Changing Socio-Spatial Structures and Growing Urban Issues in the Quest of Making Thimphu a Dream City

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Abstract

Building on the notion of socio-spatial dialectic, this paper examines new forms of urban space emerging in Thimphu city and formulates a critique to the idealisation of Thimphu as a dream city for all. This paper further asserts that new trends of social ordering can potentially pose a threat to Bhutan's unique development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which elevates and popularizes the country in global development debates.

Introduction

By 2027, as the ambitious Thimphu Structure Plan 2004-2027 envisions, Thimphu city will have witnessed an urban facelift that turns Thimphu city into a dream city for all Bhutanese. Buttressed by the Gross National Happiness (GHN) philosophy, the Thimphu Structure Plan 2004-2027 (TSP) underscores the reinforcement and reestablishment of public domains directed towards providing better choices, spaces, and places for a sense of community to develop, thereby making interactions and activities of the people in different spaces unique (MoWHS 2004). Since the introduction of the Thimphu Structure Plan, progress in various determinants of urban development is engineered by the country's meticulous and systematically designed development policies that underline the chief goals – balancing spiritual well-being and material well-being - of Gross National Happiness. In contemporary development debates, the notion of progress, however, is contested and articulated from different philosophical perspectives, the most dominant being the neoliberal ideology.[1]

Given the existing development philosophy of the country, which does not privilege excessive materialism, the concept of neoliberal ideology may be deemed irrelevant in the Bhutanese context. And yet, simmering just below the surface are novel forms of social and economic relations that betray the gradual penetration of a 'neoliberal ideology', certainly so in

[1] Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. Furthering, the role of a state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

Thimphu. New lifestyles with new social structures are currently emerging in Thimphu, leading to a gradual change in the traditional socio-economic landscape, even as contemporary development policies remain concurrent to the philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Until not so very long ago, Thimphu city was a mere swatch of paddy fields dotted with a few villages. These villages then amalgamated into the present urban Thimphu, now the largest urban centre of the country.

It is against this background that this article argues that rapid changes in urban socio-spatial structures are currently unfolding and resulting in new forms of urban space. These changes, I pose, are the manifestation of the infusion of neoliberal ideology in the socio-economic practices in Thimphu.[2]

The Birth of Modern Thimphu city

The 1950s is an epochal decade in the history of Bhutan, a period popularly associated with the dissolution of the country's self-imposed isolation policy. What compelled Bhutan to dissolve its self-imposed isolation policy is subject to interpretation, yet the long standing claim of China over parts of Bhutan, which it sees as part of Southern Tibet, socio-economic insecurity, and widespread political pandemonium witnessed in South-Asia midway the 20th century are regularly invoked as contributing factors. Bhutan judiciously fixed its political proclivity towards India with the aim of strengthening its own territorial, social and economic security. It was during these decades of political pandemonium in the Himalayan region, and South Asia more

[2] The concept 'socio-spatial structure' requires an understanding of the meaning of 'space' employed in the present paper. Space is a social construct that emerges out of various human interactions and activities. It is not only a container of social activities, as assumed in the past, but constitutes a part of social relations and is intimately involved in everyday life. It affects the way we feel about what we do and explains why people alter space and construct new environments to fit their needs (Gottdiener, & Hutchison 2011). Such a (re)construction process of space is triggered at large by the motive of competitive control over resources, which in turn produces a new pattern of social structure. Socio-spatial structure thus here refers to the social structure that emerged recently as a response to the modernization process. In common parlance, urban socio-spatial structure is formed as a result of differentiation in social status, income, lifestyle consumption pattern and living conditions, and embodied in it are the differentiation and combination of social groups in geographical space (Wang & Liu, 2017)

widely, that Bhutan steered towards modernisation through transitioning its political system, thus becoming one of the last nations in the world to embrace modernity (Phuntsho 2013). The choice of Bhutan to turn towards India, as Pradhan (2012:73) asserts, has "proved to be beneficial for the nation's wellbeing and Gross National Happiness', especially when China was considered hostile to Bhutan's political survival, at least until then last decades of the 20th century".

