

## **Forming Local Citizens in Bhutan:**

### **The Traditionalization of Participation, Empowerment, domination or Subjugation?**

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#### **Gross National Happiness: A Development Model**

'Gross National Happiness' is the name of a new development model invented by a small Himalayan Kingdom, Bhutan. This development approach is seen by an increasing number of people as a refreshing alternative to the conventional development models that often take growth as their main target. But how is it actually practiced in Bhutan and how does this influence the way in which the rural inhabitants are constructed as citizens?

These are questions that you should get wiser on at the PhD defense of the thesis: *Forming Local Citizens in Bhutan: The Traditionalization of Participation: Empowerment, Domination or Subjugation?*

The thesis addresses questions of how local governance reforms are diverted by national discourses on citizenship, ones that serve to traditionalize the local citizens into roles as supplicants rather than promoting self-determining citizens. Thus, even if donors have success in localizing governance it may not result in the form of citizenship donors would like to see.

The defense will take place at 14.00.  
At Political Science, Copenhagen University,  
Øster Farimagsgade 5, opg. E.

#### **Summary:**

During the first decade of the new millennium Bhutan became world famous for its alternative development model which used 'Gross National Happiness' (henceforth GNH), as an alternative model and yardstick to Gross National Product. This discourse needs to be seen against events in the 90's where Bhutan plunged into a situation close to civil war, which resulted in gross human rights violations, and one of the biggest refugee crises in modern Asian history. The State therefore holds a pressing need to reassert its legitimacy, both towards its population as well as towards the outside world.

The analysis of these events show that both before and after the crisis patterns are visible in which conflicting interpretations of how to organize order interact, and continue to do so. The current rationalization of State order needs to be seen in the context of *raison d'état*. In the effort to reassert the legitimacy of the State, two logics meet: i) the logic of national survival, in which governance is seen to be a process of nationalizing the State; and ii) a donor-inspired logic, which links governance to the active involvement of the local citizens in political processes.

As such, the relationship between the State and the local citizens has been revised, and has become one that is understood in terms of a contract between two partners, i.e. the Government and the local citizens. The basic premise for this contract is that governance is, in principle, moved from the central spaces into the local spaces. The principle argument is that this partnership is one that goes beyond being an institutional material. Rather, it is a contract that equally takes on a highly symbolic form by establishing a cultural relationship between the state and the local citizens.

The expectation of donors is that the state can set a framework in place that will generate new development dynamics, i.e. local participation that will promote local ownership over development processes. Simultaneously, however, the local spaces serve as strategic venues to promote an idea of citizenship in terms of oneness, drawing on an understanding of social order as one that is upheld by cultural homogeneity. As a result, the participatory spaces have been turned into sites for the construction of nationals, one's that are seen as practitioners of a culture that is seen to originate in a distant past. In the process, the past culture of respecting the lamas is reinvented and turned into a present culture of respecting state officials. This is effectuated in a host of traditionalizing governance technologies that teach the locals how to display the uttermost respect to their superiors in the state, for instance by bowing and avoiding direct eye contact. As a result of these processes, the marginalized citizens are placed in a position as subordinate and inferior to the state officials, thereby effectively reproducing their former positions as supplicants of the state.

The process of adopting a written constitution however, provides opportunities for reform. These do effectively make a change in the way that the power of dignitaries close to the King is challenged. Meanwhile, however, it also opens up for new, or continued, processes of reproducing the inferior role of the marginalized citizens.

The process of localizing the state has therefore resulted in a two-way street: that of involving local citizens in governance, and that of enhancing state control over these very same citizens. As an effect, local governance has in effect come to equally serve the reverse strategy, one of disempowering the local citizens, whilst strengthening the preponderant position of the ruling elite.

Thus, in spite of the hopes that the state can work as an agent of empowerment, the Bhutanese case at first glance seems indicative of the opposite. However, the power of the State to frame the way in which the locals are constructed as citizens, in effect, suggests that this remains a theoretical possibility. Indeed, the fieldwork signifies how the State is a highly efficient instrument for framing political processes at the local level, not so much through its institutionalization as through its power to orchestrate the symbolic aspects of governance. The only difference in Bhutan's case, however, is that these reforms tended to have the perverse effect of instituting new forms of symbolic domination.