

## **Integration of Buddhist Values in Bhutan's Governance: A Sustainable Development Model Based on Gross National Happiness (GNH)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Bhutan, located in the Eastern Himalayas, has a rich history of integrating Buddhism as the state religion, profoundly influencing its political, cultural, and economic policies. This research explores the evolution of Buddhism in Bhutan, examining its interplay with national development while addressing the challenges and opportunities Bhutan faces in a rapidly globalizing world. This study, grounded in a qualitative methodology, employs a literature review and policy analysis to investigate how Buddhist principles have shaped Bhutan's identity, governance, and social structures. Through the analysis of historical and contemporary sources, this research highlights the unique role of Buddhism in fostering Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, which emphasizes sustainable development, cultural preservation, and spiritual well-being over material gains. The findings illustrate how Buddhist values guide Bhutan's political transitions, environmental conservation policies, and economic strategies rooted in self-reliance and moderation. This study contributes to the broader discourse by providing insights into the alignment of religion with governance and development. It underscores the implications of Bhutan's Buddhist-inspired model, offering a replicable framework for balancing tradition and modernization in other nations. However, as Bhutan navigates modernization, the study identifies potential challenges to its cultural integrity and traditional societal structures. By addressing the gap in existing literature and emphasizing the relevance of cultural and spiritual values in statecraft, this research provides a foundation for further exploration into how Bhutan's holistic approach to happiness can inform global development strategies.

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## Introduction

Buddhism, as a profound philosophical and spiritual tradition, has significantly influenced the socio-political landscapes of various regions since its expansion beyond India by the end of the 5th century BCE. It reached regions such as Bhutan, Ceylon, Burma, Nepal, Tibet, Central Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Japan, and Sri Lanka (Heirman & Bumbacher, 2007). In the Himalayan regions, including Bhutan, Buddhism continued to flourish even after its decline in India due to the revival of Hinduism by Shankaracharya in the 7th century BCE (Drup, 2013). Introduced to Bhutan before the 7th century BCE by King Tibet Songtsen Gyalopo and later strengthened by Padmasambhava in 747 AD, Buddhism has deeply shaped the country's culture and identity. Today, three-quarters of Bhutan's population adhere to Mahayana Buddhism, which serves as the state religion and forms the philosophical backbone of national policies (Bhutan Broadcasting Service Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2011).

In Bhutan, Buddhism transcends religious practice and functions as a foundational principle influencing governance, education, family structures, and social cohesion. Its integration into national policy emphasizes spiritual happiness over materialistic pursuits, framing the ultimate goal of life in terms of enlightenment and contentment (Hodous, 2004). This worldview not only underpins Bhutan's governance but also permeates daily life, shaping educational systems to prioritize holistic development, fostering harmonious family dynamics, and strengthening societal bonds. Mahayana Buddhism, with its teachings on interconnectedness and impermanence, provides a framework for the fluid and adaptive structures that define Bhutan's unique cultural identity (Williams, 2008). Understanding the broader influence of Buddhism on these aspects is crucial to appreciating Bhutan's approach to development and its societal resilience.

Modern studies have delved deeper into Bhutan's religio-political framework and the unique influence of Buddhist principles on its policies. For instance, Ura (2015) explores the Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, which integrates Buddhist values into governance, emphasizing the balance between material progress and spiritual well-being. Similarly, Phuntsho (2013) highlights how Bhutan's religious heritage shapes its identity and policy-making processes. These studies illustrate the centrality of Buddhist ideals in Bhutan's development model, demonstrating their impact on education, environmental policies, and community cohesion. Moreover, research by Mathou (2000) examines Bhutan's political system, revealing how Buddhist philosophy underpins its approach to democracy, characterized by harmony and collectivism over individualism. Such studies provide a vital contemporary lens for understanding how Bhutan aligns traditional Buddhist values with modern governance.

