by China is not new and was also done with Nepal.²⁸

Divergent Views on the Tri-Junction Point

Chinese government and the media outlets have been consistent on their claim that the India-China boundary in the Sikkim sector was delimited by the ‘Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet’ signed between the representatives of Great Britain and the Qing dynasty of China on 17 March 1890, in Kolkatta, India.

The 1890 Convention was signed as a result of repeated Tibetan invasions into Lingtu, a place 18 miles within the Sikkim frontier that was claimed by Tibet as her territory.²⁹ The convention was signed by Sheng Tai, Chinese Amban or imperial resident in Lhasa. Alistair Lamb wrote that, even after ten years of long discussions from 1894 to 1903, the British and Chinese failed to persuade the Tibetans to accept the boundary as per the convention.³⁰ Narrating a similar context, Tsering Sakya in fact contends that delimiting “border was not the main objective of 1890 Convention, and its actual description in the treaty was vague and contradictory; the agreement was far more important for China and Britain because it provided legitimisation of the British position in Sikkim and the tacit acknowledgement of China’s authority in Tibet”.³¹ So, it was an unfair treaty signed without consent

²⁸ Thierry Mathou, *Bhutan-China Relations: Towards a New Step in Himalayan Politics*.

²⁹ See Deepak, 2017

³⁰ See Deepak, 2017.

³¹ Tsering Shakya, *Doklam then and now: From British to Chinese interests, follow the money*, *South China Morning Post*, 19 August 2017b.

from Tibet. As is evident, Bhutan played no role in this, nor did the independent Sikkim or Tibet at that time.³²

The convention, however, did decide the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. Article 1 of the 1890 Convention states the following:

The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal [Nepal] territory.

However, the description in the treaty is not consistent with the geographical reality according to many sources. An article in *The Wire* stated that “alignment on the ground is not an established fact” justifying that “line [that] commences at Mount Gimpochi on the Bhutan frontier” violates the principle that the “boundary of Sikkim and Tibet [was to] be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing” southwards and northwards, and should in fact be six kilometres to the north – making the area of trespass wholly Bhutanese soil.³³ Similarly, Deepak³⁴ (an Indian sinologist and a professor) mentioned that the ‘watershed’ and ‘the crest of the mountain range’ do not stretch beyond Batang La, six kilometres north of Doka La. Several articles also pointed out that the tri-junction lies at Batang La if one follows the ‘watershed principle.’³⁵ On the contrary, not a single article was found, at

³² Manoj Joshi, Doklam, Gipmochi, Gyemochen: It’s Hard Making Cartographic Sense of a Geopolitical Quagmire, *The Wire*, 20 July 2017; Arpi, as cited in Mitra, 2017a.

³³ No mention of the 1890 Convention was made by the Indian press statement released on 30 June 2017.

³⁴ See Deepak, 2017.

³⁵ Singh and Sabgal, 2017; D. Mitra, Current Standoff an Attempt by China to Change the Status Quo at Tri-Junction: Shivshankar Menon, *The Wire*, 9 July

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least during this period, which points out otherwise. So, the 1890 Convention has an inherent problem, and how India and China interpreted and valued it over time is unclear.

China claims that Indian representatives starting from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru have formally accepted the legality of 1890 Convention on numerous occasions. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng said that, in a letter to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on March 22, 1959, Nehru stated the border of India's protectorate Sikkim and China's Tibet was defined by the 1890 Convention and marked by both sides on the ground in 1895. In another letter from Nehru to Zhou on September 26 of the same year, it was found that Nehru had repeated the information, adding there was no dispute regarding the border between Sikkim and Tibet. But, in the same letter of September 26,³⁶ Nehru stated that the "Chinese maps show sizeable areas of Bhutan as part of Tibet," adding, "[t]he rectification of errors in Chinese maps regarding the boundary of Bhutan³⁷ with Tibet is therefore a matter which has to be discussed along with the boundary of India with the Tibet region of China in the same sector". How this issue evolved over time is not discussed by anyone.

Against the backdrop of these conflicting and confusing assertions, it remains true that Sino-Indian border at the Sikkim sector is officially not finalized, at least on the ground. Despite their assertion of having demarcated the boundary, China's 15-page statement stated that the two countries expect an 'early harvest' in the settlement of the boundary in the

2017c; P. K. Dutta, 'Doklam standoff: Why Chinese mock video is pack of lies, India has committed no 'sin'', *India Today*, 17 August 2017.

³⁶ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, www.pib.nic.in

³⁷ Bhutan's boundary discussions with China was done in consultation with India till 1984. Nehru's letter on September 26, 1959 state that "under treaty relationships with Bhutan, the Government of India are the only competent authority to take up with other Governments matters concerning Bhutan's external relations..."

Sikkim sector which imply that the demarcation is not complete, but later argues that the only issue was to sign a new convention in their own names. India in its press release stated that the “finalization of the boundary” is not complete despite a mutual agreement on the “basis of alignment”.

