
Happiness, Wellbeing, Gross National Happiness and Sustainability Education

Dr. BIPASHA SINHA
Head, Department of Education
Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College
University of Calcutta
India

Abstract:

What paves the way to happiness and wellbeing is an essential question for discourse in all cultures. Studies have found that increase in material wealth does not necessarily lead to true happiness and wellbeing. Studies have also shown that the purchasing power of poor countries is very low compared to rich countries but there no significant difference in their scale of life satisfaction. Modernization and globalization has led to several ills like increased material consumption, heightened social comparisons, erosion of values and environmental degradation. The concept of Gross National Happiness is in accordance with the major religions of the world and it has been accepted upon by 193 countries in the United Nations (2011) as the new economic paradigm. Sustainability education along with moral education will help provide learning experiences that will enable individuals to develop knowledge, behaviours and skills to help create healthier ecosystems, social systems, and economies.

Key words: Happiness, wellbeing, Gross National Happiness, sustainability education

What paves the way to happiness and wellbeing is an essential question for discourse in all cultures. Human beings by nature aspire to be happy and seek various ways and modes to attain

it. Behind any concept of quality of life and wellbeing is a world perspective, which provides a perception on the essence of man, his position in the universe, and the nature of the universe. These questions are universal questions which men have attempted to understand and explain since time immemorial. Material wealth and affluence, human relationships, human aspirations and achievements, faith in religion and spirituality are variables noteworthy in this context.

In the above context, it is important to understand the conceptualization of happiness and wellbeing in the background of various socio-cultural differences. A lot of research has been done in this regard and several studies have been conducted to find out various means and ways men seek to attain happiness and its subsequent effect on mankind. A study by Joshi (2002) revealed that an upwardly mobile society that is non-restrictive to individual gains of material comfort may not provide mental and spiritual relief when needed. Kasser & Ryan (1996) found that people who pursue for more extrinsic goals such as money, have more problems and their well being is less robust or potent (cited by Myers, 2000). Kammann (1983) in his research had stated that 'objective life circumstances have a negligible role to play in a theory of happiness' (Myers, 2000, p.60). Diener (2000) studied differences in the degrees of life satisfaction between economically poor and well off nations. Results show that the economically poor and rich nations do not differ significantly in the index of life satisfaction. It is seen that the purchasing power of less developed nations like India and Nigeria are extremely low compared to richer nations like USA and Switzerland, yet there was very little difference between their satisfactions with life than that of the so-called wealthy nations.

Country	Purchasing Power Parity (Scale of 100)	Life Satisfaction (Scale of 10)
India	5	6.70
Nigeria	6	6.59

USA	100	7.73
Switzerland	93	8.36

So, it is seen that material wealth and affluence plays little role in ensuring happiness. Myers (2000) reviewed a number of related studies, and found no significant relation between increase in national wealth and economic growth and the reported well being among so called economically rich countries. He further goes to state that “Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well being”.

A countries development indices need to be re-assessed in terms of how much it has been able to inculcate human values among its citizens and not by how much material opulence a country possesses. Therefore the development framework of each country should include influences of body and mind and should be capable of determining physical, social, moral and psychological wellbeing along with economic parameters.

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a concept which was propounded in 1972 by the then King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk. His highness, the King of Bhutan went further to emphasize that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. Gross National Happiness (GNH) proposes that responsible development is characterized by the right balance between equitable and sustainable livelihood, ecological conservation, good governance and a dynamic and thriving culture. This, in turn, fosters a sense of sufficiency and contentment which promotes harmony and connectedness with nature, others and ourselves thereby leading to the essence of true happiness. The human aspiration for happiness transcends all the dividing contours of society and has the power to unite all of humanity.

Gross National Happiness as a terminology may seem newfound and is getting popularised in the present century but its principles are akin to the teachings and preaching's of all