Previous foundational works, including those by Radhakrishnan (1923) and Ratnam (2013), have primarily focused on the historical evolution of Buddhist thought within the Indian context. While these studies offer valuable philosophical insights, they inadequately address the application of Buddhist values in Bhutan's unique socio-political, economic, and cultural systems. This study bridges the gap by connecting historical perspectives to Bhutan's contemporary framework,

demonstrating how Buddhist principles address challenges such as globalization, modernization, and corporate social responsibility.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on Bhutan's adaptation of Buddhist values as a guiding principle for sustainable development. By examining Bhutan's religio-political framework, this research explores the role of Buddhist ideals in shaping national policies, economic strategies, and societal norms. Bhutan's development model, which balances tradition with modernization, offers a compelling case for exploring how spiritual principles can guide sustainable and inclusive progress. By examining the intersection of religion, governance, and societal well-being, this research aims to illuminate the ways in which Buddhist ideals bolster Bhutan's resilience and identity amidst global challenges.

This study investigates how Buddhist principles have shaped Bhutan's identity, governance, and social structures while addressing the challenges of globalization and modernization. Through a qualitative approach involving literature review and policy analysis, the research highlights the integration of Buddhist values into Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, which emphasizes sustainable development, cultural preservation, and spiritual well-being over material gains.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the alignment of religion with governance and development. It underscores the relevance of Bhutan's Buddhist-inspired model, offering a replicable framework for balancing tradition and modernization in other nations. By addressing the challenges of modernization while preserving cultural and spiritual authenticity, this research provides a foundation for further exploration into Bhutan's holistic approach to sustainable development and its implications for global development strategies.

## **Method**

The study employs a qualitative research methodology with a literature-based data collection approach to explore the interaction between Buddhism and Bhutan's social, political, and economic structures (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative methods are chosen due to their effectiveness in examining cultural and contextual nuances, making them suitable for analyzing Bhutan's religio-political framework and the influence of Buddhist principles on governance, education, and societal norms.

The analysis focuses on Bhutan's national policies, socio-political institutions, and cultural practices that integrate Buddhist values. The investigation examines how Buddhism shapes Bhutan's identity and development model, specifically analyzing its influence on governance, education, and societal norms, providing insights into Bhutan's resilience and modernization strategies.

The study gathers data from secondary materials, including peer-reviewed articles, government reports, policy documents, and publications from non-governmental organizations. Sources are selected based on their relevance, credibility, and timeliness while also incorporating historical perspectives to ensure contextual depth. Systematic searches are conducted in academic databases using keywords such as "Buddhism in Bhutan" and "Gross National Happiness,"

complemented by citation tracking to identify high-quality and thematically relevant literature.

The data analysis follows a structured process of reduction, organization, and thematic categorization (Price & Smith, 2021). Key patterns related to Buddhist values and their impact on Bhutan's policies and social structures are summarized and mapped. Findings are presented visually through tables and diagrams to clarify themes. The study ensures accuracy and consistency through triangulation by comparing insights from multiple sources. The thematic analysis identifies recurring themes, highlighting the integration of Buddhist principles into Bhutan's governance and culture while emphasizing their role in sustainable development.

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***Influence of Buddhism on Bhutan's Religious and Cultural Identity***

Buddhism, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, forms the bedrock of Bhutan's religious and cultural identity. Historically introduced before the 7th century BCE and later strengthened by Padmasambhava in 747 AD, Buddhism has become deeply embedded in the nation's governance, festivals, and societal practices. This religious foundation fosters a significant degree of homogeneity, uniting the population under shared spiritual and cultural values. The country's guiding philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) exemplifies this integration, emphasizing harmony between material development and spiritual well-being as core to Bhutanese policy and daily life (Phuntsho, 2013). Traditional festivals, such as *Tshechu*, showcase Buddhist teachings and reinforce communal bonds, while the legal and political frameworks of the country reflect Buddhist ethics and moral principles.

Furthermore, Bhutan's unique geographical location has played a critical role in preserving its religious and cultural identity. Nestled in the high mountains of the Himalayas, Bhutan remained insulated from foreign invasions and colonization that could have disrupted its traditions and autonomy. This geographic isolation has allowed Bhutan to maintain its spiritual and cultural purity, unlike neighboring regions influenced by colonial powers (Walcott, 2011). Consequently, Buddhism has continued to thrive as a central element of national identity, permeating every aspect of Bhutanese life.