However, it must be understood that India and China have no dispute of territorial claims across the Sikkim sector. It only concerns the finalization of the tri-junction point between Mount Gipmochi and Mount Batang La. A tri-junction at Mount Gipmochi will of course bring the Chinese troops closer to the Siliguri corridor by about six kilometers. The key question then is whether the Convention must be viewed in terms of the exact terms of reference (Mount Gipmochi which is mentioned specifically) or on the principle of geographical features specified as ‘the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing...’ (which must be Mount Batang La). Whether Bhutan must adhere to an Anglo-Chinese Convention signed without Bhutan being even informed is also worth discussing. In Bhutan’s record, the 68th session of the Bhutanese National Assembly in 1989 noted that the border would go from Batangla to Merugla to Sinchela along the ridge and then down to Amo Chhu river.³⁸

India’s Involvement

India argued that Chinese action in Doklam was an attempt to unilaterally determine the tri-junction point.³⁹ It was viewed as an attempt to push the tri-junction further south, and accused China of violating an understanding between Indian and Chinese boundary negotiators in 2012 where they agreed that

³⁸ The Resolutions of the 68th Session of the National Assembly; Translation of the Proceedings and Resolutions of the 82nd Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan.

³⁹ This is on the basis of their assertion that Mount Batang La is the tri-junction point.

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the final alignment of the boundary in the tri-junction area would be settled in consultations with India, China and the concerned third country.

However, the Chinese official document alleged that India had been "notified" ahead of the road building exercise. The Deputy Chief of Mission of the Chinese Embassy in Delhi, Liu Jinsong, said that India was notified through mechanisms at the border troop level about its intended road construction at Doklam on two separate occasions (May 18 and June 8), but there was no response till the Indian troops came in from Sikkim.⁴⁰ Shyam Saran questions Chinese government for such a need to inform the Indian side if Chinese were so sure that Doklam belonged to them.⁴¹ While he indicate that this Chinese action quietly acknowledges the status of Doklam as a disputed area, it can also be argued that informing may not necessarily amount to seeking permission or consultation with India. In retrospect, it must also be noted that India never accepted this claim that they were pre-informed by the Chinese before their action on ground.⁴² Hence, no conclusion can be drawn on it.

Other reason that the Indian government had explicitly mentioned in their official press release is the 'security implications' posed by the Chinese action. This implies the threat to India's Chicken's Neck - a narrow strip of land (20 km wide) that connects the seven northeast states to the mainland. However, China argues that "to cross a delimited boundary and

⁴⁰ Devirupa Mitra, China Disputes Indian Version of 2012 Understanding on Border Tri-junction, *The Wire*, 3 August 2017d.

⁴¹ Sikkim Standoff: People say in Doklam, India is better placed. Why do we think Chinese could only act here, asks former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, *Financial Express*, 13 August 2017.

⁴² Delhi's ambassador to Beijing Gautam Bambawale said in March 2018 in an interview with the South China Morning Post that "If the Chinese military are going to build a road, then they must tell us that 'we are going to build a road'". For detail see 'India and China must be frank with each other to prevent another Doklam, ambassador warns', *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2018.

enter the territory of a neighboring country on the grounds of so-called "security concerns", for whatever activities, runs counter to the basic principles of international law and basic norms governing international relations".⁴³ On a side note, there are some who also justify that India already has a strategic advantage in this part of the border, and that there is not much to be concerned by with the Chinese action. For instance, one of them said that the vulnerability of the Chicken's Neck is a mere 'cartographic illusion that has been taken advantage of by armchair strategists to create their stock-in-trade fear'.⁴⁴ Bardalai, in a paper published in the *Journal of Defence Studies*, also mentioned clearly that India has an advantage in Chumbi valley, but he pointed out that the need to maintain stronghold in this sector was viewed as crucial as early as 1950 after the invasion of Tibet by China.⁴⁵ Taking a different perspective, a historian⁴⁶ argued that, "[unfortunately] 'Neck', road and plateaus continue to define our security concepts in the 21st century where drones, satellites and missiles have brought distant parts of India under Chinese surveillance."

Some news articles reported that India had to intervene because of the bilateral Friendship Treaty of 2007 between Bhutan and India, under which both sides agreed to "cooperate closely ... on issues relating to their national interests".⁴⁷

⁴³ It refers to the 1974 UN General Assembly Resolution which states that "no consideration of whatsoever nature, whether political, economic, military or otherwise, may serve as a justification for the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State".

⁴⁴ Prem Shankar Jha, Neither win nor loss, the end of the Doklam standoff is an opportunity, *The Wire*, 28 August 2017.

⁴⁵ Bardalai, 2018.

⁴⁶ Atul Bhardwaj, Diplomacy at Doklam was an afterthought when it should have been the first step, *The Wire*, 8 September 2017.

⁴⁷ Sourabh Gupta, India's got itself into a fine mess in Doklam, it's time to get out and let China and Bhutan work it out, *South China Morning Post*, 23 July 2017; Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan raised Doklam at all boundary negotiations with China, *The Wire*, 21 August 2017b.

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However, from the official sources, the only information regarding the process of intervention was the following:

... RGOB and the Government of India have been in continuous contact through the unfolding of these developments. ... In coordination with the RGOB, Indian personnel, who were present at general area Doka La, approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo. These efforts continue.

