

## HARMONY AND BALANCE FOR HAPPINESS UNLIMITED?

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**Abstract:** *Progress and development have been a fundamental preoccupation of all human societies. But what drives this endeavour? What does and what should constitute the meaning of happiness. The Royal Government of Bhutan had come up with an engaging articulation of what they have referred to as a whole 'New Paradigm of Development'. It has been found that our present understandings of happiness and development lay at the root of the challenges like climate change. The report submitted by the Bhutanese government to the UN has identifies the challenges and possibilities associated with this new understanding of development. This article makes a critical assessment of the same.*

**Keywords:** *Happiness, development, paradigm.*

Perhaps no philosopher has yet disputed that every human being basically wants to be happy, so that the pursuit of happiness remains a fundamental motivation driving the multitude of human activities. It might even not be an exaggeration to say that the entire process of civilization was in a way or another guided by an effort by humankind to be happier than before. However, we are yet to arrive at an exact definition of what happiness means. And yet, this did not stop us from pursuing happiness in whatever form we conceived it in. A lot hence depends on how we understand happiness which in turn determines what we do in order to secure it. The most common way that we understand it today is the feeling that results from the satisfaction of a human desire, most of them being material in nature like the desire to own a car, a phone or something as simple as a pastry! Accordingly, we have understood 'development' as being capable of securing this form of happiness. So, people living in the USA are supposed to be happier than those living in Africa because the former has better access to the means of happiness that is, money, using which they can buy the things that make them happy!

Well, keeping aside the debate over whether this can indeed be accepted as the real meaning of happiness, let us take a look at the different implications of such an understanding of happiness on our society, our ecology and on our minds.

The function of an economy is to provide for the necessities of the people. Mainstream understanding believes that the economy should be a realm where every individual should conduct exchanges with others keeping in mind the goal of his/her personal interest as the overriding priority. The commodities being exchanged and the sources from which those commodities are produced are all to be viewed as means to the end of maximising one's own material interest and thereby his/her happiness. Thus, free market ideology is premised on placing value on the individual above everything else. It thus justifies all kinds of commodification (of nature, the non-human life forms, social services like care,

hospitality, education and so on) as long as it serves to make the abstract individual happy. Now, since this applies to every individual, the economy becomes a realm of relentless competition as the resources using which each can fulfil their interests are finite and dwindling. Such an ideology is kept alive through the propagation of a culture of consumerism that generates and legitimises the multitude of material desires that can be satisfied only through procurement of a commodity for a given price. When materialism and consumerism thus become a way of life, they tend to blur the distinction between a 'need' and a 'fancy', which in turn causes the economy to keep growing endlessly to meet the ceaseless wants, but primarily of the human individual.

What is often overlooked in this process is that we are drawing upon a limited pool of resources to produce an unlimited list of things while we are distributing the same in a severely inequitable fashion (which again is a result of the way production happens- private ownership and the rationale of individualistic profit). Moreover, because this takes a dis-embedded view of the economic system, there is little or no consideration of the larger spheres (the social system and the environmental system) within which it must function and with which the economy must maintain its balance, harmony and equilibrium as a prerequisite of sustenance.

In our 'pursuit of happiness', we have caused such a great deal of damage which is amply evident from the following:

**Ecological Crisis:** This is evident from climate change, unassimilated wastes, accelerated loss of species diversity and so on. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, the current status of climate change, biodiversity loss, and nitrogen production prove that humanity has transgressed "safe boundaries" of anthropocentrism.

**Economic and Social Crises:** Despite the unsatisfactory progress made in achieving many of the MDGs, 1.2 billion people still remain below the extreme poverty line.

More than 80 percent of the global population live in countries where income gaps are widening. Large income gaps between nations drive unsustainable and increasingly problematic international migration; large income gaps within nations foment political instability and conflict.

In-egalitarian social conditions have made society less cohesive, community life weaker, and dwindled people's trust in each other.

Given the reality that we live on a finite planet with limited resources, we cannot alleviate the extreme poverty of 1.3 billion of our fellow global citizens without curbing the excess consumption of more than a billion more.

Humanity is already consuming resources and generating waste 60 percent faster than the planet can regenerate, absorb and sustain. If everyone were to consume at the current levels of affluence, we would need four more planets to provide the necessary resources. Put another way, we now need a billion people to live in extreme poverty if we are to maintain the lifestyles of the affluent without creating even more damage to our planet.