the major religions of the world. The notion of Gross National Happiness is in accordance with the Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist way of life where happiness is based on compassion and in seeking welfare of others. Its evidence is found in the four Noble Truths, three Roots of Evil and the eight Fold Path of life in Buddhism. The Ten Commandments of Christianity propagate that the progress towards collective wellbeing comes from the cultivation of moral sensibilities and through pro-social conduct. Among Muslims, the Five Pillars of Islam aim to inculcate a happy morality in which charity, peacefulness, fellow-feeling and the control of selfishness are the highest and most adaptive virtues. According to Hinduism, happiness can be known only through discovering one's true self with no real attachments, by cultivating fellow feeling and by considering oneself as one with the Universe. Great leaders have debated on and prophesized on the avenues of accomplishing happiness. Aristotle felt that happiness is the ultimate aim of all human existence and its foundation depends on the cultivation of moral values. The English philosopher Francis Bacon opined that to enjoy happiness is good, but to have the possibility to give its good to other people is the greatest good. Jeremy Bentham the father of Utilitarianism felt that the comparative value of actions is based on its comparative usefulness or its ability to create durable and deep happiness. Adam Smith in his 'Theory of Moral Sentiments' remarked that the need for sympathy and human heartedness is a necessity for the progress of a decent society. So happiness should be based on the cultivation of morality and virtues, experiencing personal contentment and joy, not at the cost of others but by sharing and extending the same to others.

The industrial revolution in the 18th century saw the rise of the mercantile class, and this gradually lead to the primacy of individual freedom in place of interests of others. This ushered the subsequent rise in self-absorbed individuals who aspired for furthering material prosperity disregarding

universal morals and values. This expansion was basically an expansion towards satisfaction of a materialistic kind which paved the platform for the new cut throat modern economic order called globalization. Globalization resulted in breathtaking escalation in material production and soaring material consumption along with heightened social comparisons, but sadly it has not led to significantly towards greater national happiness. The above phenomenon of globalization is based on short term goals, short term profits, short term satisfaction and short term happiness that in actuality amount to unsustainable happiness. The industrial world of today continues to nurture a culture that drives millions of people into the race for compete-or-die philosophy. The resultant backlash is the collapse of several morally restraining cultures that have been swept away by the torrential currents of commercial business and media. This has resulted in morally chaotic progress, monopoly and polarization of power, unstable relationships, indulgent wealth and raving poverty along with high degree of unemployment and the wiping out of indigenous markets and culture. In terms of the natural environment, it has led to rapid depletion of natural resources and environmental exploitation causing toxic pollution, decline in food security, collapsing fish stocks, changing weather patterns and shrinking soil fertility.

The New Economics Foundation (Marks et al., 2006) developed the Happy Planet Index (HPI) to seek answers to questions like whether happiness has to cost the earth. The index was designed to challenge well-established indices of countries' development, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the Human Development Index (HDI), which do not take sustainability into account. Happy Planet Index show that Costa Rica has the highest number of happy life years and is using fair share of earth's resources and USA with 'high ecological footprint' was way below (105th position out of 153 countries studied) in the Happy Planet Index. Ecological

footprint analysis compares human demands on nature with the biosphere's ability to regenerate resources and provide services. A country with a large per capita ecological footprint like USA uses more than its fair share of resources, both by drawing resources from other countries, and also by causing permanent damage to the planet which will impact future generations. Thus the affluent nations do not represent ideal model of sustainable development. Several studies have documented that consumption of the first world countries has had adverse effects on less affluent countries (Sachs, 2012). Wealthy nations use much more natural resources than their fair share and are exposed to unsustainable lifestyles forming the breeding ground for lifestyle diseases like obesity, heart disease, diabetes and depression.

The Earth Summit by the United Nations in Rio-de-Janerio (1992) first addressed issues of environment, development and sustainability. In June 2012, a UN conference on sustainable development reviewed the progress made since 1992. It was seen that although some achievements have been attained, like reduction of extreme poverty, sustainable access to drinking water, and equal enrolment in primary education for girls yet much more is required. Studies have found that our planet is already in a state of ecological overshoot which means humanity's annual demand on the natural world has exceeded what the Earth can renew in a year. The study by Moran and Wackernagel (2012) stated that in 2007, humanity's Ecological Footprint had already exceeded the earth's bio-capacity by 50%. This reinforces that fact that we continue to use the earth's resources faster than it can be replenished. Orr (2012) in his study suggests that we will soon face the "perfect storm" with greater environmental challenges like more severe climate change, deforestation, water shortages, species loss, and the acidification of oceans.

