Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan's GNH Tourism Model: An investigation using Grounded Theory Methodology

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Abstract

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is an aspirational development philosophy promoted by Bhutan's 4th King. GNH attracted world attention at the United Nations (UN) when Happiness was declared the 9th Millennium Development Goal in 2012. This dissertation examines how GNH is manifest in tourism policy, planning and development in Bhutan. The study employs a constructivist grounded theory methodology (GTM). Data was collected through a number of qualitative methods, including fieldwork, participant observation, case studies, and semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders. The investigation follows the researcher's journey, navigating through a romanticised notion of GNH, to experiencing the issues and challenges of the implementation of GNH policy in tourism in Bhutan. The GTM led the researcher to Foucault's governmentality framework, which is used to examine the relationship between tourism development and GNH, in particular the changes in Bhutan's tourism policy from high value, low volume to high value, low impact, between 2008 and 2012. The study uncovered a number of contradictions in the implementation of GNH; paradox through the change in tourism policy; tensions resulting from the Accelerate Bhutan's Socio-economic Development (ABSD) Plan's McKinsey Report; controversy around the Ura-Shingkar Gold Course Development; and, the concerns of some tourism stakeholders about meeting the demands of increasing tourist numbers whilst maintaining GNH principles. The dissertation has found that the first term democratically elected Bhutanese government (2008 - 2013) prioritised economic benefits over its socio-cultural and environmental integrity through the ABSD Plan, and demonstrates the complexities involved in tourism policy, planning and development. The dissertation concludes that the ‘low impact’ tourism policy is unsustainable and proposes that reverting to ‘low volume’ is better aligned to the GNH value-led and slow-paced development philosophy. The study contributes an increased understanding of the complexities inherent in Bhutan aligning its tourism policy, planning and development with its GNH development philosophy.