

# Dzongkha, GNH and the Hegemonic in Bhutan: Manufacturing Nationalism and Transnational Belonging through Language

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This paper is based on extensive fieldwork in Bhutan conducted across several months in 2014 and 2015. Bhutan is a country going through significant upheaval due to new development programs proposed by the government. As part of the process, the government has introduced nationalization efforts that have affected interactions among linguistic communities and that have made Bhutanese citizenship signify the dominant ethnic/linguistic group, at the exclusion of others.

National and transnational forms of belonging are both constructed through legal language in Bhutan. At a national level, the government's recent efforts at nationalization include the adoption of an official national language, Dzongkha. This national language is required of all citizens, even ethnic minorities who did not previously speak the language. The language of the dominant group becomes hegemonic, and ethnic minority languages such as Brokpahka, Mompa, and Sharschop are considered less important, creating ethnic strife.

National belonging is also emphasized through Gross National Happiness (GNH), the government's attempt at measuring ethical development by promoting uniform milestones across the country. Yet GNH also serves as a form of transnational belonging because it relates personal milestones in the language of global capitalism. In the process, it connects Bhutan with the global economic market and thereby introduces vocabulary into everyday language that becomes exclusionary to

minorities and rural dwellers who do not fully participate in the government's development program.

Urbanization is currently a major phenomenon in Bhutan; urban migration is now the highest in Asia because of the rise of development programs within the country. As part of this urbanization, nomads from ethnic minorities have been moving to the cities and encountering for the first time native speakers of the national language, Dzongkha, to which these nomads have minimal access. Due to a lack of Dzongkha, these former nomads are denied access to the local economy—suggesting that socioeconomic mobility depends on the ability to access society beyond means of production. The government uses these disadvantaged individuals as an example for promoting citizenship education and nationalization programs, specifically the use of Dzongkha.

To further complicate matters, English has now emerged as a major language in the country due to development efforts promoting the language as important for citizens to learn in order to engage in the global economic system. In this context, English displaces even Dzongkha in importance, and knowledge of English becomes an important tool in socioeconomic accessibility. Parents in rural areas who previously resisted sending their children to government schools now concede because of the major socioeconomic advantage English provides. English thus becomes an equalizing force across ethnic communities at an individual level, but ironically enables the development programs that create local inequities at a broader, more structural level.

Bhutan therefore provides an important case study of the role played by language in the conceptualization of belonging in the context of development, and it displays the challenges and limitations inherent in representing a multiplicity of voices in state-sponsored language policy.