Notwithstanding the above matters of fact, a number of news articles from several news agencies including the reputed *BBC* and *Aljazeera* have reported that India sent its border troops on Bhutan's request.⁴⁸ This is misleading and has potential to cause great damage.

Disengagement or Withdrawal

Many speculated that the pre-BRICS NSA meeting between India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and State Councillor Yang Jiechi in Beijing on 27 July 2017 would bring an end to the standoff.⁴⁹ But no immediate breakthrough was reached at that meeting. However, some authors later credited

⁴⁸ Liu Zhen, India ready for talks with China to end border standoff, but Beijing digs in heels, *South China Morning Post*, 20 July 2017; China warns India over 'military build-up' in Doklam, *Aljazeera*, 5 August 2017; Biswas, 2017; Mitra, 2017d; M Minnie Chan, China calls border row with India 'the worst in 30 years' as both sides dig in heels, *South China Morning Post*, 5 July 2017; 'Restraint needed in border dispute between China and India', *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Biswas, 2017; Sushant Singh, Two perspectives on Doklam standoff, *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

this meeting as a starting point of diplomatic negotiation that resulted in a peaceful end to the standoff.⁵⁰

To everyone's relief, Doklam standoff came to an end on 28 August 2017 with the Indian Ministry of External Affairs first issuing a two-paragraph public statement. It stated that the two sides have agreed for an "expeditious disengagement."

The Chinese also implied that it had stopped its road building efforts but cited that it was due to "weather and other factors." China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that they "will make proper building plans in light of the actual situation".⁵¹ She said that China had been "long involved in road construction in Doklam area in order to improve living condition and ramp up local military instruction." "China will continue to exercise sovereignty rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the rules of the historical boundary," she said.

A day later, Bhutan welcomed the disengagement through a short public statement. Unlike the earlier statement that did not mention anything about India, the second statement acknowledges India as a part of the dispute.⁵² To this, Ambassador Phunchok Stobdan said that "Bhutan is shifting its emphasis away from its bilateral dispute with China over Doklam and focusing instead on the importance of the tri-junction area being properly managed".⁵³

We hope this contributes to the maintenance of peace and tranquility and status quo along the borders of Bhutan, China

⁵⁰ Lui & Huang, Aggression to agreement: the inside story of the Doklam deal, *The Times of India*, 30 August 2017.

⁵¹ Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff, China says it has stopped road building – for Now, *The Wire*, 29 August 2017e.

⁵² Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff.

⁵³ Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff.

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and India in keeping with the existing agreements between respective countries. (29 August 2017)

Official statements regarding the end of Doklam standoff are vague and the exact terms of the settlement is not known. India called it “disengagement” of the two sides from the earlier place of standoff. The fact that both sides disengaged from Doklam was described as a victory for Indian side by the Indian media because it fulfilled what India has asked for: that both sides should withdraw to resolve the issue. But Chinese has called it as “withdrawal” of Indian troops from Doklam saying that the Chinese PLA has moved out, but only temporarily due to bad weather. This is a way of saying that it has fulfilled their position that Indian withdrawal from Doklam was a prerequisite for any meaningful dialogue to take place. While such controversies existed, it made little sense as long as both sides agreed to resolve the standoff at that point of time. After all, this was a display of successful diplomacy from both sides, including Bhutan where studied silence played positively.

The timing of the resolution fell few days before the BRICS summit from 3 to 5 September 2017 in southeast China which was attended by both President Xi Jinping and PM Narendra Modi. This was also seen as the main reason for the “expeditious disengagement”. The duo also met at the sidelines of G20 meeting at Hamburg on 7 July 2017.⁵⁴

Post-Doklam Standoff

Even as the mid-June to August Doklam standoff came to an end, news of Chinese road construction in the Doklam region continues to appear in the media.⁵⁵ On 6 October 2017, it was

⁵⁴ See Aggression to agreement, *The Times of India*, 30 August 2017.

⁵⁵ Panda reported that troops on both sides have retreated their position from the standoff point by 150 meters each. For details see Ankit Panda, ‘The

reported that about 1,000 Chinese soldiers are still deployed in the border region to carry out infrastructure construction work.⁵⁶ On 12 December 2017, based on satellite images, Som reported, 'Chinese have expanded multiple stretches of road in the disputed area, just a short distance from the site where Indian and Chinese soldiers faced off.'⁵⁷ He stated that at least two stretches were constructed between 17 October and 8 December 2017 towards north and east of the earlier face-off site. Unlike the previous years, it was reported that around 1,600-1,800 Chinese troops have now 'virtually established a permanent presence in the Doklam area' (withstanding the freezing winter for the first time).⁵⁸ 'But the status quo prevails at the earlier face-off site,' Pandit noted. On 28 January 2018, it was again reported that hectic build-up of permanent structure is underway in the disputed area of Doklam based on an analysis of the satellite images by a retired Indian colonel.⁵⁹ On 23 March, a report pointed out that PLA is now building a new road to bypass the point of the previous year's blockade, and highlighted that it 'would not be amenable to the type of blockade India placed last year'.⁶⁰

However, official sources say that the status quo of 28 August 2017 is maintained. Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on 5 March that PLA's infrastructure build-up at the border areas is 'to maintain these troops during the

troops may have stepped back, but the China-India dispute in the Himalayas is far from over', *South China Morning Post*, 21 October 2017.

