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The Role of Civil Religion in Influencing Bhutan's Development Policy

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Bhutan is situated in the Eastern Himalayas. It is a land-locked country and it has China in the North, India in the South, East and West as its neighbours. According to the National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan the total population of the country is 778,055 and it is the last standing Buddhist kingdom of the world. Religion and culture has played a significant role in Bhutan's development and developing its vision. This academic paper will try to analyze the development paradigm of Bhutan in the light of religion. It will try to inquire how religion has played a vital role in shaping the development policy of a nation and it will also try to give an answer whether it has done good or bad for Bhutan.

Key Words: Bhutan, religion, Gross National Happiness, development, civil religion.

Introduction: The Kingdom of Bhutan is situated in the Eastern Himalayas. It is a land-locked country and it has China in the North, India in the South, East and West as its neighbours. According the National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan, the total population of the country is 778,055 and it is the last standing Buddhist kingdom of the world. Religion and culture has played a significant role in Bhutan's development and developing its vision. It has been clearly stated in *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness* that "The vision attempts to strike a balance between development and environment, modernization and tradition, values and technology, immediate and long term, individuals and the society, and realism and aspirations." (Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999)

Bhutan has challenged the so called western notion of 'development' and they have tried to contribute a new perspective in this discourse. For Bhutan, Gross National Happiness is much more important than Gross Domestic Product Index. This term Gross National Happiness was first coined by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk in the 1970's. Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom and religion has played a very vital role for formulating this idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Historically religion has played a very vital role to shape our histories and societies. This academic paper will try to analyze the development paradigm of Bhutan in the light of

religion. It will try to enquire how religion has played a vital role in shaping the development policy of a nation and it will also try to give an answer whether it has done good or bad for Bhutan.

The first part of the paper will try to deal with the theories of the civil religion. Second part will briefly focus on Buddhist religious philosophy and how it has influenced Bhutan's national development policy. And in the concluding part this paper will try to analyze the role of religion in Bhutan's development philosophy and whether it does good or bad for the nation. Geographical location of Bhutan has made it a very interesting case. The country is located between the authoritarian communist giant China and world's largest democracy India. So, it will be interesting to see how Bhutan maintains its very own social and cultural identity in future by sitting in between two economic giants.

Theoretical background of Civil Religion: Before going to our case study of Bhutan it is very important to have a clear understanding of what 'Civil Religion' means. The term 'Civil Religion' was first coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his book *The Social Contract*. Rousseau has extensively discussed about the idea of 'Civil Religion' and what should be the form of it. Rousseau in his writings clearly stated that the state needs a religious foundation. In his writings Rousseau mentions about Hobbes and how he wanted the reunion of the state and the religion which in Rousseau's words 'the reunion of the two heads of the eagle'. But, Rousseau is of the view that this will never be possible because the 'priestly interest' will be much stronger than that of the State. Rousseau divided religion into three distinct types and those are – religion of man, religion of the citizen and the third type which in his own words "There is a third sort of religion of a more singular kind, which gives men two codes of legislation, two rulers, and two countries, renders them subject to contradictory duties, and makes it impossible for them to be faithful both to religion and to citizenship." (Rousseau 1762,107)

But Rousseau is criticizing all of them and the third variant is the worst of them all because it according to him destroys 'social unity'. He is totally rejecting the idea of institutions which creates contradiction in man. In fact, such a view has a long tradition, right down to the two dystopian novels of 20th Century, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. The dystopian world of both novels have learnt to abandon institutions such as art, science and religion, since they come in the way of the stability of the citizenry and social order. It is evident from Rousseau's writings that he has high regards for 'not the Christianity of to-day, but that of the Gospel.' But Rousseau has its own paradox. Rousseau clearly identifies the problem of religion especially when it comes in contact with the state but he fails to provide a solution to this problem. Only in the concluding paragraphs of the 'Civil Religion' chapter he throws some light on his view of 'Civil Religion'.

