

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPYNESS AND FOREIGN POLICY OF BHUTAN : INTERLINKAGES AND IMPERATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is an instrument to serve the national goals, interest and aspirations of a country. The foreign policy of a country is framed in a way so as to follow the changing contours of international politics, so as to preserve and promote the national interests. It has to be flexible enough to adjust itself to the changing dynamics of the global order.

The domestic milieu of a country plays a significant role in shaping its foreign policy. In fact, to a large extent, foreign policy is a reflection of the domestic dimensions of a country, its needs and priorities and strength and weaknesses¹. In this way, foreign policy is shaped by certain objective conditions such as history, geography, socio-economic conditions etc., on the one hand and the changing dynamics of international politics on the other. A successful foreign policy requires a balance between these two dimensions.

The foreign policy issues are significant for small and under developed countries which are faced with the challenges of preserving and promoting national identity and securing and seeking support to its process of development². In this way, foreign policy became a significant factor in the context of those countries which are in search of self-identity and independence.

Let us now focus upon the notion of development which appears to be desirable in order to examine co-relationship between foreign policy and developmental paradigms and processes of a country. Development is generally viewed as the progress made by a country towards achieving certain goals by way of attaining economic growth³. It is also viewed in

terms of the progress made by a society. Progress is a normative concept which means a society or a nation proceeding towards a desired direction⁴. The process of development has also been viewed in terms of increasing capabilities of the people to mold a particular situation in their favour⁵. It is also believed that development is a situation in which people can enjoy freedom from poverty and discrimination. Thus development may be viewed as the march of a country from a particular situation which is characterised by backwardness. In this context development is a relative condition. There cannot be any definite scale of development. In recent years, however, it is being strongly viewed that development has to be people oriented, aimed at building human capabilities. The structural transformations within society itself are not sufficient. It is necessary that the developmental process leads to an environment in which people can utilise their potential in order to realize their needs and aspirations. The nature and direction of development may differ in different contexts, because people and the state may have different priorities and goals. As such development is a contextual phenomenon. The nature and pattern of development can be setup according to the needs and priorities of a country.

Thus it is possible to limit the goals of development and ascertain its direction according to one's needs, priorities and limitations. However, it would depend to what extent a country has a clear vision about its priorities and then fix up goals of development accordingly. In this context development is not an ideal but an instrument to attain certain ideals. It is not an objective but a means. Hence, the process of development can be fixed up in accordance to the objectives set out by a country. For instance, if the national goal is preservation of cultural identity then the dynamics of development has to be in accordance to that. It is, in this context that development is not necessarily be a universalized process. It can instead be a localized process as well.

It has also to be noted that development is not an isolated phenomenon. The domestic and external milieu of a country not only shapes it but also influences it to a large extent. It is here that the question of foreign policy comes in. Whether foreign policy can be helpful in realising particular modes of development and developmental goals of a country is the question that this paper would seek to address here in the context of Bhutan. Bhutan is one country which has tried to redefine development according to its own needs and priorities. Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a unique idea in that perspective. To what extent foreign policy of Bhutan has been an instrument in preserving and promoting the developmental goals as visualized in its concept of GNH is our main concern here.

BHUTAN: A PROFILE

Bhutan is a small country located in the southern slopes of the snow clad mountains of the great Himalayas. Among the few surviving monarchies of the world Bhutan is steadily heading towards democracy and constitutionalism in recent times.

Bhutan has extreme and difficult geographic variations ranging from a small strip of plains land in the south to middle hills and the snow clad mountain ranges towards the north⁶. The whole country is divided in to isolated regions by rivers, dense forests and mountains. In terms of size it is one of the smallest countries of the world. Its total land area is 18000 sq. mile.

It is surrounded on three sides by India and in the north by the Tibet region of China. Thus, it is sandwiched between two great powers of Asia. Bhutan is a landlocked country and its relations with the rest of the world have been possible through the Indian territory only. Apart from the landlocked nature, dense forests, high mountains and extreme

climatic conditions have enhanced inaccessibility of the kingdom, internally as well as externally. The transportation and communication structures are quite weak and at a very low stage of development. It has also resulted in the isolation of different parts of the country from each other. Bhutan has sparse population. It is believed that the geographical features have compelled the country to have a limited population.