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) that was originally proposed by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk was

accepted and agreed upon by 193 countries in the United Nations in 2011 (Thinley, 2012). The United Nations new resolution (2012) is that the pillars of the new economic paradigm would be sustainability, wellbeing and happiness. Bhutan's New Development Paradigm (NDP) which is based on the concept of Gross National Happiness is an initiative which is a part of the worldwide effort to help define a new and more viable post-2015 global development agenda. The report, *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* was submitted to the United Nations in December, 2013. The New Development Paradigm offers a transformative vision and practical pathways for genuinely holistic, sustainable and inclusive social progress. It gives a higher purpose to development than just economic growth by recognising the interdependence of all life on Earth. According to Thinley (2012), sustainability should be the core of any sane economic system which would enable conditions for human happiness and the well-being of all life forms as the ultimate goal, purpose and context of development. Deliberations on happiness and wellbeing are access points to sustainable lifestyles and sustainable policies. Well-being is now realised as consisting not only economic prosperity but also that ensures physical, social, psychological wellbeing along with environmental protection and preservation. Sustainable happiness refers to justifiable happiness which would lead to wellbeing or welfare of oneself and others and that which will ensure sustainability or maintainability of our planet. Therefore happiness should not be a personal hankering but rather a universal objective that involves unity with the natural world and compassion towards all living beings. The root of happiness is wellbeing. Wellbeing should not be confused by material assets and prosperity. Wellbeing in the truest sense comprises of good health, knowledge, peace, security and justice, equality and meaningful relationships. So, the broader meaning of wellbeing extends from physical, social, emotional, and spiritual to

ecological wellbeing. Individual wellbeing, the wellbeing of others and the wellbeing of our natural environment leads to true happiness or sustainable happiness. Sustainable happiness will in turn enhance the quality of life and contribute towards individual, community and global or planetary wellbeing.

Sustainability education is a term that includes Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2005), environmental education, and education about sustainability in general. Sustainability education refers generally to learning experiences that enable individual to develop knowledge, behaviours and skills to help create healthier ecosystems, social systems, and economies. Sustainability education develops skills, knowledge and values that promote behaviour in support of a sustainable environment. It is not confined to formal schooling and covers a wide range of non-formal and informal education settings.

Sustainability education should be based on the four pillars of Gross National Happiness that is the promotion of equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, ecological conservation, good governance and a dynamic and thriving culture. Public education should be formulated in such a way so as to expose the unhappy consequences and detrimental effects of modernization and globalization.

Equitable and sustainable socio-economic development would entail that all people of a country are able enjoy high standards of living, have access to modern amenities and technology, enjoy good health care and avail community services. Economy should be such that goods and services produced should be of genuine value which in turn would be capable improving the quality of life and which would maintain the dignity of the workers and consumers. The goal of community sustainability is to establish local economies that are economically viable, environmentally sound and socially responsible. Education is an essential tool for achieving

sustainability. Education for sustainable development involves participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development. Research has shown that education can improve agricultural productivity, enhance the status of women, reduce population growth rates, enhance environmental protection, and generally raise the standard of living. For example education also helps farmers help in scientific methods of cultivation thereby reducing the risks to the environment and human health. Educating women creates more equitable lives for women and increases their ability to participate in community decision making. Good community-based decisions which are based on education will contribute social, economic, and environmental well-being. Education is also central to improving quality of life. Education raises the economic status of families; it improves life conditions, lowers infant mortality, and improves the educational attainment and wellbeing of the next generation. Therefore improved education holds both individual and national wellbeing.

Governance refers to establishment of policies, and continuous monitoring of their proper implementation, by the members of the governing body of an organization. Good governance mean an organization (government or private) should have a constructive path whereby policies are participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society. Education is a vital instrument through which knowledge about politics, parliament and government, the operation of the legal system, how the economy functions, the role of the media, human rights is disseminated. Education should facilitate the development of one's ability to participate

in communities and wider society as active, aware, informed, determined and responsible citizens who have a superior understanding to contribute to a better society. Education should help citizens to understand the connection between individual self-interest and what is good for the community as a whole.

Ecological conservation refers to respecting our earth's biodiversity and protecting species, their habitats, and ecosystems from excessive rates of extinction and the erosion of biotic interactions. This means using resources wisely and responsibly e.g. by reducing waste, saving trees, recycling, and using renewable resources that don't deplete our natural resources. Education about ecological conservation can make individuals aware of how properly managed ecosystems influence human well-being like the importance of pollution free environment on human health. It will help individuals to know about the fundamental physical, chemical, and biological concepts needed to understand the composition, structure and function of ecosystems. Education helps in defining and prioritizing Earth's biological diversity to in order to maximize the benefits and effectiveness of conservation efforts. An effort in this regard would be protection of endangered species. Education about ecological conservation also teaches the techniques used to manage natural as well as human-impacted ecosystems like re-forestation. Education aids in developing the management tools and techniques needed to minimize the human footprint on our remaining natural habitats for example in production of fuel efficient transport. A study by Ramanathan et al.(2012) found that children of parents who walk them to school reported possessing more positive emotions like feeling happy than the ones who used motorized transportation. Education about ecological conservation includes topics like ecological restoration, fisheries and wildlife management, ecosystem services, forest ecosystem management, climate change, environmental risk assessment,

bioremediation, sustainable agriculture and aquaculture etc. which promotes global ecological preservation.

