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## **Sustainable Tourism in Bhutan**

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**Abstract--** Bhutan's sustainable tourism is worth a reflection. A small nation with limitations has thoughtfully embarked upon the journey of sustainable tourism. The policy has been "high value low volume".

This study examines sustainable tourism in Bhutan. Bhutan is a Buddhist influenced nation hence the adherence to Buddhism and its principles has been the main backdrop for Bhutan's sustainability practices like all the other policies of the Bhutan government. The background of sustainability in tourism is underscored in the study. The benefits and limitations attached to sustainability is part of the study. How Bhutan as a sustainable tourist destinations stands out among the other nations will be looked in this study.

**Keywords--**Bhutan, Sustainable Tourism, Buddhism, GNH

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Expansion and exploration are the very basic component of humans imbibed in their DNA since existence. However, history is a testament to the fact that non mindfulness explorations and discoveries creates harmful impact on the society large and small. Form ancient to modern time humans have expanded, explored and travelled for reasons so diverse.

In today's time this human expansion has taken the form of tourism. Today tourism can be roughly be categorized into conventional tourism with minimal to nil focus on sustainability and conservation and non-conventional tourism with prime focus on sustainable tourism.

And what the world desperately needs today is sustainable tourism with sustainable practices.

Sustainable tourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature in a way that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people. **(World Conservation Union, 1996)**. Unlike the conventional form of tourism, sustainable tourism is planned to enhance conservation of natural resources, promote respect for the traditional culture and values, provide opportunities to the local communities and educate the local and the visiting tourist regarding the same. Profit is not the only hallmark of sustainable tourism.

It is environmentally, socially, culturally and economically conscious form of tourism.

### **II. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN BHUTAN: THEORITICAL BACKGORUND**

The Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal arrived in Bhutan from Tibet to take his position as the fifth incarnation of Gyalwang Drukpa, was not aloof to the plethora of internal enmities challenging his position which finally climaxed with his victory and final succession to control over Bhutan. The Shabdrung created the dual system of government in Bhutan with a religious head under Je Khenpo and a civil government under the Druk Desi. Each province of Bhutan was under the control of a Penlop (governor).

The death of Nawang Namgyal in the year 1651 and Bhutan witnessed a series of civil wars and political conspiracies with each Druk Desi and the Penlops fighting for power occupation. Amidst the ongoing political instability in Bhutan, the Penlop of Tongsa Ugyen Wangchuk with support from British India government emerged supreme and defeated his political contesters thus establishing the first hereditary monarch in Bhutan. In 1907 he was elected as the first king Druk Gyalpo of the Wangchuk dynasty.

With his incarnation, the position of Druk Desi, Je Khenpo and Penlop was abolished and power became centralized under the king. Ugyen Wangchuk formally began the pre-cautious and restrained modernization of Bhutan whilst keeping intact its isolation policy to preserve the traditional roots, values, culture and ethos of the nation with sustainable practices. The king's cordial relationship with the British India, climaxed with the signing of treaty of Punakha in 1910 which granted and assured the political independence of Bhutan. Gradual reforms and adaptation to new changes in the region and beyond was done with maintaining isolation.

The cautious modernization policy was carried further by the second king Jigme Wangchuk.

Since the inception of Bhutan as a nation state, the rulers have been guarded about the preservation and protection of the tradition, culture, values and in maintaining minimal interaction with the world and this ideology thrived with its relationship with the British India in the subcontinent.

The political metamorphosis in the Indian subcontinent region from the 1940's was not to the suitability of Bhutan



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as a nation and its ethos. Its cordial friend British India acceded to an independent Indian state in 1947.

Clouds of suspicion loomed large at Bhutan which worsened with the Chinese annexation of Tibet with not much Indian opposition. Bhutan's feared its sovereignty and independence would be at peril. So the alternative for Bhutan was embarking upon a deeper relation with India and doing away with policy of isolation gradually to meet the changing times new challenges.

While the first two kings of Bhutan concentrated primarily on securing the power and legitimacy of the monarchy and started careful modernisation and development, it was the third Druk Gyalpo who initiated key process of democratic institutionalisation (**Wangchuk 2004:838**)

The third king of Bhutan's close friendship with the prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru was beneficial for the country. With India's support the reforms accelerated nationally and internationally. Bhutan became the member of united nations in 1971 with the help of India.

The gradual change in Bhutan was accompanied with sustainable growth and the preservation and protection of the cultural and traditional foundations of the country. India also respected the principle of Bhutan's transformation to a modern nation state with its roots firmly grounded to the values of the country.

For the first time under the reign of the fourth king of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk the country's first national elections was held in March 2008, the written constitution was signed and passed on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2008 and Bhutan transitioned from a monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with the establishment of a democratic system of government with the coronation of the fifth and present king of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk in November 2008.