⁵⁶ 1,000 Chinese soldiers reportedly still in Doklam a month after border standoff ended,' *South China Morning Post*, 6 October 2017.

⁵⁷ Vishnu Som, Exclusive: In Doklam, Chinese built new roads in last 2 months, show satellite pics, NDTV, 12 December 2017.

⁵⁸ Rajat Pandit, In first winter stay, 1,800 Chinese troops camping at Doklam, *The Times of India*, 11 December 2017.

⁵⁹ Debasish Roy Chowdhury, China and India: are war clouds gathering over Doklam again? *South China Morning Post*, 27 January 2018.

⁶⁰ Manoj Joshi, After Doklam, military postures continue to escalate in India, China, *Asia Times*, 23 March 2018.

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winter'. She stated that the troops of both sides have redeployed from the face-off site and the strength of troops on both sides has been reduced since then.⁶¹ Likewise, the Indian Army Chief has mentioned that the Chinese build-up is mostly temporary in nature.⁶² But the fact is, India is wary about the increased PLA concentration in the border areas. On 12 January, Army Chief said that it's time for India to shift their focus from its western border with Pakistan to its northern border with China.⁶³

These post-Doklam standoff developments in the area may be seen in the context of the China's Press Release issued on 5 August where China refused to indicate clearly whether they have abandoned the area.

Conclusion

Doklam standoff has shown the extent of a fragile relationship between India and China who fought a short war in 1962. Though small-scale flare-ups at the border occur frequently, the scale of Doklam face-off was unprecedented since 1962. Until the standoff came to an end on 28 August, nobody could rule out possibilities of a war between the two countries. Military exercises were undertaken on both sides alongside the brutal exchange of war rhetoric. But both countries have displayed high level of diplomatic maturity in closing the Doklam chapter without inflicting major damages on any side.

By the virtue of its strategic location, the threat of such conflicts on the security and sovereignty of Bhutan is extremely

⁶¹ Nirmala Sitharaman, China building helipads, sentry posts, trenches in Doklam area, *Times of India*, 5 March 2018.

⁶² China builds up presence at Doklam, army chief Gen Rawat says it is temporary, *Hindustan Times*, 18 January 2018.

⁶³ India can't allow its neighbours to drift away to China: Gen Bipin Rawat, *The Times of India*, 11 January 2018.

high. It got into a very difficult situation and had the standoff lasted any longer, any action or prolonged inaction from Bhutan's side would have resulted in serious problems. The government of Bhutan's position in remaining silent has fortunately played out very well during the 73-day standoff.

Doklam standoff has come to end but the border disputes remain. News of Chinese PLA strengthening their military base near the conflict site were repeatedly reported after 28 August 2017. No breakthrough negotiation took place since then except the news that Doklam issue was a part of the 20th round of India-China Special Representatives talks held at Delhi on 22 December 2017. Specific discussion and results were not revealed and one could safely assume that it must have been like any other border talks till now. The main issue now is how to move forward from here. India and China must pick up from what they agreed to in 2012. The concerned parties must continue to search for common grounds to negotiate. Until that time where border disputes are solved once and for all, there may not be an end to border incursions, flare-ups, psy-war, media hypes, rhetoric, and blurring of the realities.

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Causes and Conditions of Bhutan's Democratic Transition*

Dorji Penjore⁺

Introduction

After more than two and a half centuries of ecclesiocratic rule and one hundred years of absolute monarchy, Bhutan became democracy in 2008. This historic event was preceded by abdication of the Fourth Majesty in 2006. It is often described as one of the most peaceful democratic transitions in modern history without any role for internal crisis or external pressure. Rather than the people demanding democracy from the king, the latter voluntarily sacrificed his absolute power to empower his subjects for future peace and wellbeing. Mieko Nishimizu (2008) wrote, "The world, after all, had never known a monarch who not only spearheaded political reforms to democracy, but also chose to abdicate the throne on his own terms – at the peak of popularity, in the fullest of his time" (p. xi). It was for the first time in world history that a monarch had voluntarily surrendered his powers and eventually abdicated the throne with no other reasons than pursuing political reforms for the sake of the kingdom and the people (Mathou, 2008).

However, it must be noted that democracy did not come overnight; it is rather the final fruit of more than 50 years of political reforms initiated by the monarchs. The reforms were made smooth and successful by the nature of traditional

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Bhutanese political and social structure, which was fundamentally democratic and egalitarian.

Bhutan's peaceful democratic transition could be understood better by placing in context of its long history of democratic culture and value, which I would distinguish as 'quasi-republican' period of the ecclesiocracy (diarchy or dual system) with a system of electing desi or civilian rulers for a three-year term. The political power during the pre-1616 period, i.e., before the introduction of ecclesiocracy in 1651, was highly dispersed and the society egalitarian, but it was the introduction of ecclesiocracy in 1651 that centralized political powers. According to Tashi Wangchuk (2004), there was an inherent tension between the people and the government because "village society is fundamentally democratic" while the modern Bhutanese nation-state, based on the rationalized top-down Western bureaucratic model, is not. He located this village-state tension as a potential for a genuine democratic development and bridging the "gap between the people and the government" (pp. 844-845). What he meant by "fundamentally democratic" is that the village society is "egalitarian and democratic in its organization and function" and in valuing justice, equality, and liberty (p. 840). Decisions affecting the community were made in *zomdu* (village meeting) attended by a member from every household.

