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-Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar villagers, the benefits of the golf course only serve 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-Shinghkar wetlands.

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

The USGCD controversy case concerns a 165 acres golf course development project located in the village of Shinghkar in Ura (see Figure 1). The Ura-Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar 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).
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 Shinghkar'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 Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar would have been compromised. According
to a local inhabitant “Shinghkar 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-Shinghkar valley is recommended.

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