The present king Jigme khesar assumed the throne of Bhutan at a globally challenging era. Climate change impacts, neo-colonialism, rapid development of technology, rapid modernization all contributed to woes and worries of the people globally.

Challenge for Bhutan was to adapt to the new world order but with principles of sustainability and moderation with less harm to the country's ethics. It was done beautifully by Bhutan as seen in the nations policies, laws and regulations. The fifth druk gyalpo and the predecessors has shown that the world can adapt to new changes while rooted to one's identity and values. The path comes with limitations but long term benefit of sustainable development fades the small constraints. The transition in Bhutan has been gradual and gentle in consonance to its principles of sustainable development which is utmost relevant today. Sustainable

tourism is a by-product of the long standing philosophy of cautious and gradual change in Bhutan.

The concept of sustainability, moderation, preservation of traditional cultural values which has been the constant of every king's developmental goal emerges from the principles of Buddhism. Bhutan is a country influenced by Buddhism hence the Buddhist principles influences Bhutan's socio, economic and political structures. The religious and cultural identity of the people and the nation is based on Buddhism. The principles of Buddhism in Bhutan is a profound base for protecting and preservation of the religious and cultural identity of the people and interestingly Bhutan's governance structures are also vastly intertwined with principles of Buddhism.

The state machinery policy formulation incorporates the teachings and principles of Buddhism. The state ban on tobacco has its origin to the Buddhist guru Rinpoche's teaching. Environmental conservation regulations owes its inspiration to Buddhist principle of welfare of all sentient beings. The 4 landmark events of buddha have taken place under a tree. The national programmes for tiger, tiger action plan for conservation of tiger by the state adheres to the tiger's significance in Bhutan's religious and cultural heritage. Tiger is the protector of Buddhism and is of prime importance to guru Rinpoche's arrival to Bhutan whose holy monastery the tigers den is highly revered in Bhutan. Hence Bhutan's embarkment to sustainable tourism was based on Buddhist principles of moderation and too preserve and protect its culture identity based on Buddhism from commercialization and westernization caused by uncontrolled tourist influx.

Bhutan's tourism policy is aligned with the policy of Gross national happiness four pillars. The GNH measures societal well-being rather just material wealth. Since the existence of human, nations have strived to for increased economic growth, it being the parameter of progress and development. However the dominant market model of developmental thinking can assure economic development with less guarantee for the holistic well-being of each individual. The solution is too seek an alternative path to holistic development, with focus on not just economic model of development but overall human development with sustainable methods.

With a strong belief spiritual and sustainable development is equally pertinent parameters to reinforce the people and the nation, the king of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk introduced the gross national happiness (GNH) in 1970'S. A sustainable and holistic way of looking at parameter of development, against the conventional GDP model.



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The four pillars of gross national happiness are 1) sustainable socio economic development 2) preservation and promotion of culture 3) conservation of environment and 4) good governance.

The nine domains of GNH which serves as the happiness measurement index reflect the values of the Bhutanese society. Psychological well-being, time use balance, cultural diversity, ecological resilience, community vitality, education, good governance, health and living standard is required to promote happiness and sustainable development.

GNH, can be regarded as a Sustainable Consumption & Production (SCP) indicator developed in response to dissatisfaction with the conventional gross domestic product (GDP) measure, which does not capture many aspects that are central for people's wellbeing.<sup>i</sup>

what was once a vision of the king of a small Himalayan country is today being accepted and validated by the world. From 2007 to 2014 Thailand, Canada, South Korea, United Kingdom, Dubai, Seattle in Washington, Singapore, China, Canada, launched their happiness index. Many governments around the world are considering measures of happiness as alternatives to Gross domestic product for the purpose of guiding economic policy making.<sup>ii</sup>

A landlocked country with limited resources and infrastructure, Bhutan recognized its capacity to intake only limited tourist so that it would not overburden the locals, its natural resources and environment. Bhutan attaches great importance to the environment. The constitution of Bhutan required that around 60 percent of the country has to remain under forest cover. Unrestricted tourist flow would certainly be a cause of resource and environment depletion with impact upon the culture and traditional roots of the country.

Bhutan has always believed that sustainability and moderation with due care towards nature, values and traditions increases the subjective well-being of the people which further creates happiness. Therefore in the holistic model of development, the sector of tourism was no new. Bhutan's pursuit to tourism holds the intention to be on the path of creating opportunity for the people while forging sustainable tourism with less harm to the nature and resources of the country. Today mass tourism is causing aggressive explorations with harmful impact to the ecology and nature, Bhutan opts for sustainable tourism.

