

Development Challenges in Bhutan: Perspectives on Inequality and Gross National Happiness. Edited by Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt

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Development Challenges in Bhutan: Perspectives on Inequality and Gross National Happiness. Edited by Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt

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This book is exactly what it says in the title. It is a collection of chapters by different authors giving their perspectives on the development challenges faced by the small nation of Bhutan, which has adopted, as a measure of a successful country, a policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), rather than the more familiar economic target of Gross National Product (GNP). The book has 10 chapters and an overarching introduction but no overall summary or conclusions. In 5 sections of 2 chapters each, the issues of democratization, migration, health, governance, and socioeconomic disparities are analyzed. There are many important, indeed crucial, issues raised here, and lots of good references throughout, but it is difficult to think of this as anything other than a Western critique on Bhutan—indeed, the author of 1 chapter notes that it has been more 25 years since he last visited Bhutan. The authors are mainly European academics, with 2 or 3 Asian academics (but apparently no Bhutanese writers). The text is well developed, and the perspectives carefully argued. Throughout the book, the mixture is of political studies, anthropology, political economy, and social studies, but surprisingly, although mentioned as important issues, there are no chapters on the relevance of national security and defense, environmental policies, or foreign policy.

It is important to understand the context of this book in relation to the modern history of Bhutan, and the details of this are picked up in several places throughout the book. Bhutan's entry into the modern world is comparatively recent, and foreign access to the country is still heavily restricted due to a substantial tourist tax that regulates visitor numbers. In addition, the Kingdom of Bhutan is a young country, having been formed by the aggregation of smaller tribal fiefdoms; this fact features frequently in the analysis of several of the authors. A further layer of interest—and a central concern of the book—is the policy decision to place a greater emphasis on GNH as a measure of successful sustainable development rather than simply on economic indicators. Although GNH

began as a rather idiosyncratic idea, it has caught the global imagination and gained some measure of academic traction. The chapters address several key issues that need to be looked at seriously, such as whether the top-down promotion of GNH, and the apparent public reluctance to advocate differing political perspectives, might in fact be contributing to widening socioeconomic disparities rather than reducing them. Similarly, the authors state several times that there has been a concerted program to define and create a unifying national identity rather than to accommodate differing linguistic and ethnic identities. There are thought-provoking discussions on cultural identity and on disparities in health and welfare, and how these issues might be linked back to GNH.

It is right, of course, to subject these development trends to academic analysis, and it is equally correct to engage with the challenges that GNH presents, as well as to seek the locus of the interplay between domestic and external necessities in the formulation of national planning. This book makes a very useful start to the deeper critical scrutiny of those issues, but what seems to be missing is the injection of any Bhutanese voice—any real contextual analysis of pragmatic politics. As a very small, rather poor country, sandwiched between the giants of India and China, there are severe constraints on Bhutan, both geographically (infrastructure problems in the Himalaya are enormous) and socially (including the country's recent history of global emergence). To be blunt, Bhutan has not had much room to maneuver, and yet its track record of the past 2 or 3 decades has been impressive and inspiring to many global development analysts. Chapters in this book appear to acknowledge the great advances in education (which is free and in English) but miss some of the forward-thinking policies (including forestry and environmental conservation) though providing a useful commentary. Where the book leaves me a bit ambivalent is a feeling that this is a very occidental perspective on Bhutan—and making direct comparisons with occidental standards is perhaps interesting, but not terribly helpful in this analysis. The collection of perspectives would certainly have been strengthened by the addition of more critical comparison with relevance to the wider regional context. For example, Transparency International awards Bhutan 64/100 in the index of perceived levels of public sector corruption, compared with 39/100 for China, 41/100 for India, and 31/100 for Nepal, making Bhutan more highly regarded in this respect than many European countries.

This is certainly an interesting book, and it brings to the surface much valuable information that should be useful for any scholar of the region, and in particular any lover of academic contested issues. On the matter of stimulating further research, there are lots and lots of fruitful hares sent running in the discussion sections, and the reference lists in each chapter will be an important source for new researchers on Bhutan. This book should certainly be in the development studies section of all university library collections, but, retailing at £ 110.00 or US\$ 149.99 for 263 pages, I suspect that it will not grace the personal bookshelves of many readers, even the enthusiasts.