One major characteristics of the Bhutanese traditional society is the consensus politics that prevented the emergence of factional politics (Mathou, 2008). However, the subsequent experience with ecclesiocracy, especially after the death of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1651 led to power fragmentation between the centre mainly represented by Druk Desis and regional governors. The system produced 55 Druk Desis (civilian rulers) and 49 Je Khenpos (religious heads). While the heads of state were appointed through a Bhutanese equivalent of divine right to rule principle in the forms of reincarnations of Zhabdrung himself, of his son and Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgye, the instrumental powers were vested in the

hands of Druk Desis and regional governors, mainly *penlops* of Trongsa, Paro and Dagana, and *dzongpons* of Punakha, Punakha, and Thimphu. Finally, two and a half centuries of chaotic rule of ecclesiocracy gave way to monarchy in 1907.

One reason the Tibetans referred to Bhutan and other southern frontier regions by a derogatory term *monyul* (dark land, i.e., without the light of Buddha's teachings), like the anthropological Other, was the absence of hierarchy between the ruler and subjects. Before its unification, valleys or regions of western Bhutan were largely autonomous despite being under strict religious laws of different traditions of the Tibetan Buddhism, particularly that of the Lhasas. Under the religio-political institution called *cho-yon* (priest-patron) introduced by the Lhasas, common people (patrons) provided material support to priests (lama) in return for spiritual support. Lhasa lamas were content with people's spiritual loyalty and patronage to support and perpetuate their lineage teachings and did not interfere in day-to-day secular matters. Thus, anarchy rather than hierarchy was the defining characteristic of political and social milieu. Even after the unification of Bhutan in 1650s and replacement of decentralized social structure with hierarchal and centralized social order, communities enjoyed a high level of autonomy.

The traditional Bhutanese polity, particularly the ecclesiocracy, was highly centralized in imposing tax and labour service and in maintaining the security of the state, but there was little state presence in other areas (Karma Ura, 2005). The individual leaders ensure there was a check and balance system, like the tri-partite separation of powers among executive, legislation and judiciary of the modern nation-state by realizing and internalizing three qualities: *mkhyen pa'i ye shes* (wisdom and compassion), *brtse ba'i thugs rje* (immeasurable loving-kindness) *nus pa'i stobs* (power of strength) (p. 6). This triad of knowledge, loving kindness and power (*mkhyen brtse nus gsum*) is a necessary quality any leader must possess. Right balance of these qualities prevented

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degeneration of leadership into despotism: power was tempered by loving kindness and compassion; too much focus on compassion was tempered by power.

Along the similar line, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse (2010) discusses three indispensable qualities of a Buddhist spiritual master: “to be learned, disciplined, and kind”. Being learned is the outer quality and no master can do without it; discipline is the inner quality and its main purpose is to serve as a skilful means to discover inner truth but not another code of conduct; while kindness is the secret quality that is supreme and indispensable without which the first two qualities, i.e., learning and discipline, go waste.

Political scientists may question rationale behind the Fourth Majesty's decision, given that kings were historically realpolitik pragmatists. But close observers of Bhutan, particularly of politics and monarchy, will not be surprised. Bhutan's democratic transition should be understood in the larger context of reforms initiated by the Third Majesty of Bhutan Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. If the first two monarchs centralized state power to consolidate monarchy, the next two successive monarchs decentralized state power, and worked towards transforming the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy.

The Third Majesty, whose 20 years reign (1952-1972) coincided with the decolonization of Africa and Asia and the emergence of new independent states, began the process of creating a modern Bhutanese nation-state to meet the challenges of the 20th century, which until then had been avoided through a self-imposed isolation policy. The Third Majesty ended Bhutan's centuries-old isolation policy by initiating socio-economic development, democratizing the traditional Bhutanese state by decentralizing the state power and authority, and establishing necessary institutions and symbols of a modern nation-state. The establishment of the National Assembly as the legislative branch of the government in 1953

was the first reforms toward a constitutional monarchy, followed by *Thrimzhung Chenmo* (Supreme Laws) in 1959 that provided one law for all subjects; establishment of the high court in 1968, and district court and sub-district courts the following year; the Royal Advisory Council in 1965 to advise the king on any matter of great importance to the country; and the council of ministers in 1968 as an executive branch.

The Third Majesty empowered the National Assembly to remove the government ministers in 1968. He not only renounced his veto power over the National Assembly but also instituted a vote of no confidence in him by the house. He established a standing army in 1959 and put Bhutan permanently on the world map through a United Nations membership in 1971. He abolished a social category that reeked of serfdom and distributed lands to landless citizens.

