

WHEN SPIRITUAL VALUES TRIUMPH OVER PERCEIVED COMMERCIAL GAINS IN TOURISM POLICY-MAKING: THE CASE OF BHUTAN'S URA-SHINGHKAR GOLF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that good governance in Bhutan's controlled tourism model occurred because of pressures on the government to preserve spiritual values, ahead of perceived commercial gains, in the Ura- Shingkar Golf Course Development (USGCD) case. The USGCD project would impact livelihoods; derange water supply to a hydropower unit and pollute the water table and rivers downstream. More significantly, it would disturb the sanctity of hermits who meditate in this spiritual heartland. The study revealed that spiritual values triumphed and led to the rejection of the USGCD project, thereby protecting the villagers' grazing livelihoods.

Key words: Gross National Happiness, controlled tourism model, high value low impact, good governance

INTRODUCTION

Good governance is key to positive tourism development outcome. Bhutan's tourism policy of *high value, low impact* is grounded in the notion of Gross National Happiness (GNH), premised on four Pillars: preservation and conservation of the natural environment; cultivation and promotion of culture; good governance and equitable and sustainable socio-economic development. This paper argues that good governance in Bhutan's *controlled tourism* model resulted because of pressures placed on the government to preserve spiritual values, ahead of perceived commercial gains in the Ura-Shingkar Golf Course Development (USGCD) controversy. At the heart of the debate lies the perceived economic benefit of the golf course. To a greater majority of the Ura-Shingkar villagers, the benefits of the golf course only serves a handful of tourist elites (Ben-Ari, 1998) and Foreign Direct Investors (FDI) at the expense of destroying their only means (dairy farming) to a livelihood. The study highlights Bhutanese spiritual values in their relationship with the Ura-Shingkar wetlands

Controversy of the Ura-Shingkar Golf Course Development (USGCD)

The USGCD controversy case concerns a 165 acres golf course development project located in the village of Shingkar in Ura (see Figure 1). The Ura-Shingkar village is situated at 3,400 metres above sea level, and is located around 9 kilometres from the nearest town of Ura, in the central district of Bumthang (see Figure 2). The main economic activity of the 35 households of around 300 villagers is pastoral farming (subsistence agriculture) and dairy grazing on the pastureland. Traditionally, tourists pass through this village, as it has no major significance in terms of tourism. However, more importantly Ura-Shingkar has great spiritual significance, because it is the spiritual heartland of the region, and is regarded as one of the eight holy places in Bhutan (Wangchuck, 2009, p.317). According to the village headman, a motion favouring the USGCD project was taken: "we passed it because it's going to help in developing our place as a tourist destination" (Kuensel, October 27, 2011).

Figure 1. Ura-Shingkar village Source: Kuensel 1st October 2011, p.19.



Figure 2. Shingkar in Ura, Bumthang



Source: www.google.com.au/ accessed February 18, 2014

However, the location of USGCD is problematic. It includes parklands, wetlands and marshlands. Studies have shown that chemicals such as herbicides and insecticides from golf course maintenance affect the water source, causing undisputed environmental impacts (Markwick, 2000; Tanner & Gange, 2005; Videira et al., 2006). Developing the USGCD would mean losing pasturelands in favour of tourism development.

The petition

A petition, in an open letter to the public through social media, by a highly respected critic and eminent historian, argued that the USGCD “will disrupt Shingkar's pastoral culture and dairy farming. Imagine a large part of the valley cordoned off for the use of golfers, with no people and animal allowed to pass through it freely. Imagine what sore sight it can be for the hermits of Shamzur and Garkhai who meditate above the meadows” (Phuntsho, 2011). Furthermore, twenty-five households or seventy per cent of the village voted against the development, arguing that, “the people here don't want the golf course, because it's a pastureland for our

livestock” (Kuensel, October 27, 2011). This reflects grave concerns to preserve the environment and spiritual sacredness, as the USGCD would disturb not only farmers’ livelihoods, but also the tranquillity in this spiritual heartland.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach using document analysis of social media, newspapers and interviews with 36 tourism stakeholders, which occurred between August and December 2012. Respondents consisting of urban based tour operators, hoteliers, tour guides, Tourism Council of Bhutan officials, government officials, non-government organizations officials, and public persons were asked “what are your views on the Shingkar golf course development in Ura?”

FINDINGS

The study revealed tensions existed between the Department of Forest and Park Services (DoFPS), the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MoAF) and the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB). The MoAF stipulated that the Ura-Shingkar wetlands must be protected, whilst the DoFPS confirmed that the golf course project was to proceed, whereas the TCB was reported as still waiting for an impact assessment report from the DoFPS. If successful, the USGCD project would have impacted the livelihood of the community because parklands, wetlands and marshes would be ecologically disturbed forever. Second, it would derange the supply of water to a hydropower unit. Third, the toxic chemical waste from the golf course maintenance would affect the water table and pollute rivers downstream. More importantly, the spiritual sanctity of Ura-Shingkar would have been compromised. According to a local inhabitant “Shingkar was the wrong place for the golf course for spiritual, ecological, historical, social and economic reasons, and I hope the authorities won’t authorize it,” (Kuensel, January 11, 2011). The study revealed that apart from concerns for the ecology integrity of the wetlands, it was the spiritual connections with the land that forced the government to reject the USGCD Project.

CONCLUSION

Losing wetlands and pasturelands would have compromised the first GNH Pillar of the preservation and conservation of the natural environment. The USGCD project revealed that spiritual values triumphed over perceived commercial gains in tourism policy-making. The government’s decision to proceed with the USGCD was perceived as economically self-serving. But more importantly, the study revealed that the government was made accountable in its tourism development trajectory and pressured into preserving spiritual values ahead of perceived commercial gains. The study’s urban representation is a limitation. Further study into ecotourism development in the Ura-Shingkar valley is recommended.

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