

Cultural Wisdom and Sustainable Development in Satsam Chorteon

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Abstract

In 1982, the United Nations initiated the World Commission on Environment and Development. This Commission defined sustainable development as “the ability to guarantee meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the coming generations to meet their own needs.” Adopting this definition here, I explore the influence and relevance of this approach to the context of Bhutan. Next, I intend to explore age-old practices of sustainable development that are deeply embedded within Bhutanese social, cultural, political and economic life-worlds. Through a case study of Satsam Chorteon, I will illustrate that sustainable development can be achieved using bottom-up approaches, with the help of local knowledge and old-age practices.

Introduction

In this paper, I offer an argument on how sustainable development goals can be achieved. In doing so, I formulate a critique and an alternative to modern and universal viewpoints that focus on science, technology, and innovation (STI) as the most crucial ingredients for sustainable development. In the context of Bhutan, I argue that what is needed is the empowering of local knowledge and wisdom, which are embedded in longstanding spiritual and cultural activities. These traditions seem to have an intrinsic connection to the idea of sustainable development. In what follows, I first offer a brief theoretical background to the concept of sustainable development. Next, I explain two images and their associated teachings which are central to Bhutan’s cultural traditions, namely ‘the four friends’ and ‘the 6 symbols of longevity.’ I then illustrate the continued relevance of these images and their lessons in the context of tree worship, in order to show how Bhutan’s spiritual and cultural knowledge and practices can help guarantee sustainable development.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

This section traces the theoretical foundations and origins of the idea of sustainable development. Rassafi, Poorzhardey & Vaziri (2005, p. 62) argue that sustainable development pertains to the ‘interrelationships of environmental, economic and social variables’, and their intermixing in a way that is deemed sustainable. It may be noted here, that sustainable development has not always been a concern. For example Marx, despite his critique of

capitalism, did not invoke the need for sustainable development. In his time, this was clearly not yet recognised as a concern.

In fact, it took a long time for the concept of 'sustainable development' to gain worldwide currency. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the economic thinker and theorist Fukuyama refused to see sustainable development as an alternative ideology to capitalism. Instead, he framed capitalism as the final ideology of a now post- Cold-war world. In his work *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama (1992) explained how the western model of capitalism and its values formulated the final, and the most developed, stage of world economy. He predicted that all of humanity would eventually adopt a homogenous model of capitalism. Fukuyama (1992) was not only uncritical of the fallouts of capitalism, he also failed to conceptualize the emergence of new economic models. His work is now criticized by the recognised need to achieve sustainable development, which formulates a critique of the kind of global and unrestrained capitalism Fukuyama envisaged.

While there are several factors that led to the emergence of 'sustainable development', climate change and environmental destruction are prime amongst these. This has prompted an intellectual debate regarding the sustainability of capitalism in the long run. In the Report titled *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm*, authored by New Development Paradigm Steering Committee and Secretariat of the Royal Government of Bhutan (2013), it states that 'the current model, based on the doctrine of limitless growth has resulted in the destructive attempt to use earth's finite resources to satisfy infinite resources.' The same report also points out that:

Now more than ever, the need for a different development approach is highlighted in ecological, social and economic crises: ecosystem degradation, potentially catastrophic climate change, excessive consumption of the affluent and extreme poverty on the other end, and growing inequalities both between and within nations. Underlying all these crises is the lack of the architecture of global governance to address these problems.

It is therefore in view of these manifold crises that sustainable development is increasingly looked upon an alternative paradigm of development and economic growth.

Technology and Sustainable development

The UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda identified Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) as major requirements to transform economies that currently rely on the exploitation of natural resources and to, more broadly, achieve paradigms of development that are sustainable. This proposal is derived from the observation that human activities are the prime driver for the exploitation of natural resources and environmental destruction. The UN highlighted the domains of technology, science, and innovation as pivotal

to help reduce our dependence on the natural resources. For this, it was emphasized, significant investment in science and technology is the need of the hour.

However, investing in technology in order to promote sustainable development raises several questions and concerns. If history is anything to go by, we see that it was technology that first gave rise to the industrial revolution, which subsequently vastly increased usage of natural resources and caused widespread pollution and environmental destruction. With technology as a medium, consumerism has taken over lifeworlds, and today it seems increasingly difficult to separate one's 'wants' from one's actual 'needs.' What the case of the industrial revolution shows is that technological advancements inevitably comes with a host of unintended side effects. I would therefore argue that the UN's push for more technology to achieve sustainable development must take careful note of such side effects. This is not to argue that technological renewal and innovation are not important. They are. But what I wish to emphasize here is that technological inventions often come with consequences that were not foreseen, and that such side-effects, and particularly the way they may impact the environment, must be taken into account.