With the termination of the isolation policy, the search for an ideal administrative centre resulted in the shift of Bhutan's capital from Punakha to Thimphu in the 1950s. His Majesty, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, consciously worked to create state institutions with their powers centered in this now new capital (Walcot 2009). To this end, a massive revamping of Tashichho Dzong was carried out with financial assistance given by the Government of India. Until that time, Thimphu was a 'cauldron' of scattered settlements whose activities revolved around the Lakhangs and Goenpas (religious structures) and Tashichho Dzong (administrative centre) (Norbu 2008). After the termination of the isolation policy, there were frequent visits by diplomats from India who announced financial aids and development funds on behalf of the Government of India.

In post-independence India, the first treaty - the treaty of friendship and cooperation - was signed between India and Bhutan in 1949. However, it was only after the visit of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1958 to Bhutan, on the invitation of His Majesty the third Druk Gyalpo, that the diplomatic relation between the two countries was actualised and came to fruition with prime emphasis given to economic development and bilateral cooperation. Nehru's visit was followed by significant developments in Bhutan, such as the introduction of the Integrated Development Plan in the year 1960 with the help of Planning Commission of India. Subsequently, The First Five-Year Plan (1961-66) was adopted and entirely financed by the government of India with an approved outlay of Rs.1747 lakh.

With the introduction of First Five Year Plan in 1961, Thimphu experienced massive transformations and began to take on an urban form with its hitherto organic and traditional settlements gradually giving way to modernisation (Norbu 2008). When the town began to emerge, there was no proper planning; people constructed their houses wherever they found it convenient and as directed by stars and astrologers (Norbu 2008). In the words of Sinha (2001:10): "Thimphu town was like a labour camp in the late 1960s with some casual

construction just started and the town was huddled within a few lived-in buildings in one street". Later, the core area, comprised of upper and lower Motithang, Changzamtog and Hejo-Langjopakha, was divided into areas for residences, a retail service strip, schools, a modern hospital and a traditional medicine centre, and in doing so followed British planning practices (Walcot 2009). The total population of the town was said to be around 3500 persons back then, including labourers and seasonal migrants such as monks, workers, members of the assembly and district and national administrators. The township was designed by the town planners from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur (Sinha 2014).

After the declaration of Thimphu as the new capital, the construction of the first administrative building (Tashichho Dzong) was started in 1961 and completed in 1969 with financial aid from India. After its completion, the attention of the government went to the development of Thimphu town. A number of bureaucrats and staffs were recruited for various departments of the new government, which, in turn, resulted in a sudden surge of population and resultant housing shortage. Therefore, in the 1970s, major efforts were initiated to cope with the increasing housing shortage. Large colonies of different types of dwellings (from large bungalows, semi-detached houses and barracks to multistoreyed apartment estates), reflecting the social status of their users, were constructed, so gradually creating an urban landscape. Thimphu city, thus, developed as a colony for bureaucrats recruited from all over the country and from abroad, particularly from India (Dujardin 1999; Norbu 2008).

The first Master Plan for the capital was actually introduced in 1964 (MoWHS 2008a) but unfortunately it could not be implemented. In 1985, the first development plan for Thimphu city was initiated when the National Urban Development Commission (now known as Department of Urban and Engineering Service) was established to consolidate development areas and streamline the so far relatively unplanned and haphazard urban developments (Dujardin 1999). Back then, the valley was still sparsely populated and the royal Government of Bhutan used incentives to attract investors into land development and into construction. Though land was practically given away, there were few takers for plots on which taxes would be levied (Benninger 2002; MoWHS 2004). This scenario has changed dramatically since, as can be seen through the mushrooming of commercial activities, services, modern buildings and expansion of urban area.

Initially, Thimphu city was a small hamlet, called Chang Jangsa, consisting of only six households and two ruins at the present site of Thimphu's city centre (Kuensel, 3 October 1992 as cited in Kunzang Choden 1999). The population was said to be about 3500 in the late 1960s (Sinha 2001) which increased to 10,000 in the 1970s and to 79,185 in 2005. The estimated figure shows that by 2027 the population of the city will reach 162,327, assuming 5% rate of growth of population (MoWHS 2004), while its carrying capacity (desirable population) is estimated to be 120,000 (MoWHS 2008$_b$). Further, the proportion of Thimphu city population to the total urban population of the country is estimated to increase from 40 percent in 2005 to 88 percent by 2020, given the current population growth rate (MoWHS 2008b). With this rapid increase in the city population, the municipal boundaries of the city have expanded from 8 sq. km in the 1970s to 25 sq. km today. The urban spread, urban growth, and urban sprawl associated with the process of urbanisation continue unabated with a constant inflow of migrants, particularly, from the rural areas. New forms and functions of urban space emerge as people enter into a new social relations and organise themselves and their activities, both influencing and influenced by their urban surroundings.