"The existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked,

the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas.” (Rousseau 1762, 111)

He clearly dreams of a world where civil religion will bring peace and tranquility and it will also help to establish justice. In this context we can lend words from Ronald Beiner and say “...Rousseau’s thought fluctuates between two opposed and contradictory standpoints, the standpoint of cosmopolitan brotherhood and the standpoint of national particularism, and the idea of civil religion seems to get caught in the interstices of this tension.” (Beiner, 1993)

Rousseau has his own shortcomings. On the one hand he realizes how violent religion can be and on the other hand he is directing the ‘Sovereign’ to punish those who don’t believe the ‘civil profession of faith’. This is purely undemocratic and autocratic in nature. Rousseau failed to give a solution to the problem of ‘civil religion’ but he was undoubtedly much ahead of his time. He realized that there is no place for one ‘national religion’ in this world anymore and religious tolerance will be the buzzword of the future.

Discussing the concept of civil religion without bringing the example of the United States of America is quite an impossible task. If we observe the American history of the past 100 years we will see how a state used religion to create a binding force which cannot be seen visually but can be felt from within. From Kennedy’s inaugural address of 20th January, 1961 to George W. Bush’s announcement of the war on terror after September 11, 2001, the trust on God can be vividly felt. Robert. N. Bellah in his article “Civil Religion in America” has tried to portray the presence and essence of civil religion in the American history from the time when the nation came into existence. In context of Kennedy’s inaugural address Bellah states that “The placing of references in this speech as well as in public life generally indicates that religion has “only a ceremonial significance”; it gets only a sentimental nod which serves largely to placate the more unenlightened members of the community, before a discussion of the really serious business with which religion has nothing whatever to do.” (Bellah 1967, 3)

This observation gives us somewhat a clear understanding of the role of civil religion in America. It is very important to observe how the concept of religion is getting portrayed. In America the oath taking ceremony is a very significant national event where the political authority is legalized by ceremonial religious oath. Bellah is of the view that the ideas of the founding fathers of America were similar to Rousseau’s idea of civil religion. And he thinks that ‘cultural climate’ of the late-eighteenth century was responsible for this.

In America civil religion has been a uniting force and the Church was never in conflict with the state historically, as the imposition of the Anglican mode of religious stability seemed to work well in this colony than it did in the metropole. Religion was totally separated from Christianity. When President Barack Hussein Obama was taking the oath by touching the Bible then his nation was divided in deciding whether he is a Muslim or a Christian. But, it was never a big issue in his country because what he believes is his personal choice. The usage of ‘God Bless America’ after Presidential speeches doesn’t refer

to any particular religion, it is more the category of divinity that the American collective has by now accepted as the construct resembling and inseparable from the spirit of the nation, unaffected by the individual Presidents who utter it in passing. The individual is insignificant. The spirit of the nation is the old structure that endures, and in its endurance, inspires respect.

But the politics of religions and the politics of its interpretations are different. The United States of America has cleverly adopted herself with changing global order. When Barack Obama celebrates *Diwali* (Hindu festival of Lights) in White House and wishes the world 'Happy Diwali' then he reminds the world that tolerance should be the new religion of the world.

Three decades later after Robert N. Bellah published his work on American civil religion, Marcela Cristi came up with her own arguments making a systematic analysis of Bellah's work. Cristi rightly pointed out that the concept of civil religion is still not properly defined and it is ambiguous. Cristi is of the view that the academicians have always taken the path of Durkheim and Bellah to understand the concept of civil religion. For Rousseau civil religion was a coercive device but for Durkheim it was more of a cultural thing which provides a common ground of morality. Cristi is of the view that the academicians has failed to understand Rousseau's idea of civil religion because of too much focus on Durkheim. According to Cristi "Rousseau's intention was to create a religion that would not be attached to any particular religious belief or organized church. Rather, it should be a religion designed and controlled by the state." (Cristi 2001,6) Cristi points out several short-coming of Bellah's argument and she makes a conclusion by saying that Bellah's idea of American civil religion does not reflect the abusive nature of civil religion.