In a TED talk, Leyla Acarolgu (2013) offered a set of insightful perspectives on how technology may result in unintended, sometimes unseen, consequences for the environment. In the 1920s, for instance, poisonous gasses that emitted from refrigerators caused human deaths. Then Thomas Midgley invented an inert gas called Chlorofluorocarbon to solve the problem of refrigerator gas emissions. This solution, however, is now in parts responsible for the hole in the ozone layer. Acarolgu also coins the example of the production of bio-fuels in Europe, which was enforced through legislation. The raw material of bio-fuel included corns and wheat, and resulted in the increased production of these crops. But as many forests were cleared in order to increase the production of these crops. Acarolgu (2013) also argues that technologies that can help address environmental issues are actually very few, amounting to only 2.7% of all technology patents that currently exist. The above further shows that the uncritical usage of technology to promote sustainable development is rather problematic.

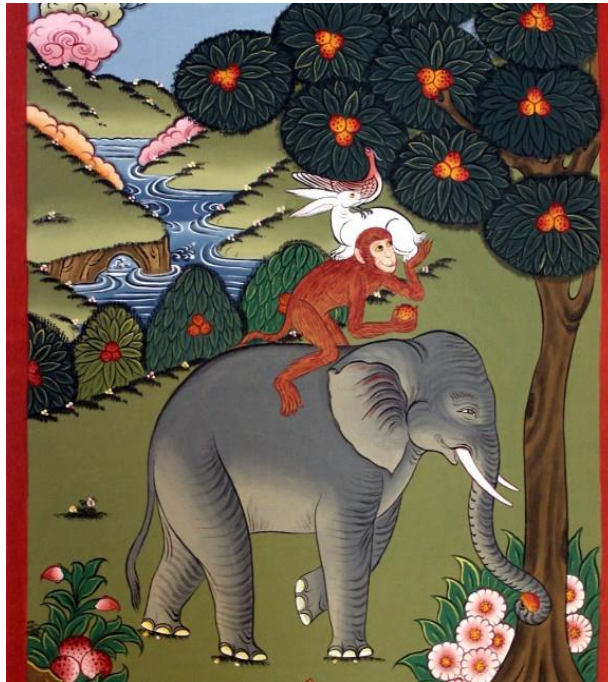
Contextualizing Sustainable Development within Bhutan's Wisdom Traditions

In this section, I will present and explain two traditional and common Bhutanese images, which, I will argue, symbolize the particularistic relationship and understanding that Bhutanese see themselves as having with the environment around them. Their traditional understandings and practices, I pose, offer a localized, indigenous version of sustainable development. I therefore suggest that instead of looking at new technologies, science, and innovation in order to address environmental concerns, academicians and policy-makers should also look to past traditions

and ancient wisdom to find solutions to the problems of environmental destruction and the exploitation of natural resources.

Two popular Bhutanese images are drawn on many *thangkas* and painted on the walls of the Cheosham at Satsam Chorteon (a village I discuss further below), and constantly reinforce our spiritual and cultural relation to the land around us. These two images are; 1. *Thunpa Puen Zhi* (The 4 Friends) and 2. *Tshering Namdru* (The 6 symbols of longevity).

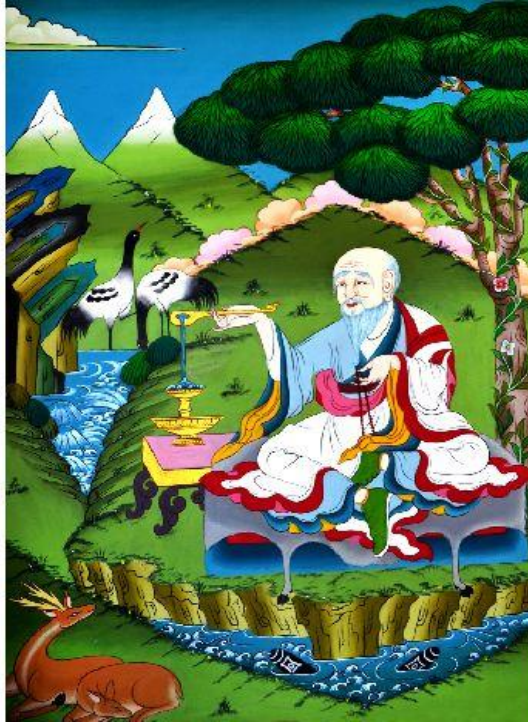
Image 1: The 4 Friends (Thuempa Puen Zhi) (Sangay Arts and Crafts, 2015)



The first image I discuss is popularly known as ‘The 4 friends.’ These friends are animals including: a rabbit, a bird, a monkey, and an elephant. The story that goes with the image is as follows. Once, many centuries ago, in a forest an elephant came across a tree and finding it useful, he claimed ownership over it. Then a monkey arrived who disputed the elephant’s private ownership of the tree, claiming that he had been in the habit of consuming its fruits long before the elephant had even saw the tree. They were subsequently joined by a rabbit, who claimed that the tree was solely his because he had long been feeding on its leaves. Finally, a partridge (bird), who witnessed the argument, joined in and told the 3 animals that it was him who was responsible for the existence of the three in the first place as he had brought the seed from which the tree had grown. It now seemed that all the animals had a reason to claim private ownership. However, the private ownership of any one of them would come to the disadvantage of the other animals. The four animals therefore agreed that since they were all interested in different aspects of the tree, it was to their common benefit to share access to the tree, and to

do so harmoniously. This story can be interpreted as a critique of private ownership. For the residents of Satsam Chorleon, this image emphasizes the 'social ownership' of the natural environment and for the need to preserve and protect it.