Culture refers to the traditional wisdom, ideals, customs, practices, folklore, myths, legends and social behaviour of a particular society. The purpose of culture is to give the society by conscious process of learning and experience, patterns of behaviour which are found useful for harmonious existence and for individual and group survival and perpetuation. Education has tremendous scope as an instrument of social and cultural change. Education should be used a means to preserve transmit, and develop culture of a country. Material culture develops at a fast pace due to scientific researches and innovations, whereas non-material culture consisting of ideals, values and norms lags behind creating a gulf between the two. Education is the only means to bridge this cultural lag by its activities and programmes of development. Education acts as corrective instrument for the cultural ills and liberates the mind. Education promotes inter-cultural understanding and appreciation of all other cultures, besides one's own. Education is a vital tool which shapes the personality of younger generation and provides information about a countries cultural heritage.

In conclusion, it is to be noted that positive interactions between environment, economy, governance, culture and the individual are important avenues to attain gross national happiness. But the most important bedrock on which happiness rests is a strong foundation of morality. Universal values like honesty, justice, equality, compassion, fellow-feeling, kindness, humility and non-violence should be instilled in the minds of the every citizen. Freedom by a certain degree of consideration and self-control needs to be inculcated among every child. This will lead to true morality and will pave the way social and ecological wellbeing thereby perpetuating individual, national and global happiness.

REFERENCES

- Bonar, J. (1926) The Theory of Moral Sentiments by Adam Smith, *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 1, 1926, pp. 333–353.
- Ed Diener (2000). Subjective well being-The science of happiness and a proposal for the national index. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 34-43.
- Joshi, M. M. (2002). Happiness doesn't equal a Mercedes Benz. *The New Indian Express*, July 28.
- Hayward, K., & Colman, R. (2010). Educating for GNH. Thimphu, Bhutan: GPI Atlantic. Retrieved from http://www.gpiatlantic.org/pdf/educatingforgnh/educating_for_gnh_proceedings.pdf
- Kammann, R. (1983). Objective circumstances, life satisfaction, and sense of well-being: Consistencies across time and place. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 12, 14-22.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 280-287.
- Marks, N., Abdallah, S., Simms, A, Thompson, S. (2006). *The Happy Planet Index*. London: New Economics Foundation.
- Moran, D., & Wackernagel, M. (2012). Measuring sustainability. In J. Murray, G. Cawthorne, C. Dey, & C. Andrew (Eds.), *Enough for all forever* (pp. 27-35). Illinois: Common Ground Publishing.
- Myers, D.G. (2000). The funds, friends and faith of happy people. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 56-67.
- Orr, D. W. (2012). Can we avoid the perfect storm? Solutions, 3.<http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/1124>
- Ramanathan, S., O'Brien, C., Stone, M. R., Faulkner, G., & Cook, L. (2012). Canadian school travel planning: Well-

- being and the school journey. Canadian Public Health Association Annual Conference, Edmonton.
- Royal Government of Bhutan (2012). The report of the high-level meeting on wellbeing and happiness: Defining a new economic paradigm. New York: The Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations. Thimphu: Office of the Prime Minister. <http://www.2apr.gov.bt/>
- Sachs, J. (2012). Chapter 1: Introduction. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, & J. Sachs (Eds.), *World happiness report* (pp. 2-9). New York: The Earth Institute, Columbia University. <http://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/Sachs%20Writing/2012/World%20Happiness%20Report.pdf>
- Thinley, J. Y. (2012). Sustainability and happiness: A development philosophy for Bhutan and the world, *Solutions*, 3. <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/1121>
- United Nations (1992). *Earth Summit '92: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro 1992*. London, The Regency Press Corporation.
- UNCSD (UN Conference on Sustainable Development). (2012a, June). *The future we want*. Retrieved from <https://rio20.un.org/rio20/documents>
- UNCSD (UN Conference on Sustainable Development). (2012b, June 22). *Rio by the numbers. Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/784rio20%20in%20numbers_final2.pdf
- UNESCO (2005a). *World decade of education for sustainable development*. Retrieved from: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>

UNESCO. (2005b). Guidelines and recommendations for reorienting teacher education to address sustainability. Education for sustainable development in action. Technical paper No. 2. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001433/143370E.pdf>