

4. A Forum for Community Power Seminar “Bhutan, the Nation of Happiness, and Its Community Power” and the Community Assessment Tool

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On March 14, 2015, the Forum for Community Power invited Professor Katsuhiko Masaki of the Hirao School of Management at Konan University to give a lecture on Bhutan’s community power. Since 2006, Mr. Masaki has been conducting research on Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) which takes into account the conditions in rural Bhutan. Due to the fact that Bhutan has set GNH as their national policy, there is a tendency for all Bhutanese people to be seen by outsiders as living “happily,” but the reality is that various social problems exist in Bhutan just like in other nations. According to the latest survey conducted by the Bhutanese government during the fiscal

year 2010, around 40% of the nation’s population could be considered “happy,” and the level of “happiness” among rural residents was lower (37%) than that of their urban counterparts (50%). We asked Mr. Masaki to speak on the status quo and the challenges faced by the rural regions of Bhutan, incorporating both the perspective of people’s everyday lives and the activities and programs of the national government.

Gross National Happiness (GNH)

GNH is a counter-concept to Gross National Product (GNP), and it aims for development with “happiness” as its ultimate objective. GNH is made of four pillars – sustainable development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and good governance – and nine domains have been established based on these four pillars. These domains have been further broken down into 33 indicators, and a national survey using these indicators is done in order to attain a quantitative measurement of GNH. A person is considered “happy” if s/he exceeds the sufficiency threshold in six of the nine domains. Policy evaluations are conducted using a screening tool based on GNH, and policies are assessed in each region based on this screening tool as well. In 2008, when there was discussion as to whether or not Bhutan should join WTO, this screening tool was used to decide against joining.

Conditions in the Rural Communities of Bhutan: From the Perspective of the People and the Nation

Bhutan is considered a model student when it comes to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Between 2007 and 2012, poverty rate has been successfully reduced to half from 23% to 12%, and other goals are being reached in terms of income and life expectancy as well. However, the Bhutanese government recognizes its challenges in areas such as education and employment, and rural areas with lack of transportation are confronted with especially serious issues. Specifically, these communities lack development funds, they also do not have educational and employment opportunities for their residents, and the population of young people are declining as a result of migration to the cities. Every year, Mr. Masaki has visited Shingkar, which is a small remote village off the major road consisting of 34 households, and he has gotten to know the residents well. Using this village as an example, he spoke about the conditions in rural communities from the perspective of the everyday lives of the people and the activities and programs of the national government.

In the rural communities of Bhutan, everyday life of the people has operated on reciprocity. These communities are characterized by strong connections among the people and the sense of unity felt within the village. Traditionally, problems that arose in the community had been solved within the community. However, as the population of young people have declined in recent years, reciprocal community life has become more and more difficult to sustain.

On the other hand, in recent years, community life has also become a site for the national government programs, and new challenges have arisen as a result. Bhutanese government has been promoting public works throughout the nation including in rural areas through provision of subsidies, and Shingkar and surrounding regions were no exception. Government-led organic agriculture project had been implemented, but the region lacks adequate access to the markets, and no results have been yielded thus far. Living conditions in the village has been improved, but, at the same time, this became an impetus for the idea to sink in among the villagers that community life belongs to the realm of national government's activities. This has led to more and more instances where the villagers rely on government funding.

Community Challenges

When it comes to solving various problems within a community, Mr. Masaki stresses the importance of residents working amongst themselves to sustain and develop their community's livelihood rather than being dependent on government subsidies and other national policies. He said that one direction to take would be to form associations between the village's cooperative union and external groups. Specifically, this would mean that external supporters who care about the well-being of the village would provide collective assistance to activities that help improve living conditions in the village. He noted that in order to make the village more livable, there have been programs implemented already, and a few other plans have also emerged. Further development is to be hoped for on this matter.

This was an example of one small village among the 700,000 Bhutanese people, but many issues commonly seen in Japanese communities were also found here. Among these issues that exist across borders was the balance between the realm of community life and the activities of the nation or government. It is vital that each community create their own "happiness" with

their own hands, but, at the same time, coordination with the government is also necessary. Therefore, when providing assistance to communities, it becomes crucial that the supporters pay attention to both of these forces.