Bhutan's economic structure is fragile and weak. It has very limited resources. Water and forests constitute the major resource base. However, the hydro-energy resources have immense potential for the development of the country and Bhutan's experiment to collaborate with India in this venture has been highly fruit bearing. More than 90 per cent of the population is dependent on agriculture. Bhutan's developmental process has been slow and largely dependent on external resources. Bhutan's economic relations are, by and large, with its immediate neighbour India. It is obvious that while pursuance of its goals of modernization and development Bhutan has to largely development on external resources, aid and trade⁷. The Bhutanese ruling elite is conscious of the fact that its openness to unlimited modernization and development would call for its excessive involvement with the outer world, thereby inviting more problems for it. Hence it has tried to limit its goals of modernisation and development and thereby restrict external exposure to limited resources and countries.

It is clear from the above brief discussion that Bhutan's geo-strategic location, its resources, economic capabilities and the dependency syndrome has significant bearings on its foreign policy.

THE CONCEPT OF GNH

Bhutan's dilemma seems to have been to modernize and develop the country, but at the same time to preserve its traditional and cultural uniqueness. Therefore, Bhutan's major concern has been to ensure development and modernization along with the preservation of its traditional cultural identity. Bhutan's ruling elite has envisaged an alternative path of development in order to attain the twin objectives. Bhutan's alternative thinking to development in terms of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been a step towards that direction.

Bhutan has tried to conceptualise its developmental needs and efforts in the context of the cultural identity and environment of the country. Bhutan has framed the concept of GNH with this objective. This concept was articulated by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck towards the late 1980s. The focus of GNH is human being. The ultimate goal of an individual should be to attain happiness. Hence the central focus of development should be to attain happiness in place of materialistic gains. The concept of GNH focuses upon limiting human needs in accordance to the available resources and the conditionalities. The concept of GNH is rooted in the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism. The core of Buddhist philosophy is that the ultimate goal of every human being is to attain happiness. It is possible by combining material gains with spirituality. Every individual is required to learn how to restrain its aspirations and live in happiness with whatever means are available. The question of restraining aspirations is closely related to the question of securing the cultural identity. Thus it is believed that the uncontrolled development may result in the destruction of the cultural identity of the country. While explaining the idea of GNH the King of Bhutan said.

“Our country has an ancient and unique cultural heritage which we wish to preserve as we feel that this is of vital importance 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 in order to improve the quality of life of our people”⁸.

Thus, the development is characterised by socio-economic progress along with the preservation of traditional, cultural and spiritual values⁹. The concept of GNH rejects the view that the accumulation of wealth and happiness are interrelated. It instead believes that happiness can be attained once the basic material needs are met with. It does not accept the concept of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) as an indication of development. The concept of GDP measures development in terms of economic growth. But economic growth can be discriminatory undermine sustainability and uproot the traditional socio-cultural values. Economic growth is essential, but it should be measured in terms of the well being of the people. It is possible when a balance is maintained between the materialistic and the spiritual components of development. In other words development has to incorporate happiness and peace. Hence, instead of economic growth the orientation of development has to be maximizing happiness.

The concept of GNH underlines that the economic growth is not an end itself. It is instead a means to achieve the goals of happiness, peace, sustainability and identity. GNH is not a static concept. There is an element of dynamism in it. It believes that the human needs and aspirations may change in the course of time. Hence the measures of happiness also change. The process of development has to move further accordingly.

The GNH became the focal point of planning and development in Bhutan in the 8th plan beginning in 1989¹⁰. The operationalisation of the concept of GNH has been a challenging task.

FOREIGN POLICY AND GNH: OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The small countries like Bhutan which are politically, economically and militarily weak are vulnerable to external influences and their foreign policy does not bear much significance in the sense that it does not have the capacity to play any significant role and influence the dynamics of international politics. However, Bhutan's foreign policy has gradually emerged with a limited interest to pursue its national interest in the arena of international politics¹¹.

In the context of operationalisation of GNH two aspects are important for the foreign policy of Bhutan. Firstly, pursuance of goals of development in a self-styled manner suitable to the Bhutanese conditions and religio-cultural and geographical milieu. Bhutan stepped on the path of modernization and development after 1950. Bhutan pursued a policy of closer relations with India. The treaty of 1949 envisaged for Bhutan's excessive dependence on India in economic and political matters and India's guidance on foreign policy issues. It was with India's assistance and encouragement that Bhutan began to move on the path of infrastructural development. Bhutan has gradually pursued its own distinctive path of development. In a limited and controlled way Bhutanese people have witnessed change and development in the new century. Development of means of transportation and communication, development of educational institutions and health facilities, growth of agro based industries, expansion of banking and financial sector, steady growth of market economy are some of the activities which Bhutanese rulers have pursued.

