



Bhutan's Green Diplomacy: A Model of Ethical Ecology and Small-State Influence

Rasik Rahman KK

Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi, India

Received: 16 May 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Jun 2025; Accepted: 15 Jun 2025; Available online: 19 Jun 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Bhutan's ascent as a moral leader in climate diplomacy complicates prevailing orthodoxies in international relations, particularly those concerning the strategic constraints faced by small states. Drawing upon a cosmology informed by Mahayana Buddhism, anchored in an environmentally prescient constitution, and governed through the paradigm of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Bhutan operationalizes an integrated model of environmental governance that exceeds symbolic engagement. This article delineates the historical, doctrinal, legal, and geopolitical foundations of Bhutan's green diplomacy, arguing that its principled posture constitutes a replicable and normatively resonant form of statecraft in an era defined by ecological precarity.*



Keywords— *Bhutan, Climate Diplomacy, Gross National Happiness, Environmental Governance, Small States*

I. INTRODUCTION

Situated between the hegemonic poles of India and China, Bhutan is an archetype of the geopolitically constrained small state. Yet, it exercises outsized influence in the normative terrain of environmental diplomacy. Unlike the traditional metrics of power or military expenditure, Bhutan's soft power is derived from its enduring commitment to ecological stewardship. It is globally recognized as the only carbon-negative nation (Youn, 2017), a status underwritten by its legally mandated forest cover, low-emission energy regime, and cultural valuation of non-extractive environmental relations.

What distinguishes Bhutan is the synthesis of Buddhist cosmology, constitutional environmentalism, and developmental pluralism. These intersecting frameworks yield a distinctive form of ecological governance in which nature is not merely instrumental but ontologically co-constitutive of national well-being. From the formalization of GNH (Alkire et al., 2012) to the constitutional injunction to maintain 60% forest cover in perpetuity, Bhutan offers a template for integrated environmental statecraft. This article interrogates the contours of Bhutan's green diplomacy as

both an internal articulation of political ecology and an external projection of normative influence.

II. FROM BUDDHIST ECOLOGY TO CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

The doctrinal underpinnings of Bhutanese environmentalism are rooted in its syncretic amalgam of Vajrayana Buddhism and indigenous animistic practices. Beginning in the 7th century, Buddhist emissaries such as Guru Rinpoche inscribed sacred geographies across the Bhutanese landscape, transforming rivers, mountains, and forests into loci of spiritual significance (Allison, 2024). This sacralization of the environment engendered a worldview wherein ecological ethics are embedded within soteriological concerns, thereby rendering environmental degradation a form of karmic dissonance.

This theological substrate finds institutional expression in Bhutan's 2008 Constitution, which codifies environmental protection as a national duty. Article 5 mandates the maintenance of at least 60% forest cover, while Articles 4 and 9 designate the citizenry as environmental custodians and enshrine GNH as a normative guidepost for public

policy (World Bank, 2024). These provisions are not rhetorical; they establish enforceable obligations that bind the state and its citizens to ecological fidelity. Such commitments are not merely declarative but are undergirded by institutional mechanisms, including the National Environment Commission and the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation. Legislative frameworks—such as the Environmental Assessment Act (2000) and the Biodiversity Act (2003)—further entrench these mandates. More than 50% of Bhutan's landmass is legally protected, encompassing ecological corridors, national parks, and wildlife sanctuaries (World Bank, 2024). The result is a jurisprudential ecology that marries spiritual reverence with legal compulsion.

III. GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS AND THE NEXUS OF DEVELOPMENT

GNH represents Bhutan's epistemological divergence from neoliberal growth-centric paradigms. Initially articulated by the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, GNH encompasses four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and good governance (Alkire et al., 2012). These are further operationalized through nine domains and over one hundred indicators, many of which directly concern ecological sustainability. Far from an abstract ethos, GNH guides national policy formation. The country's carbon-negative status is not accidental; it is a manifestation of policy decisions that align with GNH objectives, such as stringent conservation laws, restrictions on deforestation, and an energy economy dominated by hydropower (World Bank, 2024). Such policies reflect an infrastructural commitment to maintaining ecological integrity while enhancing social well-being.

Empirical evidence supports the linkage between ecological health and subjective wellbeing. Communities residing near preserved forest areas report elevated levels of social cohesion and psychological well being (Matsuzawa, 2019). Thus, GNH transforms environmental sustainability from a sectoral policy issue into an ontological foundation of national development. It renders Bhutan's environmental diplomacy intelligible as an extension of internal coherence rather than external branding.