New social ordering and spatial consciousness

The making of a city is a continuous process influenced by socio-economic and political dynamics. The constituent processes that make a city are not confined to iconic architecture, flagship projects, or ambitious master plans, but also include formal and informal practices that shape urban environments and the ordering of urban spaces in particular ways (Tonkiss 2013). The particular forms cities take are deeply rooted in human practices, interactions and responses to the material functions, economic arrangements, social relations and the political system. Cities are, therefore, not just physical spaces but socially constructed spaces – they are products of human imagination and human agency, and ever, of course, tied up to questions of politics and power (Harvey 1973). The nature of social relations, in such a 'socially constructed space', evolves over time and become deeply intertwined with relation of power. Eventually, privileged sections of the population assume more powers, which results in the fragmentation of urban space along the lines of: 'who can influence and who can be influenced'. It is, therefore, important to see the direction of change and the conditions under which the change in the urban social landscape is taking place while analysing urban socio-spatial phenomena. Given the contemporary urban socio-spatial change in Bhutan, Thimphu in particular, the dynamics of spatial (social) processes appear somewhat similar to the experiences observed in many urban centres in developing countries. More precisely, new urban spaces with varying social structures have emerged in Thimphu in what was earlier, rather unproblematically, described as a 'humble city' (Benninger 2002). These urban forms are stirred by neoliberalism and globalisation, both

of which increasingly permeate social and economic practices and give rise to the logic of accumulation and consumerism. In Bhutan, too, people are increasingly oriented towards consumerism and accumulation, which is resulting in an increasing competition over resources while the society itself shows signs of division along clearly discernable material lines.

The idea of accumulation, inherent to the capitalist mode of production, is becoming increasingly perceptible amongst Thimphu's urban elite and landowners (Bajaj 2014; Bothe 2017). The dominant group, mostly consisting of landowners, businessmen, and senior government officials (Thapa 2005: 24) exercise their status and power in the accumulation of urban property (Norbu 2008; Lorway, Dorji, Bradley, Ramesh, Isaac & Blanchard 2011) and preside over the rental system of apartments.[3] There is no rental rate fixed by the state as the Bhutan Tenancy Act 2015 (Chapter IV, clause 19) gives freedom to the parties (landlords and tenant) to determine monthly rent. Given the situation of housing shortage in the city, only 11.1 percent of the households in Thimphu *Thromde* own their dwellings (NSB 2017) implying that the vast majority are renting their apartments, and the absence of standardised rent rate according to the unit, size and quality of the apartment, landlords play a monopoly in determining the rent by charging more than the actual price it would cost. This makes the tenants one of the most disadvantages groups among the urban dwellers and victims of private house owners (Penjor 1999). With no alternative left, many tenants are compelled to stay and keep paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent (Dendup 2016)

The identification and demarcation of area development also worked to escalate land value, giving rise to opportunities for wealth creation, and real estate speculation by landowners further makes land unaffordable to those who are less affluent (MoWHS 2008a). It therefore appears that the absence of systematic and effective state policies or legislation against the renting or sales of buildings and land in the urban area works to further augment the power and wealth of urban landowners, while the absence of taxes levied by the state on associated income (unearned income) disadvantages the public sector (Norbu 2008).

These contemporary trends are giving rise to 'urban privilege' in a modern, capitalist sense. Unequal access begets unequal exchange and eventually this augmenting inequality is expected to increase over time. In India, inequalities in the urban sector are usually associated with a hierarchical social structure. Interestingly, such concerns are now also recognised in the

[3] The term 'dominant group' referred here is not an expression of the class structure emerging from the social (spatial) relations of production, but a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial Soja (1980:208).

Thimphu Structure Plan, which says: "In every Local Area Plan (LAP) of the city, a small high-density village of low income units should be constructed for domestic servants who will work in the area" (MoWHS 2004:38). Thimphu Thromde development control regulation 2016 also provides special regulation for the development of residential schemes for the low-income group within the urban village (Thimphu Thromde 2016).