**Crisis of Governance:** The architecture of global governance has been inadequate in addressing these pervasive issues. In many cases, big corporations are overriding national laws instituted through democratic processes. Economist Herman Daly has described how international competition and trade lowers production costs by externalising them, rather than by improving efficiency. This has its toll on the environment, welfare and social security.

Aware of these challenges, we are attempting to find solution to them. But most of our efforts are aimed at managing the symptoms of the crisis without looking at the root of their emergence. Moreover, the symptoms are inevitable. As David Korten so succinctly phrased it, the problems of climate change, poverty and social disruption are a '*structural dysfunction*'- as long we perceive of development in this manner, ecological crisis, inequity etc are inevitable. So, they have to be structurally eradicated which calls for radical change, not mere piecemeal reform. The bulk of current attempts at securing sustainable development (ecological modernisation and strong sustainability) are but modest variants of the same old paradigm that itself needs transformation, elevation.

The need of the hour is for reflection upon the very meaning of happiness and the appropriate way of securing it. Appropriate not only by ethical standards, (the debate on which may certainly be difficult to settle conclusively) but also in the light of the clearly evident negative effects of the old understanding that we have just highlighted above.

As long as we believe happiness flows from capability to fulfil material desires, besides the essential needs, curbing consumption for sustainable development will certainly appear to be a huge '*compromise*' achievable only at the cost of '*development*'. David Korten, in his analysis of the New Paradigm of Development proposed by Bhutan, has rightly observed that focusing on ideas like '*limits to growth*', '*de-growth*' or '*steady state economics*' are a political nonstarter because they exhort us to cut back, give up or do without, particularly when countless people are struggling hard just to get by.

Therefore it is not possible to resolve these unless we change our understanding of development to bring it in conformity with planetary boundaries.

Quite logically, the need of the hour is to adjust our understanding of happiness to the real external conditions instead of trying to forcibly adjust those conditions to suit our definition of happiness, the poverty of which is too evident to overlook in the contemporary times. And this is what the New Paradigm of Development offered by Bhutan, bring to us. They have redefined happiness to connote, a sense of harmony and interconnectedness between the human person and the community (starting from the immediate community to the world), nature and the non-human world and as stemming from service to others.

Guided by such a definition, we become well equipped not merely to handle the symptoms of the old paradigm's colossal failure but begin working in the earnest for effecting the change from the roots, bottom up. Then, subsistence consumption becomes the way to secure happiness, instead of being a compromise on happiness, whose meaning has now broken free from the narrow and flawed old belief system.

We should accept this definition of happiness because of the sound and healthy implications it carries for intra generational and inter-generational equity, if not for manifesting a general philosophical agreement of what happiness really means. As of now, that definition is useful which offers the best possible way to face the mammoth challenges facing our generation. And without doubt, the new paradigm offers such a definition.

Bhutan has been practising what it is preaching, which is evident from the country's adoption of the Gross National Happiness replacing the use GDP as a measure of its development status. Bhutan has proposed a working model in its report to the UN, to help actualise this paradigm shift in development thinking. The model is briefly summarised below.

Development policies should be reoriented to be focussed on ensuring universal access to certain basic needs like a healthy, diverse and resilient natural environment, decent living standards, physical and mental health, education, vibrant cultures, community vitality, balanced time use,

good governance and psychological wellbeing, all of which are measurable. We notice how the focus goes beyond material needs alone.

For this, policies must draw on available natural, human, social and economic resources, which then have to be managed sustainably and responsibly through appropriate structures and policies to ensure this wealth remains available for use by future generations.

The core indicators that can be used to measure progress along this holistic development paradigm are environmental conservation, sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.

However, these key wellbeing outcomes and conditions, while they provide vital opportunities, do not automatically translate into the ultimate goal of development - namely human happiness through a sense of connectedness, harmony, and union with nature, community, other beings and the world. An individual may have virtually all the required conditions and opportunities and still be miserable, while someone with fewer advantages may be far happier. Conscious skills, processes and practices are therefore required to transform wellbeing opportunities into the experience of human and societal happiness which in turn influences the fulfilment of needs. The inner transformation of our own mind sets and behaviours is as important for happiness as the transformation of the outer conditions of wellbeing. Happiness skills support the sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence which lead to meaningful pro-social engagement - the foundation of citizenship and collective happiness. Happiness skills must be inculcated to facilitate every person to experience happiness. A conscious process of unlearning the wrong belief system that taught us to become hyper individualistic and materialistic is very crucial here. Even science has proven the poverty of it.