Image 2: The 6 symbols of longevity (Tshering Namdru) (ICHAP, 2018)



Another popular image is that of the "6 symbols of longevity", which shows the relationship between 'man' and the environment. The 6 symbols displayed are: the cliff, man, tree, water, deer, and crane of longevity. The 'man of longevity' is symbolized by an old hermit with a long, white beard, which indicates his advanced age. He is holding an ancient, precious bottle and a holy peach. The hermit, here, symbolizes all human beings. The cliff is shown in the background, and is considered crucial for human shelter in the original eco-system. The tree of longevity is represented by the tree under which the old man is seated. The tree is included as it provides a source of food, shelter, warmth, as well as produces the air which we breathe. Water, furthermore, supports people, animals, trees, and all other living organisms. The deer of longevity is also important as it refers to all animals which walk the earth on four limbs. The crane of longevity here represents all kinds of birds any other animal with two limbs.

Taken together, this painting focuses on the balance between human beings and the ecology, including both living and non-living entities. This image calls attention to the value of inter-dependence between 'man' and the environment.' It is this inter-dependence that leads to sustainability, which in this image is symbolized by the notion of 'longevity.'

The spiritual practice of tree protection through worshipping

In this section I will dwell on my personal observations concerning a long-standing local tradition of tree worshipping in Satsam Chorteon. I use this case to further argue that environmental conservation need not always be guided by science, technology, and innovation, but must also take heed of traditional and indigenous knowledge and practices. Indeed, almost all households at Satsam Chorteon have long been involved in the conservation of the environment, without the help of advanced science, technology, or innovation.

Once every winter, I, along with my father, visit my grandfather's place, which is a 3 hour journey by foot through the alpine vegetation. We make this visit in order to pay our respects to the tradition my grandfather practiced. We show our respect through offering butter lamps, incense, and by prostrating to a large pine tree. It is said that these trees have been here for many generations. At the foot, these trees meet a small mud spherical stupa of just 50cm in height and 40cm in diameter. It has long been believed that these trees are the home of a deity and this stupa was constructed to house this deity.

Deities are a powerful representation of both incentives and punishment in Bhutanese society. Often, as is the case here, the deity is seen as a subterranean god. These subterranean gods are believed by popular Bhutanese cultural traditions to occupy the underworld and to make their homes in the trees of the middle earth, which is a. Once, my father asked a village monk to perform a small ritual in front of the stupa. We offered locally brewed alcohol, fruits and prostrated before the stupa in hopes of earning better health. Such relations between trees, health and sickness influence people's activities, which, as a side effect, results in the preservation and protection of these trees. It is also being said that if one fails to worship the trees, grave consequences will follow. Such dynamics do not only apply to trees and human, but equally to lakes and mountains. Humans, here, are seen as subservient to nature, not as dominating it in the way that unrestrained forms of capitalism seems to promote. It is this traditional understanding and knowledge of the environment that many Bhutanese possess that now offers new perspectives for conservation and sustainable development, which could be achieved in Bhutan through spiritual means.

I must qualify here, however, that while this knowledge and practice remains a 'living tradition', it is increasingly threatened by the onset of modernity and development. In the immediate vicinity of Satsam Chorteon, farm roads have now been constructed, many trees have been cut, while stones have been excavated for use as construction materials. Additionally, hotels, shops and new residents have rapidly arrived in recent years at Satsam Chorteon, and which, among other issues, led to pressures on drinking water, land availability, and the environment more widely. These changes, rapid as they are, may lead to a scenario in which the

traditional and spiritual protection of the environment becomes challenged, even threatened, by the perceived need for rapid development and modernization. The onset of modernization is definite, but traditional wisdom revolving around the environmental conservation informs the locals of Satsam Chorteon on why they need to conserve the environment. This traditional wisdom may not be scientific or methodical, but has nevertheless long proven to be efficient at protecting the environment and should therefore inform an inclusive environmental activism that pursues sustainable development.

Conclusion

Achieving sustainable development is crucial in today's context of the widespread exploitation of natural resources and associated environmental issues. Globally, the dominant discourse now hinges on science, technology, and innovation to address environmental concerns. But while this may be useful in parts, in this paper I have argued with the help of two popular Bhutanese paintings that are common all over Bhutan, including in Satsam Chorteon, and by narrating my own personal experiences, that sustainable development can also be achieved through a resurgence of traditional wisdom and practices that are deeply embedded in Bhutanese spiritual and cultural lifeworlds.

Acknowledgment

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