In the quest for providing affordable housing, the National Housing Development Corporation (NHDCL) has taken up numerous housing projects based on various income brackets. Perhaps the earliest such initiative was the construction of the Changjiji housing colony in Thimphu, which is occupied by the civil servants from lower income groups since December 2005 ("Thirty five families", 2013). I argue that the creation of such spaces, and associate practices, indicate a new form of hierarchy, one that feeds into a neoliberal ideology. Of course, a hierarchical social structure has long been intrinsic to Bhutanese society, as can be read into the existence of social classes such as: *threlpa, drapa, nangzen and suma* (Lhendup & Zangpo 2014). While these forms of social stratification no longer exist in explicit terms, in its place have emerged new form of social hierarchies that result from current development initiatives. This suggests that urban challenges can no longer be confined to issues such as, social infrastructure, planning and management but must also take account of new forms of social stratification generated through the neoliberal logic of accumulation. Emerging new trends of social ordering observed in Thimphu city appear identical, in many respects, to contemporary social hierarchies that characterise urban centres of many developing countries. A relevant question that can therefore be posed is to what extent the popular assertion of 'Thimphu as a reflection of hope, aspirations and dreams of the people, image of who we are, image of Bhutan, the mirror of Bhutan' (MoWHS 2004) can be justified in the light of such developments.

Relatedly, spatial consciousness has now entered the public discourse. This spatial consciousness, or what may be called 'the geographical imagination', as Harvey (1973:24) writes,

> enables the individual to recognise the role of space and place in his own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognise how transactions between individuals and between organisations are affected by the space that separates them.

Such spatial consciousness regarding contemporary urban space of Thimphu is mirrored in various lived experiences of individuals, neighbourhoods, or the community as a whole. A recent film by Chand Rai titled: 'Thimphu city', projects the livelihoods of seven individuals and attempts to identify the patterns of their everyday lives. These seven characters represent the composite life of people's perception, imagination, negotiation and experiences of everyday life in Thimphu city - rich and powerful people, successful yet fighting their own inner demons,

struggling and finding it hard to make ends meet, strong and independent yet facing illusions, people who want it all but loses all at the end, a transgender seeking love and identity, people with hope and dreams and competition over space ("Seven lives one city", 2017; Rai, 2017). All these experiences reveal how Thimphu's urban space has changed significantly in the process of the country's modernisation.

While there are contradicting views by scholars and researchers on these changing urban social forms, once can certainly identify in these changes elements of the new global order. For instance, Bhutanese society was long characterized by close-knit relationships that could contain social and civic problems. However, such intangible relationships are largely lacking in urban settlements such as Thimphu, where life is increasingly becoming individualistic and nucleated, leading to a reduced sphere of social life (Ura 1999). In the given asymmetric social matrix, an attempt to find space for an ordinary person could be a Herculean task. It is therefore imperative that the development and growth of Thimphu city needs to be examined alongside existing and emerging socio-spatial structures and processes. The implementation of urban planning must hence take account of the vertical and horizontal cross-section of people who together constitute the social morphology of the city. Thimphu city can thrive only when planned development strategies recognise the defining characteristic of the city, and which are multidimensional in nature – high density, mixed usage, stimulus, transactions and above all diversity (Montgomery 1995; Amin & Graham 1997).

The slow entry of consumerism and the ideology of accumulation in social and economic practices has increased competition over the control of urban resources – the land and real estate market in particular – and this intensified the degree of disparity in the urban socio-spatial structure. Sections of the city, like Motithang, continue to retain its tag of 'locality of the elite and affluent suburb' while Changzamtog predominantly houses the lower income group (Norbu 2008; Misra, Thakur & Singh 2013). One can thus visualise intra-city spatial relations as locality indicates place identity and social position in the urban setting, which is a common urban feature noticed in many large cities in places across the world where pockets of the city are known for their high concentration of either elites or marginalized sections of the population.