Democratic Transition

Let me now discuss some popular democratization theories, most of which establish positive links between socio-economic development and political changes. The central thesis of Seymour Lipset's (1959) classic article on modernization theory is that the richer countries have greater chances to sustain democracy. While correlating wealth and democracy, he claims that economic prosperity will result in profound social changes, which in turn will produce democracy. His basic premise is that a rapid economic development will create an alternative power centre to challenge the state power. The wealthier societies, he argues, tend to have higher levels of urbanization and literacy, different sophisticated means of communication, greater social equality and mobility, and larger middle classes, all of which are associated with, and necessary for, the emergence and functioning of democratic institutions. Samuel Huntington (1968) similarly believed in economic development's capacity to bring about profound social changes but argued that countries in the throes of dramatic social transformation tend to be unstable and violent.

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The dependency theorists argue that economic development bred bureaucratic authoritarianism, not democracy in the Latin America and other developing countries. Economic development or a shift to a free-market economy was found to be the cause of the third wave of global democratization that swept across from southern Europe to East Asia and from Latin America to the Soviet Union. Przeworski and Limongi (1997) explained that the earlier democratization theorists have failed to differentiate between 'democratization' (i.e., establishing democracy) and 'consolidation' (sustaining democracy), and assert that economic development fosters the latter, not the former. The elite bargain theory points to negotiation among existing powers as the reason for democratization. Heterogeneous elites negotiate to compromise and share power.

According to Larry Diamond (2008), democratization process is a result of internal and external factors: the internal factors are the loss of regime's legitimacy due to non-delivery of economic development, success in delivery of economic development, shift in people's values due to economic development, and the rise of civil society. The external factors, Diamond mentions, are pressures on authoritarian government through diplomacy, economic assistance and sanctions; assistance to strengthen democratic institutions, civil society, and governance reform; and democratization by force, which is the last resort. He emphasized the role of political leadership and international support for democracy and demolished an old notion that democracy is a culture-bound Western artefact. He resisted the conventional scholarly view that democracy tends to follow, and therefore must await, economic modernization. In the poor parts of the world, provision of basic social services and economic growth, not ideas, is what democrats and authoritarians fight for.

How does Bhutan's transition fit within these democratic transition frameworks? They are inadequate to explain Bhutan's transition. Despite a recent rise in living standard

and dramatic changes in socio-economic conditions, Bhutan is still a third world country with a per capita GDP of only Nu 89,638 in 2010 (Nidup Gyeltshen, 2010). It is an agrarian country, with two-thirds of the population depending on agriculture for livelihood. 23.7 percent of the population lives below poverty line of Nu 1,096.94 per person per month (National Statistics Bureau, 2007). Similarly, the national adult literacy rate is 53 percent, with 30.9 percent urbanization (Office of the Census Commissioner, 2006).

If none of the prevailing democratic transition theories are inadequate to explain Bhutan's unique transition to democracy, how was democracy possible in Bhutan? What are the causes and conditions that made the transition smooth?

Causes and Conditions

If there is one, just one reason for Bhutan's democratic transition, it is the leadership of the Fourth Majesty who had shown that if the leaders are committed to democracy, the transition can be smooth and peaceful. The Fourth Majesty had always kept the interests of the nation before anyone else's. After the coronation, the Fourth Majesty consolidated the Third Majesty's reforms and initiated a series of political reforms, such that the preceding reform was systematically planned to cumulatively lead and add to the next. They finally culminated in his abdication and introduction of democracy in 2008. These reforms, albeit repeated like a mantra in any publications or discussions on decentralization, is worth narrating here.

Necessary executive and financial power devolved to a district-level institution called district development committee (*Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung*) instituted in 1981. District development committee was made responsible for making development plans for districts through public consultation while bureaucracy's role was restricted to implementing

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decision of the people. The decision-making was taken right to the people in 1991 by establishing block development committee (*Gewog Yargye Tshogchung*) to involve rural communities directly in the decision-making process. Block development committee became a local platform for expressing development interests of villages. The *gewog*, smallest administrative unit constituted by a group of villages, made their own development plans.

After dissolving the old handpicked cabinet, the council of ministers elected by National Assembly was given executive power in 1998 while the king became the head of state. For the first time the state and the government became separate entities. A vote of no confidence on the king was also reinstated. By empowering National Assembly (whose members were elected by the people) to elect the new council of ministers, the king made the government responsible and accountable to the people, not to the king as in the past. The system of yearly rotation of the head of the government (minister who got the highest votes served as the first head of government) provided much-needed leadership training to the ministers.

The Fourth Majesty issued a decree for drafting a written constitution in 2001. A 39 members constitution drafting committee was formed under the chair of the Chief Justice. The draft constitution was submitted to the king in August 2005. The Fourth Majesty and the crown prince personally discussed the constitution with the people of all 20 districts.

Seldom mentioned or discussed is the revision of Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogchung and Gewog Yargay Tshogchung *chathrim* in 2003. The two legislations increased administrative, management, and financial powers of these local bodies and provided among others the election of local leaders (*gup*, *chimi*, and *mang-ap*) through universal adult franchise for the first time in 2003. It introduced the new culture of party politics and elections to the people, thus provided much needed

training for the upcoming elections. Earlier the village elders selected the local leaders through consensus followed by a household voting. Gup was a hereditary post before the Third Majesty discontinued it in 1963 (National Assembly Secretariat, 1999, p. 112).

The Fourth Majesty abdicated on 14 December 2006, which is widely seen as a royal sacrifice on the altar of democracy.