Though the true meaning of the term 'civil religion' still remains ambiguous but one thing is true that the ultimate goal of 'civil religion' is to establish peace and order in society. The debate arises when it comes to how it can be established and how nations have historically used 'civil religion' to achieve its goals and aspirations. United States of America has been the focal point of attention in this academic discourse. Many scholars have studied other states too. But, in the age of globalization and a new world order this subject matter needs more attention especially in context of other countries of the developing world. In the coming chapters case study of Bhutan will be analyzed and we will see how civil religion has played a significant role in nation's development.

Influence of Buddhism in Bhutan's development vision: The concept of Gross National Happiness has been highly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. GNH has four main pillars which have been elaborated into nine domains. The four main pillars of GNH are:

- Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development
- Environmental conservation
- Preservation and promotion of culture
- Good Governance

The religion of Buddhism is not only concerned about human beings but all kinds of living objects. This religious ideology has a great influence on Bhutan. The concept of GNH tries to seek a balance between material world and spiritual life. Buddhist economist Schumacher is of the view that “Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of human wants but in the purification of human character...formed primarily by a man's work.” (Harvey 2000, 219)

So, if we keep these foundational basics of Buddhist religious philosophy in our mind then we can find a striking similarity with Bhutan's vision statement. GDP is an economic measurement and it can be calculated where only money is involved but it doesn't bring into calculation the greatest happiness in our lives which don't come with money. Peter Harvey in this context sums up Ven. Payutto's argument precisely and he says “He seeks modern economics as based on the assumption that people's aim is to seek happiness through the satisfaction of craving, which means that the goal is always over the horizon, as craving can never attain lasting satisfaction.” (Harvey 2000, 221)

The policy formulators of Bhutan also have a similar kind of vision where Buddhist religion plays a significant role. Bhutan has rejected the western idea of development which is only concerned about competition and growth. Their focus is on sustainable development, preservation of their culture and values, use of renewable resources and special focus on good governance.

Role of Religion in Bhutan's Development Policy: The previous chapters have dealt with the concept of civil religion and the foundational basics of Buddhist religious philosophy to set a platform for the analysis of the role of religion in Bhutan in the last chapter of this paper. In the concluding portion of the academic paper we will try to analyze whether religion has done good or bad for Bhutan's development. There is no scope to deny that low rate of literacy has played a significant role for making monarchy influential in the country. In this context we need to analyze how Bhutan incorporated religion or to be specific some elements of religion in the development process. If we analyze the policies of Bhutan then we will find that the case of Bhutan is close to Rousseau and Emile Durkheim's idea of civil religion. Bhutan has given a unique shape to this model by incorporating their own elements which is very close to Buddhist religious philosophy.

Chhewang Rinzin in his book *On the Middle Path* has pointed out the relationship of four pillars of GNH with Buddhist religion by giving reference of writings of various academicians. He is of the view that “Both normative approaches share a conception of happiness including the spiritual or ‘inner development’ aspect of individual happiness. This contrasts with other scholars who restrict happiness explicitly or implicitly to material well-being.” (Rinzin 2006, 32)

It is an official stance by the government that GNH will be a set goal that Bhutan will thrive to achieve in future. But, it is clear from the national policies and the 2020 vision statement that all the developmental activities in the kingdom are taking place with GNH

guidelines in mind. It is a rule in Bhutan that all the government projects must be sanctioned by GNH Commission. The government is trying to implement the GNH influenced curriculum in all the schools which focuses on holistic education, universal brotherhood and sustainable development. This shows how the idea of GNH is put into practice through government machinery. This process of ideological force from the level of the state can be related with Rousseau's idea. Rousseau is of the view that "There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject." (Rousseau 1762,111) This is a very significant character of Bhutan's developmental model.

In this context it is very important to see how the general people of Bhutan perceives the model of Gross National Happiness and what is their role in the developmental process. In this context references will be drawn several times from an independent academic research which was done by Chhewang Rinzin in 2006 from Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Bhutan is committed towards sustainable development with specific focus on few areas like hydropower development and selling it to neighbouring countries, management of forest and natural resources and limited industrial development which complies with their agendas in GNH. Rinzin's work was the first sociological analysis of Bhutan's sustainable development agenda and he interviewed in ten out of twenty districts in Bhutan.