The spatial dimensions of urban space is one of the concerns accorded in urban development policies, yet the existing development plans and policies have apparently failed to address the issues. Housing for the poor, for instance, has not been adequately addressed in the Local Area Plans (LAPs) and the local communities, particularly the poor, are not engaged in the development dialogue (MoWHS 2008). Inability of the current development policies to address the issues (Bajaj 2014), coupled with a lack of coordination and compliance of the people further intensifies urban problems. Though there is no concrete information about the numbers of urban poor, estimated figures shows that 800 to 2900 households are poor and vulnerable (MoWHS 2008a:19). Particular areas, such as opposite to the vegetable market, around the three

water tanks in Motithang, behind RMA in Kawajangsa, near the Youth Hostel, behind the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources in Motithang, Kala Bazaar, and Changzamtong are identified as poor areas (MoWHS 2008a:6). Most of these informal settlements are inhabited by municipal workers and labourers, and by those engaged in the informal sector. Even though their extents and numbers are small, it has become a challenging task for the state to address the issue (MoWHS 2016).

Concluding remarks

Cities have become focal points in contemporary development studies. They play a crucial role in social, economic, and political transformations; serve as centres of economic innovation, political engagement, and cultural exchange, and constitute arenas in which human activities thrive and develop in response to economic and social needs (Harris &Ullman 1945). Development dynamics of cities are influenced by the ways in which human activities are arranged, organised and by the ways means are deployed to fulfill social needs. While human activities of different kinds continue to interact, meet and negotiate, urban spaces gradually get exposed to a process of 'spatial segregation' with the tendency of the dominant group gaining greater control and influence over spatial activities. One consequence of this is the production of conflicting spaces associated with intra-city spatial relations, resulting in different kinds of localities. Therefore, the agendas of inclusive urban development policy needs to be actualised by taking people as the focal of development and by allotting priority to the upliftment of the poor. Only in this way can Thimphu city become a 'dream city' for all.

Thimphu city has already become a centre of attraction in the country. There is a constant flow of migrants to the city, exerting huge pressure on urban infrastructure. Consequently, existing infrastructure has not been able to keep at pace with rapid population growth. This has resulted in unplanned development in peripheral areas, chronic shortage of housing, lack of clean and reliable drinking water, issues of solid waste management, traffic congestion and pollution, and increasing issues of crime and safety (GNHC 2013). People from rural areas come to Thimphu city with the hope of assimilating themselves into its urban culture and to secure modern forms of employment. Oftentimes, however, their aspirations descend into frustration and a sense of hopelessness, among others due to mismatch of skills, which, in turn, has contributed to a range of social issues. Associated problems include increasing crime rate, unemployment, rising numbers of commercial sex workers, amongst others (Lorway, Dorji, Bradley; Ramesh, Isaac & Blanchard, 2011, RENEW 2015; GNHC 2016).

Given such emerging issues, alternative measures to ease urban tensions, as the Bhutan National Urban Policy 2008 envisaged, could be the creation of growth centres in the country and the subsequent redistribution of the urban population (MoWHS, 2008b). This would also

contribute to improving regional equality. The roles and contributions of small towns in regional development deserve special attention, not only to reduce regional inequality but also to accelerate the economic growth of the country. There is a clear need to stress the development of local towns to serve as economic, social and cultural centres of their respective areas; small towns, after all, are an integral part of the local economic landscape. The nature and extent of economic linkages between rural towns and their hinterland constitute a key factor of local development (Wandschneider 2004, Register 2013).

While the urban development strategy of the country emphatically focuses on Thimphu city with the intention of making a dream city for all the Bhutanese, development strategies that focus on regional growth centres need equal attention. Thimphu, being an administrative seat of the country with the services sector as the dominant activity, cannot accommodate all aspiring urban migrants. The latest report of Bhutan Living Standard Survey report (2017) shows that Thimphu thromde now has the highest unemployed rate in the country with 6.8 percent (NSB 2017). The relocation and redistribution of population to reduce urban tensions would be feasible only through the creation of centers of opportunities in the peripheral regions. The plan of the state to turn Thimphu city into 'a dream city for all' would therefore seem overtly ambitious.

Apart from efforts by the state, there is also need for further academic engagement on urban planning and space. The importance of small towns and urban centres in regional development need to be brought in to the mainstream of academic research. This can help develop policy measures relevant to the actual realities and requirements of peoples, and at the same time justify the development programmes and policies embarked on to enhance the quality of life, and, finally, to fully achieve the goals of Gross National Happiness.

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