Quite obviously, there will be a host of challenges obstructing efforts to herald the new paradigm. The report has divided them into substantive challenges like saving the paradigm from being appropriated by noble sounding variants of the old paradigm; process challenges like exploring and integrating the diversity of unorthodox approaches that challenge the fundamentals of the current paradigm in search of a better way to live and flourish on our planet and implementation challenges like putting up a conscious resistance to the culture of consumerism. But the biggest challenge to implementation of a new paradigm will be the difficulty of changing socio-economic power structures. As Rees goes on to say: "We must recognise that our vision is in direct conflict with the goals of the economic and political mainstream and that there will be tremendous 'pushback' against the NDP."

However, the report is very optimistic about the success of the new paradigm despite all the challenges in its way.

It beautifully states that, "because the institutions and policies that currently endanger our survival are human created, they can be transformed if we wish to do so."

Reflecting the approach often advocated by the Neo Marxists like Antonio Gramsci, the report suggest the promotion of a counter culture to delegitimise and eventually break the hegemony of the old ideology of development. "A new lexicon is also required if we are to move from the language of perpetual growth to stories grounded in reality and *"aligned both with human nature and the laws of wider nature"*. The scientific understanding that life can exist only in community and that wellbeing and human happiness depend on living in dynamic, adaptive, evolving balance with nature, is the moral and conceptual foundation for the new paradigm.

For instance, Bhutan is promoting altruism and compassion as a desired value to be adopted because that will ease the transition from the old to the new way of thinking serving as a more useful strategy for progress than the current competition-based ethos as they provide the impetus to move to the next level of cooperation and add the "voice of care" to the "voice of reason" in the economic field.

As Albert Einstein had once observed: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them". Thus the success of the new paradigm largely depends upon our ability to effect a "revolution of the imagination". Notwithstanding the fact that the poverty of the old paradigm is thoroughly exposed, it continues to define the order of the day still. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the world is becoming increasingly more receptive of the need for transformation. This is clearly evident in UN's initiative calling for global deliberations involving governments, civil society, academia, and other partners to identify a post-2015 development agenda. The report of the UN SG's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda recommended in this context that, "*we must move beyond business-as-usual, and we must start today. The new global partnership should encourage everyone to alter his or her worldview, profoundly and dramatically. It should lead all countries to move willingly towards merging the environmental and development agendas, and tackling poverty's symptoms and causes in a unified and universal way.*"

By redefining the very meaning of development, the suggested new paradigm has tremendous potential to help redesign our contemporary world. It offers the simplest solution to the looming challenge of climate change making global efforts more successful unlike the present scenario where the goal of being ahead than the rest in a rat race to an apocalypse seems to dominate 'development' thinking! Post-colonial countries may no longer have to strive for matching the material standards achieved by the so called developed countries. Rather, the latter will have to rethink its status of being 'developed'

by the new standards. Above all, there will be an end brought to the apparent incompatibility between development and environment, in a manner that substantially transcends the Brundtland formulation of sustainable development's subtle sympathetic orientation towards the status quo and greater anthropocentrism, thereby taking development thinking to the next level that is higher and more evolved.

It is interesting to note that such a principled rejection of materialism, industrialisation and gross anthropocentrism has substantially prefigured in the works of Rousseau, Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, who was a principle advocate of such a paradigm for India since before independence. Perhaps, because the current paradigm which rose to vogue in that era appeared more attractive and its adverse implications were then too early to surface, that the views of these philosophers seemed rather naïve. But, as things have turned out, the most sustainable approaches to development are indeed what they had suggested. The new paradigm also shares a lot with Amartya Sen's view of 'development as freedom'. An appraisal of the new paradigm of development thus leads one to a critical observation that there is actually nothing so new about this understanding. At the same time, Bhutan deserves all the credit for beautifully articulating it in such a lucid and coherent manner. The Report of the Kingdom of Bhutan namely, *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* has struck at the root of our present predicament by showing that it is ultimately our flawed notion of happiness that has been acting as Pandora's Box! Accordingly, it has tremendously simplified our basic task. All we need to do is to change the way we think and everything else will gradually but certainly fall in line. Indeed as they say, it's all in the mind!

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