However, Bhutan's conscious effort has been to allow these developments to take place in a way that it does not destroy its basic cultural ethos. Bhutan has tried to limit its foreign aid resources to a few friendly countries like India. In past few decades Bhutan has expanded its foreign aid avenues but she has been conscious of her goals and requirements. Bhutan Prime Minister made it clear thus:

“We are looking for economic assistance from countries other than traditional donor nations, but we are determined to ensure that such aid has no political strings attached. We shall not seek aid from either the US or the USSR as we do not wish to get involved in the super power racket¹²”.

Bhutan is concerned to the unrestricted flow of external resources, goods, men and material which also influence the socio-cultural ethos of the country. Hence, the perception of the Bhutanese ruling is:

“We can not allow ourselves to assume that every thing that is new and alien to us should be unconditionally accepted. We must accept that some forces that promise change and progress may erode the assets we have built up over centuries and which continue to serve us..... We must recognize that assets and values are never static but are always subject to continuous process of redefinition as they adopt to the needs and aspirations of a society in development¹³”.

Secondly, Bhutan is concerned to the preservation of its traditional religio-cultural identity, peace and stability, which indeed is a vital aspect of the concept of GNH. The Bhutanese ruling elite believes that its sovereignty and identity depends on the preservation of its cultural values as represented by Drukpa society and Buddhist religion. It was opined that:

“Our future sovereignty as a nation – state will continue to depend upon the orientation of a cultural imperative that asserts our distinctive Bhutanese identity. The maintenance of our distinctive model of development will also be contingent upon our ability to maintain and conserve our development assets. We must recognize that modernisation is a powerful force. It is both a destroyer and creator of values. The values destroyed are typically those that are traditional and indigenous. While the new values are more universal, moulded in the mould of the technologies that fuel the modernisation process and which seek to create a world in their own image”¹⁴.

Bhutan is conscious of the fact that it is sandwiched between the Asian giants. Hence its task to preserve its distinct identity is a crucial issue. Bhutanese rulers clearly state that

“The main challenge facing the nation as a whole is the maintenance of our identity, sovereignty and security as a nation – state. We must never lose sight of the fact that we are a small nation state sandwiched between two of the world’s giants. Our existence is not a historical accident. It is the result of conscious actions taken over several centuries that have some times compelled us to seek alliance without compromising our sovereignty. Nor must we ever lose sight of the fact that our nation is the last serving independent Mahayana Buddhist kingdom in the world. We are the sole serving 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 this social and cultural system, which is today unique to Bhutan where it both survives and flourishes”¹⁵.

It is clear that Bhutan believes that its unique cultural identity is an asset to its survival and sustenance as a sovereign nation state. It is for this reason that the preservation of cultural identity is an essential component of the GNH. The self-styled developmental process and the preservation of cultural identity has an external dimension as well, which has to be attained through foreign policy.

GNH AND FOREIGN POLICY: ORIENTATION AND DYNAMISM

The concept of GNH and the foreign policy orientation has been complimentary to each other. In fact, the alternative model of development that Bhutan has pursued needs a balanced foreign policy as well as to limit its foreign policy options according to its requirements.

Bhutan has indeed followed a policy of limited exposure to the outer world ever since the British withdrawal from the sub continent Bhutan followed a policy of close relations with India. Their relations were institutionalized in the treaty of 1949. Article 2 of the treaty stated that:

“The government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the government of India in its external relations”¹⁶.

It was further explained that:

“It is submitted that a sovereign state is entitled to be guided by the advice of another state and that could not on any account be regarded as repugnant to one’s sovereignty. In fact, it is in the exercise of its sovereign right that Bhutan has agreed to be guided by the advice of the government of India”¹⁷.

The treaty guided Bhutan's foreign policy to a considerable extent. Bhutan laid down large reliance on India for aid and trade. Over the years Bhutan's relations have matured with India and the two countries have entered into constructive engagement and involvements. With China another immediate neighbour, Bhutan's relations have been normal but without any active involvement and engagement Bhutan has not established diplomatic relations with major powers of the world like USA, Russia, Britain, France and China. Bhutan has also not accepted foreign assistance from these countries. Bhutan has non-residential diplomatic relations with the neighbouring countries which are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In recent years Bhutan has taken interest in forging economic relations with these countries, particularly with Bangladesh.