**Table 1.** Aspects of Buddhism's Influence on Bhutan's Religious and Cultural Identity

Aspect of Influence	Data/Examples
Religious Adherence	75% of the Bhutanese population follows Mahayana Buddhism.
Cultural Practices	Traditional festivals like <i>Tshechu</i> emphasize Buddhist teachings and community bonding.
State Philosophy	GNH integrates Buddhist values, balancing material and spiritual development.
Geographic Isolation	The high Himalayan location insulated Bhutan from invasions and external cultural influences.

Buddhism is not just a religious affiliation in Bhutan; it is a unifying force that shapes the nation's identity, governance, and cultural expression (Bhutan Broadcasting Service Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2011). This spiritual framework underpins national policies, reinforces societal cohesion through shared festivals and practices, and preserves Bhutan's distinct cultural legacy.

Several key patterns emerge from this data. Firstly, Bhutan's religious homogeneity, rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, creates a collective spiritual identity that unites its people and strengthens national solidarity. Secondly, the GNH framework seamlessly integrates Buddhist principles into governance, emphasizing the balance between material and spiritual goals. Thirdly, Bhutan strategically utilizes its geographic isolation to reinforce cultural preservation, shielding itself from external influences and maintaining its traditions and religious practices intact. Lastly, the integration of Buddhist values into everyday life, exemplified by shared communal practices such as labor and the maintenance of monasteries, reflects the depth of Buddhism's influence on Bhutanese society.

The influence of Buddhism on Bhutan's religious and cultural identity underscores its role as a cornerstone of the nation's cohesion and resilience (Long & Grolle, 1990). By integrating Buddhist values into governance and daily life, Bhutan has not only preserved its unique traditions but also created a model of development that harmonizes modernity with spirituality. This interplay between Buddhism, governance, and cultural expression highlights Bhutan's ability to maintain its identity amidst the pressures of globalization, serving as a compelling example of how religious values can shape and sustain national unity and cultural integrity.

### ***Influence of Buddhism on Bhutan's Governance and Policies***

Bhutan's governance system is deeply intertwined with Buddhist principles, shaping both its policies and political transitions. A prime example is Bhutan's transformation from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy, a process rooted in Buddhist values such as harmony, collective welfare, and non-violence. This transition, referred to as "democracy from above," was initiated by the

monarchy, where King Jigme Singye Wangchuck voluntarily relinquished much of his power to enable democratic governance for the people's long-term benefit (Mathou, 2000). The process was deliberate, peaceful, and designed to preserve national unity, showcasing how Buddhist ideals influenced governance reforms.

Environmental conservation policies also reflect Bhutan's commitment to Buddhist tenets. The constitution mandates that a minimum of 60% of Bhutan's land area remain under forest cover at all times, embodying the Buddhist concept of interdependence and respect for nature. Bhutan's policies prioritize sustainability, ensuring that economic development does not come at the expense of the environment (Uddin, Taplin, & Yu, 2007). Additionally, the nation's economic philosophy emphasizes self-reliance and balanced growth. Instead of pursuing rapid industrialization, Bhutan opts for policies aligned with Buddhist teachings on sufficiency, promoting societal well-being and environmental harmony over materialistic ambitions.

**Table 2.** Policy Areas in Bhutan Influenced by Buddhist Values

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Environmental Conservation</b>	Forest preservation laws ensure at least 60% forest cover.
<b>Political Transition</b>	Democratic reforms initiated by the monarchy in 2008 emphasized peaceful transformation.
<b>Economic Philosophy</b>	Policies focusing on self-reliance and balanced growth are rooted in Buddhist teachings.

Bhutan's governance and policy frameworks exemplify a deliberate alignment with Buddhist values. From environmental sustainability to economic self-reliance and a peaceful transition to democracy, these policies demonstrate the integration of spiritual principles into practical state governance. The emphasis on collective well-being and harmony underscores Bhutan's unique approach to modern governance (Theys & Rietig, 2020).

Key patterns and trends observed in Bhutan's governance and policies underscore the profound influence of Buddhist principles. Environmental responsibility emerges as a central theme, with Bhutan's policies rooted in the Buddhist understanding of interdependence, which views humans and nature as interconnected. The constitutional mandate to maintain at least 60% forest cover exemplifies how development activities are aligned with sustainable practices and ecological balance, making environmental conservation not only a necessity but also a moral duty (Schroeder, 2017). Furthermore, the peaceful and gradual political transformation from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy reflects Buddhist ideals of harmony and non-violence. This deliberate approach prioritizes societal welfare and avoids the disruptions typically associated with abrupt political change, showcasing how spiritual values can guide democratic reforms.