IV. GREEN DIPLOMACY: NORMS, SOVEREIGNTY, AND REGIONAL STRATEGY

Bhutan's external environmental posture is a projection of its internal moral and legal architectures. It aligns with global South coalitions within climate negotiations,

emphasizing differentiated responsibilities, intergenerational equity, and ecological justice (Tshering & Craft, 2016). Its diplomatic interventions are legitimated by its empirical performance and legal codification, enhancing its credibility in for such as the UNFCCC.

In regional geopolitics, Bhutan's green diplomacy is a mode of asserting sovereign agency amid structural asymmetry. Its ecological zones, particularly in contested areas like Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, serve dual functions: preserving biodiversity and symbolically demarcating territory (Rao, 2016). Rather than militarization, Bhutan opts for ecological demarcation, transforming landscapes into registers of sovereignty. The Mindfulness City initiative in Gelephu exemplifies Bhutan's aspiration to integrate GNH principles into modern urbanism. Envisioned as a low-carbon, spiritually grounded urban settlement, the project signifies Bhutan's commitment to ecological futurity and national identity (Time, 2025). Partnerships with India on hydropower and infrastructure further entrench this approach, blending regional cooperation with developmental autonomy. Transnational collaborations with entities such as UNDP and WWF amplify Bhutan's influence, translating its ecological vision into globally resonant idioms.

V. RETHINKING POWER AND PRINCIPLED STATECRAFT

Bhutan's environmental diplomacy compels a re-examination of foundational assumptions in international relations. It contests the realist fixation on material capabilities, offering instead a model wherein ethical coherence and normative leadership constitute viable forms of geopolitical agency. Bhutan's commitment to ecological preservation is not merely performative but emerges from a deep integration of constitutional law, cosmological belief, and strategic rationality.

For similarly situated polities, Bhutan illustrates the potential of issue specialization—in this case, environmental custodianship—as a source of diplomatic capital. Its jurisprudential and spiritual architectures provide durable scaffolding for international engagement, allowing for principled alliances and differentiated partnerships. Through consistent ethical positioning, Bhutan carves out a role that exceeds its quantitative metrics. Moreover, Bhutan's model contributes to the theoretical pluralization of global governance. As ecological instability becomes a defining feature of the Anthropocene, Bhutan's synthesis of cultural, spiritual, and legal norms presents a civilizational alternative to technocratic sustainability. Ura (2023) characterizes this approach as one grounded in cosmological equilibrium and

historical continuity—an ontological reordering that privileges relationality over extraction.

VI. CONCLUSION

Bhutan's green diplomacy exemplifies how principled small states can exercise agency within global systems dominated by power asymmetries. By institutionalizing environmental ethics through constitutional law, spiritual cosmology, and developmental praxis, Bhutan transforms its ecological vision into a durable mode of international engagement. Its model serves as both critique and alternative to extractive, growth-oriented paradigms. As climate crises intensify, Bhutan offers more than symbolic resistance; it posits a coherent system in which moral clarity, cultural integrity, and institutional coherence are foundational to effective statecraft. In repositioning environmental diplomacy as a locus of ethical leadership, Bhutan challenges the epistemological core of international relations and expands the horizon of what small states can achieve.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alkire, S., Ura, K., Zangmo, T., & Wangdi, K. (2012). *A short guide to Gross National Happiness Index*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- [2] Allison, E. (2024). Religion and environment in Bhutan. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.827>
- [3] Karma Ura. (2023). *Bhutan: The Unremembered Nation (Vol. 2, Art and Ideals)*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- [4] Matsuzawa, T. (2019). Bhutan: Environmental education and Gross National Happiness (GNH). *Primates*, 60(2), 103–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10329-019-00709-5>
- [5] Rao, K. (2016, July 10). How Bhutan became the world's greenest country. *Mint*. <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/big-story/how-bhutan-became-the-world-s-greenest-country-111646885236756.html>
- [6] Tshering, D., & Craft, B. (2016). *Engaging effectively in climate diplomacy: Policy pointers from Bhutan*. IIED. <https://pubs.iied.org/17364iied>
- [7] World Bank. (2024). *Bhutan country environmental analysis: Taking the green growth agenda forward* (Report No. 099031124064513492). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099031124064513492>
- [8] Youn, S. (2017, January 17). Bhutan is the world's only carbon-negative country. *National Geographic*. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/bhutan-carbon-negative-country-climate-change>