Bhutan finally went to the polls to elect the parliament in 2008. The Fourth Majesty had always said that a political system must change with time to fulfil the needs of changing society, and democracy is a viable political institution that could fulfil the aspirations of the people. He said that if democracy is not working well in other countries, it isn't because of democracy's inherent weakness, but due to the abuse of democracy by those in power. The biggest weakness of monarchy, the Fourth Majesty said, is that a person becomes a king by birth not merit, and its dependence on one person when the country's security and wellbeing is best served by a political system that rest on the collective wisdom of all people. Asked why democracy was introduced now, not earlier or later, the Fourth Majesty explained that democracy should be best introduced at a time when there is a high level of trust among the people across all sections of society; when there is security in the country; when the people were enjoying peace and stability; when the economy is growing; and when the country's foreign relations, particularly the Indo-Bhutan relation, was at a new height. These can be considered as the necessary conditions to introduce democracy in Bhutan (See Sonam Kinga, 2009, pp. 134-161).

In his address to the first sitting of the Parliament on 8 May 2008 the Fifth Majesty said that the people of Bhutan have handed over Bhutan for safekeeping in 1907 to the Wangchuck dynasty, and introducing democracy was an act of returning it to the people after one hundred years.

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The highest achievement of one hundred years of monarchy has been the constant nurturing of Democracy. This has culminated today with the first sitting of Parliament and the start of democracy, whereby my father, the fourth Druk Gyaplo, and I, hereby return to our People the power that had been vested in our kings by our forefathers one hundred years ago (Cited in Sonam Kinga, 2009, p. 377).

Bhutan's transition to democracy and institution of a hereditary monarchy in 1907 were equally unique. Ugyen Wangchuck was enthroned as the first hereditary king by the representative of the people after signing a *gantshig* (letter of undertaking): the undertaking of the king was "laying down a secure future" for Bhutan and its people, while on their part, the signatories were to serve the king and his heirs with loyalty and dedication. As Sonam Kinga puts it, the political reform is not a mere survival strategy for the monarchy, but it is reaffirmation as a progressive institution of social and political changes; it is not a cosmetic relic of a sacral past but a vibrant national institution (Sonam Kinga, 2010).

Challenges

Bhutan's young democracy is not without challenges.

Two important responsibilities of the government can be said to improve the welfare of the people and to establish a solid democratic foundation. How far will the democratic roots grow in the country will depend on the elected government's performance in fulfilling these responsibilities.

Monarchy replaced a political system that had failed to provide political stability, and the one that brought much sufferings to the people in forms of heavy taxation, corvée labour and conscriptions to fight endless civil wars. If the success of the Wangchuck dynasty, especially during the last 50 years, was often measured in comparison to the preceding exploitative political era, the elected government's performance will be

gauged in comparison to the Wangchuck dynasty's achievements. There is nothing much the elected government can do in addition to what the monarchs had already done for the people. The challenges facing the new government are complex, and the needs of the people have climbed Maslow's hierarchy. This will pose a challenge to the elected government to gain legitimacy. It will also take time for the people to accept the culture of getting legitimacy overnight through periodic elections. So long as Bhutan remains a development state whose popular legitimacy rests on the ability of the state to deliver economic development, there are also opportunities for the elected government to strengthen democracy and gain wider acceptance among the populations.

One legacy of the Fourth Majesty is Gross National Happiness that continues to guide Bhutan's development. Simply put, GNH is the promotion of holistic development by balancing physical and non-physical needs of the people, and seeing development as a means towards an end, i.e., happiness of the people, and not as an end.

One major challenge facing the country is reconciling democracy with GNH. In 2008 both political parties embraced GNH values in their party manifestoes and both ran on a GNH platform. GNH was explained to be compatible with party politics during the election campaigns. Very often politicians explained GNH in terms of delivering GDP. However, there are fundamental differences between the two. Democracy is only a subset of GNH. There is a risk of GNH becoming peripheral to democracy, rather than the other way. What drives democracy is the narrow interest of the political parties while GNH tries to promote common public goods. The challenge is to embed democratic value and practice within GNH framework. For Bhutan, democracy should be a means to achieve GNH goal. GNH is a long-term vision while the vision of party politics is often no longer than the electoral cycle, although it should not be devoid of short-term pragmatic actions for it to be relevant. If the party is to be electorally successful, it must respond to

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people's choices. However, popular choices will not necessarily conform to GNH that is oriented towards long-term goals. The voters will evaluate the government's performance in terms of fulfilling their needs, what are often short-term, myopic and physical. GNH is about sacrifice, especially suffering short-term pain for long-term gain. So far, the kings have been a source of justice and welfare, which has been one of the monarchy's legitimizing forces among the people.

Safeguarding the sovereignty and security of Bhutan is one of the reasons for introducing democracy. The monarchy inherited a society rife with traditional prejudices and backwardness temporarily insulated by self-imposed isolation. The socio-economic and political transformation of the last one hundred years has transformed Bhutan into a sovereign and independent modern nation-state. The survival of Bhutan as an independent country in the aftermath of geo-political events that were unkind to similar states in the region is not an historical accident or geographical luck, but the outcome of conscious decisions of the monarchs. One big question being asked of the elected government is its ability to consolidate and strengthen the country's independence and sovereignty. The party politics is fundamentally a spiltist ideology while safeguarding the sovereignty and independence require unity and solidarity. Most of the times, winning the election becomes primary to the country's security.