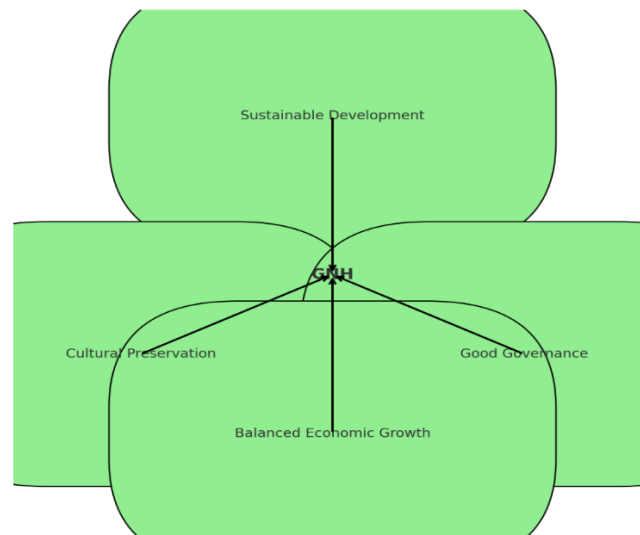
Economic strategies in Bhutan also resonate with Buddhist teachings on moderation and sufficiency. Rather than pursuing profit-driven industrialization or overexploiting resources, Bhutan adopts policies that promote self-reliance and sustainable development, fostering balanced growth that benefits both society and

the environment. Additionally, Bhutan's governance framework reflects a commitment to preserving its cultural identity. The monarchy's integration of democratic practices while upholding traditional values illustrates a thoughtful balance between modernity and tradition, ensuring that Bhutan's unique cultural heritage remains intact (Schroeder, 2015).

These insights highlight Bhutan's governance model as a compelling example of ethical statecraft. By prioritizing sustainability, societal harmony, and collective welfare, Bhutan diverges from conventional profit-driven systems, demonstrating the potential of integrating spiritual principles into governance. This model not only addresses immediate challenges but also fosters long-term resilience and sustainability. Bhutan's ability to harmonize tradition with modernity offers valuable lessons for countries seeking sustainable and culturally rooted development strategies (Schroeder, 2017).

### ***Bhutan's Buddhist-Inspired Development Model as a Global Example***

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework exemplifies how Buddhist principles guide sustainable development, emphasizing holistic well-being over purely economic metrics. This unique model, which incorporates dimensions such as environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and community vitality, challenges conventional GDP-focused paradigms and has gained significant global attention (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2008). Key policies such as maintaining 60% forest cover reflect the Buddhist principle of interdependence and a moral duty toward nature. Bhutan's balanced economic philosophy, rooted in insufficiency, prioritizes self-reliance and sustainable growth over excessive industrialization or resource exploitation. This approach aligns with Buddhist teachings on moderation and harmony, ensuring societal well-being and environmental integrity.



**Figure 1.** Pattern Model of Bhutan's GNH Pillars

Bhutan's geographic isolation and historical autonomy have allowed the nation to preserve its cultural identity and implement its development model without significant external interference. The monarchy's role in transitioning the

country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional democracy demonstrates a governance style guided by Buddhist ideals of non-violence, collective welfare, and gradual transformation (Mathou, 2000). This transition has not only preserved Bhutan's unique identity but also positioned it as a model for other nations seeking to balance tradition with modernization.

**Table 3.** Examples of GNH Pillars in Bhutan's Development Model

<b>GNH Pillar</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	Policies ensuring 60% forest cover ecological conservation.
<b>Cultural Preservation</b>	Support for traditional arts, festivals, and Buddhist rituals.
<b>Good Governance</b>	Transition to democracy guided by Buddhist values.
<b>Balanced Economic Growth</b>	Focus on sufficiency and sustainability over profit-driven models.

Bhutan's development model demonstrates a deliberate integration of Buddhist values, as evidenced by its environmentally conscious policies, cultural preservation efforts, and balanced economic strategies. Unlike GDP-centric approaches, Bhutan's GNH framework places equal importance on material, spiritual, and social well-being, providing a sustainable and inclusive development blueprint.