Tourism in Bhutan began from the 1970's onwards after opening coming out of the policy of isolation. The primary reason to open tourism was to generate revenue, open up Bhutan's unique culture and nature to the world, to widen the scope of opportunities for the locals and to contribute towards its social and economic development. However,

Bhutan also understood that unrestricted tourist flow could be harmful for Bhutan's conservation and environment.

Protection and preservation of its traditions, culture values have always been intrinsic part of Bhutanese government and society hence this is reflected in the tourism policy too. Bhutan banks on sustainable tourism to preserve their heritage and ecology.

Bhutan's tourism policy is defined by "high value and low volume" which seeks to attract environmentally conscious and responsible tourist while minimizing the negative effects of huge tourist influx. Bhutan believes that the tourism in Bhutan has to be in accordance to the capacity of its resource availability. Its good till Bhutan can sustainably sustain. Sustainable tourism of Bhutan is a smaller approach inside the larger based philosophy of Buddhism and GNH which emphasizes on holistic model of development.

Bhutan tourism policy is high value low volume. The objective is to attract high valued tourist with a conscience to respect the environment, nature and culture of Bhutan rather than massive inflow with aggressive impact on the country's holistic path of development. Tourist visiting Bhutan are required pay a tourism revenue called the sustainable development fee which is used for improving health care, education, infrastructure development and environmental and cultural conservation. Levying a revenue to visit the country naturally leads to less visitors annually.

Even with limited visitors, the goal of Bhutanese government is to promote community development and participation in tourism sectors. Homestays, handicrafts, cultural artistic performances local services are encouraged. The focus is on equal distribution of tourism revenue among the people and the government.

### III. LIMITATIONS AND BEYOND

For a small economy like Bhutan, a rapid boom of tourism would certainly soar high the state revenue graph, but it comes with a cost to the society and the heritage and this is what Bhutan is not willing to put stake. Sustainable tourism though might not be very favourable to the economy per say but it is non-negotiable for Bhutan.

One of the greatest benefit of sustainable tourism has been environmental conservation. Limited tourist mean less burden on the eco system. Bhutan has managed to limit cultural commercialization which occurs with aggressive tourism. Hence tourism in Bhutan focus on encouraging the visitors to educate themselves about the cultural heritage and nature of Bhutan. Even with a substantive revenue generation from sustainable tourism, Bhutan has managed to generate employment in tourism sector, help the local communities with the small business and keep a fair share for government revenue.



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Limited number of tourist means qualitative visitors with inherent awareness of respect towards the culture and heritage of Bhutan and less visits cater to avail good quality services which provides greater satisfaction.

Globally countries today in the name of rapid progress fail to recognize the harmful future impacts but Bhutan's sustainable tourism policy is a strategic action on part of the government for long term sustainability. It might not yield instant results in the conventional manner but the future generation will definitely be thankful.

Benefits though great, some limitations which challenges the sustainable tourism policy of Bhutan cannot be ignored. Limited tourism means potential for less economic growth, lesser opportunities for the locals, minimum revenue for the government, slower expansion of the industry.

The sustainable fee that is levied upon international traveller discourages many limited budget tourist visit especially the young travellers, visitors for education purpose, students visit for research. The nations becomes accessible mostly from the non-budget travellers, making it less inclusive.

Due to the tourist fee levied on daily basis the visitors could minimize the stay to fewer number of days, because of this the priority visits might mainly be the main cities of Paro Thimpu leaving the rural areas behind. This causes uneven distribution of tourism which leads to uneven distribution of tourism opportunities.

Sustainable tourism in not the guarantee to completely eliminate the harmful impact on environment. The impact though minimal will exist. Hence the government of Bhutan has to regularly upgrade their already inspiring policy and come with new measures to enhance sustainability in tourism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Bhutan's sustainability centric tourism is not a construct that transpired all of a sudden. The policy is deep rooted in the country's roots. The bearing lies upon the country's trajectory of understanding growth and development from a holistic perspective inspired from Buddhist principles of moderation and harmony.

The government of Bhutan has made extraordinary effort in ensuring that tourism develops in an appropriate and sustainable manner. There is a good synchronization between the locals, the tourism department and the governments regulation and policies to ensure appropriate implementation and accomplishment.

Today Bhutan stands as an exemplary example of sustainable tourism. A small nation with limitations of its own has made a remarkable imprint internationally. Today nations globally have due respect for Bhutan and has taken inspiration from its growth model.

Bhutan has proved that tourism can be managed by prioritizing sustainability along with economic development. It serves as a global model of sustainable tourism today and is often referred at international platforms of sustainable development.

The due credit for this achievement lies with the local communities and the government of Bhutan, whose roots are so embedded in the country's heritage and values that concepts of conservation, preservations, sustainability is organically embedded rather than forced upon. And this is what makes Bhutan different from the rest.

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