Bhutan has diplomatic relations with four countries – India, Bangladesh, Kuwait and Thailand and non-residential diplomatic relations with fourteen countries¹⁸. Despite not having residential diplomatic relations, Japan, Scandinavia, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland and Netherlands are the countries which are seriously engaged in Bhutan's development in recent years. In fact, these are the countries which have taken interest in Bhutan's alternative path of development. It is clear here that (i) Bhutan's foreign policy operates in a limited framework. (ii) Bhutan's relations are confined to few countries only. (iii) Bhutan has not accepted economic assistance from the traditional donor countries whose aid is generally believed to have political strings attached to it. (iv) Bhutan has instead accepted aid from those countries which have appreciated its model of development and its priorities and needs.

It may again be pointed out here that Bhutan strongly believes that it is not desperately looking to modernize the country in the way most of

the Asian – African countries have followed the western paradigms of modernisation and development and thereby invited the western cultural influences which have adversely affected the native socio-cultural fabric. In fact, the Bhutanese rulers believe that modernisation and development on western models would invite destabilizing and subversive elements in the country. Hence, it is better to keep diplomatic relations limited. Bhutan has believed in forging those ties which are necessary and which do not bring in diplomatic pulls and pressures.

A small, landlocked and underdeveloped country like Bhutan is sensitive to its identity, sovereignty and independence. Bhutan has adhered to the principles of the United Nations in order to ensure these goals. Bhutan became a member of the UNO in 1971 and since then she has been supporting the policies of peace and cooperation. Bhutan subsequently became a member of the Non-Alignment Movement and pledged its support to the policies of peace and coexistence. King Jigme Singhye Wangchuck said:

“We have based our policy of non-alignment on our determination not to align ourselves with one block and to hate the other or to play power politics with both”¹⁹. Bhutan is also an active member on SAARC and has supported its policies and programmes. It has, however, taken interest in the non-controversial regional issues.

The King of Bhutan stressed the importance of SAARC thus,

“The concept of regional cooperation has taken a concrete shape with the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. It is a manifestation of our collective wisdom and political will to bring about meaningful regional cooperation inspite of differences in foreign policy and security perceptions. We have established a viable forum for regular consultation on all issues of

mutual concern in pursuance of our common aim to promote peace, progress and prosperity²⁰.

Being a landlocked country and due to its excessive dependence on bilateral cooperation with India Bhutan has its limitations to play a role in the SAARC. However, it does provide status and identity to that country.

Bhutan has thus followed policy of supporting UNO, NAM and SAARC. But Bhutan's role in these organisations has confined to broad and general issues and it has refrained from involving into complex and contentions issues. In fact, it can be said that Bhutan's foreign policy has been rather simple. It has not entered into any conflict with any country except Nepal for last some years. Bhutan has tried to not to invite any kind of interference and influences from the outside world, so that its indigenous mode of development remains intact.

Preservation of cultural identity is a crucial issue for the Bhutanese foreign policy. Bhutan has tried to build a monolithic society by encouraging diverse ethnic groups to follow the Bhutanese national cultural values and traits as represented by the ruling Drukpas. Bhutan's attempts to various ethnic groups within the fold of its national culture brought it in conflict with the people of Nepali origin living in Bhutan. This resulted in the large-scale expulsion of Bhutani Nepalese to take refuges in Nepal²¹. The two countries have failed so far in finding any solution to the problem of refugee. However, Bhutan has strained relations with Nepal since then which indeed is an exception for a country like Bhutan. Bhutan has developed conflictual relations with a sister countries at the cost of preservation of its cultural identity.

Bhutan has also been conscious of allowing minimum external exposure to its people. Bhutan has also not encouraged tourism, external investments etc. so that its cultural uniqueness is protected.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Foreign policy is an important instrument of Gross National Happiness, the alternative model of development that Bhutan has pursued over the last two decades. A balanced foreign policy approach is required to attain the objectives of GNH.

In today's world system it is not possible for any country to keep itself isolated from the outer world. Despite Bhutan's historical, geographical and socio-cultural limitations it has to allow exposure of the country to outer world.

Bhutan has defined its developmental goals in terms of maximizing people's happiness. Yet it being a resource scarce country needs external cooperation. The challenge to Bhutanese foreign policy is that it cannot allow unrestrained and unlimited cooperation because the goal is maximization of happiness not material affluence. Similarly the issue of preservation of cultural identity is important. This also calls for the regularization of foreign policy in a way that the external influences do not affect its traditional cultural fabric. Hence, Bhutan's attempt is to operate its foreign policy in a limited and restrained framework. The Bhutanese ruling elite has to be conscious of the limitations laid down by the GNH to its foreign policy operations. Bhutan cannot bear the burden of being ambitious on foreign policy issues.

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