Bhutan's Buddhist-inspired development model reveals several significant trends that highlight its unique approach to governance and sustainability. At the heart of this model lies the Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, a groundbreaking governance philosophy that integrates Buddhist values to prioritize societal harmony, environmental sustainability, and spiritual well-being. Central to this vision is Bhutan's commitment to preserving its cultural and religious heritage, which serves as a cornerstone for shaping modern policies. Bhutan demonstrates this commitment through the promotion of traditional Buddhist festivals, arts, and rituals, which reinforce a collective national identity rooted in historical and spiritual values. Environmental responsibility further underscores this model, as demonstrated by Bhutan's constitutionally mandated forest preservation laws, reflecting a deep commitment to ecological balance guided by the Buddhist principle of interdependence (Maxwell, 2008). Beyond its national context, Bhutan's GNH framework has garnered global attention as a viable alternative to profit-driven economic systems, inspiring discussions on sustainable development models that balance material progress with cultural and environmental integrity. Collectively, these trends underscore Bhutan's holistic approach to development, offering a powerful example of how traditional values can harmonize with modern governance to address contemporary global challenges.

Bhutan's Buddhist-inspired development model offers valuable lessons for nations grappling with modernization, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion. By integrating spiritual principles into governance and policy-making, Bhutan has demonstrated the potential for a sustainable and culturally resonant approach to development. Its focus on balancing material progress with



environmental and societal well-being challenges conventional economic paradigms and provides an inspiring alternative for global policy discourse. Bhutan's success in harmonizing tradition with modernity underscores the viability of a development model rooted in ethical and spiritual values, making it a beacon for sustainable development in the 21st century.

### ***Integration of Buddhist Values in Bhutan's Development***

This research reveals how Buddhist values, particularly from the Mahayana tradition, profoundly shape Bhutan's national identity, governance policies, and developmental framework. The concept of *Gross National Happiness (GNH)*, a development philosophy prioritising collective happiness and well-being over economic growth) emerges as a unique model balancing material development with cultural preservation and spiritual well-being. The study highlights the influence of Buddhist values on Bhutan's peaceful democratic transition, progressive environmental policies such as maintaining 60% forest cover, and economic strategies emphasising sufficiency and sustainability. Bhutan successfully integrates modernity with traditional values, making it a global example of spirituality-based sustainable development.

The integration of Buddhist values into Bhutan's policies is driven by Buddhism functioning not only as a spiritual guide but also as the nation's philosophy. The Buddhist view of interdependence and moderation inspires Bhutan to adopt developmental policies that focus on environmental sustainability and social well-being rather than mere economic growth. Bhutan's peaceful democratic transition is a reflection of Buddhist teachings on harmony and collectivism, which prioritise the common good over personal ambition or conflict.

The findings of this research align with Mathou (2000), who observed that Bhutan's political transition was rooted in Buddhist principles of harmony. Furthermore, this study offers a new perspective by connecting Bhutan's environmental conservation policies with the Buddhist concept of interdependence, as discussed by Uddin, Taplin, and Yu (2007). Similarly, it complements Rinzin's (2006) emphasis on the importance of the Buddhist "Middle Path" (a balanced approach to life and decision-making) in Bhutan's environmental policies.

Additionally, this research adds context to the evolution of Buddhism in Bhutan, as described by Wangmo and Choden (2010). Their findings about the influence of Bonism (pre-Buddhist spiritual practices involving nature worship) in Bhutan enrich our understanding of how Guru Padmasambhava integrated local deities into Vajrayana Buddhism in the 8th century CE. This integration, as noted by Allison (2019), became foundational for the widespread acceptance of Buddhism in Bhutanese society.

Unlike Heirman and Bumbacher (2007), who focused on the historical dissemination of Buddhism in the Himalayan region, this study centres on the application of Buddhist values in contemporary policies, as encapsulated in the *GNH* concept (Givel, 2024). It further expands the analysis of how the Drukpa Kagyu school of Mahayana Buddhism, which developed in Bhutan in the 17th century (Petek & Ciglenecki, 2022), established monastic institutions and educational systems that persist into the modern era (Dukpa, 2016).