45% members of the civil society think that spiritual wellbeing is very important for them. Preservation of natural resources and sanctity of life is an important element of Buddhist religious philosophy. Bhutanese administration gives special emphasis on environmental preservation. People were asked questions on how important it is to conserve environment. 99% of the respondents said that it is important to conserve environment. 95% of people think that policies initiated by the government will help to protect the environment. 99% respondents feel that Bhutanese people considers 'culture' to be very important. Survey was carried out on the fourth pillar of GNH also, which is the 'good governance'. According to Rinzin "The survey results show that a majority (59%) of the respondents are of the view that decisions are made based on need and on a participatory basis, while 19% responded that the decisions are directed by the central government and 16% feel that the DYT chairman directs the decisions." (Rinzin 2006,69)

For a small kingdom like Bhutan the 'bottom up' approach of policy implementation is major success. It literally proves that whatever the Government is implementing is in accordance with the consent of the citizens of the country. The four pillars of GNH have been deeply influenced by Buddhist religious philosophy and it acts as a motivating factor of development and the normal people seems to be very happy with the vision statement of the kingdom.

Conclusion: The government of Bhutan is well aware of its geographical location, its problems and prospects. It is never an easy task to sit in between two economic giants of the world, especially when one of it directly controls its foreign policy and both influence the

elections that Bhutan tries to hold. There is always a possibility of getting effected by winds of change which is influenced by globalization and liberal market economy. The main question here is, has religion played a positive or negative role in Bhutan's development? Many critics of GNH are of the view that it goes against the real ground situation and it is too much ideological. But, the scholars who has been a critic of western notions of so called 'development' has praised the Bhutanese model. Bhutan is very clear on what they have and what they want in future. One thing we should not forget that the country is just 46,500 sq km in size and it is located in the Himalayan mountainous region. So, their model of development cannot be same like other big countries like U.S.A, China or India.

There is no scope to deny that Bhutan has its own problems which needs to be sorted out with sound economic and developmental policies.

But, they carefully extracted the best ideas from the Buddhist religion and incorporated it with their national developmental plans. When the world leaders are busy in blame game regarding pollution, carbon emission then Bhutan is focusing on sustainable development as its national policy. Will it be ethically right to say that their policies are wrong? Maybe the western scholars are not satisfied with their development because they haven't opened their market liberally and they are very cautious about it so that nothing cannot harm their cultural identity.

But, the Bhutanese administration has to be careful on the application of GNH ideologies. Bhutan has a significant number of Nepalese population and they should not oppress them in the name of preserving their cultural identity. If somehow the government becomes autocratic to implement their ideology similarly in the line of Rousseau where he has given authority to the Sovereign to 'punish' people by death if somebody doesn't obey the publicly recognized dogmas then Bhutan's unique model will come under scanner and has to face criticism.

Due to lack of good educational institutions many Bhutanese students go to foreign countries for higher education and they become exposed to the western culture. It will be a great challenge for Bhutan to accommodate them in Bhutanese society and use their intellectual assets in future. If they still accept Bhutan's GNH model of development then there is no conflict but when they reject the idea then the real crisis will develop which is most likely not going to happen. Bhutan is still not a member of World Trade Organization (WTO) and as soon as they become a member of WTO then the world would like to see what step Bhutan takes to maintain its cultural identity based on the principles of GNH.

As sustainable development is their prime focus in development agenda, for that reason their growth rate is slow. Bhutan should try to extract the best from its two giant neighbours. Especially they should focus on developing strong institutions which will give them a strong basis for future.

Bhutan is a perfect example of a nation state which has used religious values in a positive way for a better future. Their model is a perfect balance of the ideas of Durkheim

and Rousseau. On the one hand there is some kind of soft force from the side of the government and the King to implement their vision and on the other hand they have given extreme focus on their cultural aspects which goes in line with the ideas of Durkheim. But, it can be concluded by saying that Bhutan is growing at its own pace and who are we to dictate them if the citizens of the country are happy with it?

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