Both the formal and informal discourses on Bhutan's democracy conflate into one word, 'gift' (*solra*). Democracy is seen as a precious gift from a benevolent monarch although the Fourth Majesty has explained that it was his duty to provide the people with a constitution for future security and prosperity of Bhutan. Democracy is understood as a precious gift from the king. No matter how 'priceless' the gift, a gift is a gift. Because democracy came as a gift without having to fight for it, it is unlikely to be valued as much as what had been won through hard struggles and sacrifice.

There is a risk of democracy widening the fault lines of the rich and the poor, urban and rural dwellers, and the illiterate and educated. Due to lack of understanding about democracy and functioning of its institutions among the poor, rural residents and the illiterates, there is a risk of democracy being hijacked by the rich, urban-dwellers, or the educated Bhutanese elites, through what is known as an 'elite capture' (Dessallien, 2005). Five out of 11 ministers, including prime minister, of the first cabinet of the first democratically elected government were former ministers, and the first election is widely understood as an elite capture. By making civil servants apolitical, it has shut the voices of educated section of populations who could otherwise engage in constructive criticism of the government. Chances of the elite capture are made more likely by the bachelor's degree qualification set for standing as an MP candidate. The ultimate result would be the control of power by few elites, which will only grow the signs of oligarchy surfacing today.

The Bhutanese people understand democracy in terms of strikes and demonstrations they hear or experience personally while travelling in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. Hence, they are highly sceptical of democracy. The anti-government demonstrations of the 1989-90s and its association with corrupt practices in the region are other reasons for its bad image.

In the first democratic election, the ruling party won 45 out of 47 seats in the National Assembly. In face of the ruling party's absolute majority, the opposition party, the upper house, and the media is seen as crucial to maintaining the balance. Given its long tradition of consensus politics, similar electoral results cannot be ruled out in future elections. A government with an absolute majority, despite its many advantages, is seen as a potential seed of authoritarianism, and any well-intentioned reform it initiates will be criticized and resisted.

Conclusion

In his abdication decree, the Fourth Majesty attributed whatever progress Bhutan had made so far to “the merit of the people of Bhutan”. He expressed his confidence about “a very bright and great future” under “the leadership of a new king and a democratic system of government that is best suited for our country”, and entrusted the future of Bhutan to the people who are “the true custodians of our tradition and culture and the ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty and continued wellbeing of our country” (Nishimizu, 2008, p. 128).

Whether or not democracy is “best suited” for Bhutan, or whether it will flourish or flounder, only time will tell. But the institution of monarchy that had so far served the people of Bhutan for one hundred years is the final sacrifice that had to be made on the altar of democracy. By aspiring for and then succumbing to what democracy promises both at the level of ideology and practice, Bhutan has traded certainty for uncertainty. But having to face and live with the world of ever-increasing interdependence and interconnectedness, a unilinear transformation of its political system is not an option. Irrespective of democracy’s broken promises to deliver even the basic survival needs in many societies, a democratic label is what any modern nation-state must wear on.

Whatever be the political system, in the end it should serve the interests of the nation, spelt out by the Fourth Majesty in his abdication decree, “to strengthen the sovereignty and security of Bhutan, to secure the blessings of liberty, ensure justice and peace in our country, and enhance the unity, happiness and wellbeing of our people for all time to come.” (Nishimizu, 2008, p. 128). The untimely abdication is a personal sacrifice the Fourth Majesty made to ensure a successful democratic transition. The royal sacrifice has made monarchy a martyr, because by giving up the king’s right to rule, the monarch’s ‘moral right to reign’ has been reinforced, thereby

strengthening the institution of monarchy (Sonam Kinga, 2010).

If the democratic transition theories are not so useful in explaining Bhutan's case, the lessons of other countries will not be so useful in understanding democracy's many pitfalls. Since the leadership of the Fourth Majesty is seen as the reason for the democratic transition, it will be the leadership of the successive monarchs that will make the democratic transition process irreversible by laying a solid foundation of democracy, strengthening democratic structures and institutions, establishing good governance, raising public awareness and consciousness of democracy, and changing their mindsets.

Despite many challenges and fulfilling none of the preconditions of the democratic transition, the transition has been peaceful. There are many indicators that could be understood as signs of a healthy democracy. The high court's ruling on the first constitutional case between the government and the opposition over the government's tax increase, which went in favour of the opposition, and later upheld by the supreme court, is one clear indicator of a strong and independent judiciary. Similarly, it has become difficult for the first elected government to pass a law in the National Assembly even where it had 45 out of 47 seats. The so-called fourth estate, the media, has been growing over the years. From only one newspaper in 2006, there are 2 daily and 5 weeklies as the people's watchdog.

Just as Bhutan can learn from mistakes of other countries in its socio-economic development effort, the same can also be said of democracy and mistakes avoided. Given its strategic geo-political location, Bhutan cannot afford mistakes. Its margin error is small.

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