Specifically, this research explores Buddhism's adaptation to modernity, as articulated by Locke (2020), by examining how Bhutan integrates Buddhist principles into modern governance, including the transition to a constitutional monarchy in 2008 (Dorji, 2022). This finding is supported by Windischgraetz (2023), who highlights the embedding of Buddhist values in Bhutan's constitution as a foundation for legal and social policies.

This research not only corroborates previous studies but also provides significant contributions by explaining how Buddhist values can be adapted to address the challenges of globalisation and modernisation. Additionally, it identifies emerging tensions, such as those between traditional and modern education systems (Dukpa, 2016) and between cultural preservation and the pressures of neoliberal economic demands (Montes, 2020).

The results demonstrate that Bhutan offers an alternative paradigm for global development. In a world that often prioritises economic growth above all else, Bhutan illustrates that spiritual well-being and cultural preservation can be key pillars of development. This approach is not only relevant to Bhutan but also provides valuable lessons for other countries facing the challenges of modernisation and globalisation, particularly in maintaining cultural identity and environmental sustainability.

Although Bhutan's development model is largely successful, this research also highlights potential challenges. Ongoing modernisation poses a threat to Bhutan's cultural integrity, especially among the younger generation increasingly exposed to external influences. Furthermore, reliance on spiritual principles in public policies may not always align seamlessly with the complexities of the global economic and environmental landscape, such as international economic pressures and climate change.

Based on the research findings, several strategic steps can be undertaken to ensure the sustainability of Bhutan's development model. Strengthening Buddhist value-based education in schools is crucial to ensuring that younger generations appreciate and understand their cultural identity. This effort will help sustain the cultural traditions central to Bhutan's national philosophy. Bhutan could also solidify its position as a global leader in environmental conservation by expanding international collaborations that support forest preservation and sustainable development. This initiative would not only protect Bhutan's natural wealth but also reaffirm the nation's commitment to harmony and sustainability, inspired by Buddhist teachings. In addressing globalisation, Bhutan can develop modernisation strategies rooted in spiritual values, such as promoting cultural tourism and eco-tourism, which align with environmental preservation and local traditions. Additionally, further research should be conducted to compare the *GNH* model with other development approaches globally, exploring the potential application of Bhutan's principles in different contexts. Through this approach, Bhutan demonstrates that tradition and modernity need not conflict but can complement each other to create a sustainable and prosperous society deeply rooted in spiritual values.

## Conclusion

This study highlights Bhutan's remarkable ability to integrate Buddhist philosophy into state policies, fostering holistic development centered on happiness and well-being. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework exemplifies how spiritual values can shape governance to prioritize societal harmony, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. Unlike neighboring countries such as India, where cultural diversity often leads to internal conflicts and lower happiness indices, Bhutan's homogeneity, guided by Buddhist principles, strengthens its collective identity and societal cohesion. Additionally, Bhutan's emphasis on sufficiency and sustainability challenges profit-driven global economic models, offering a unique perspective on development. However, modernization and globalization pose challenges to Bhutan's traditional social structures, which may compromise its cultural and ethical values over time.

This research provides a valuable contribution by showcasing Bhutan's Buddhist-inspired development model as a replicable framework for sustainable governance. It underscores the importance of integrating cultural and spiritual values into modern policies, offering an alternative to economic systems driven solely by material growth. By illustrating the impact of Buddhist principles on Bhutan's policies, economy, and societal cohesion, this study contributes to the discourse on ethical statecraft and sustainable development, positioning Bhutan as a global example of how tradition and modernity can harmoniously coexist. The findings inspire policymakers and scholars to explore the potential of culturally rooted frameworks in addressing contemporary global challenges.

This study primarily relies on secondary sources, which may limit the representation of Bhutanese perspectives and voices. The dynamic socio-political landscape of Bhutan suggests that some findings may be time-sensitive, necessitating updates as the country continues to evolve. Furthermore, while the research focuses on the strengths of Bhutan's development model, it may overlook challenges and critical viewpoints.

Future research should aim to incorporate fieldwork and qualitative interviews with Bhutanese citizens to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the sustainability of Bhutan's development model amidst ongoing globalization and modernization. Additionally, comparative analyses with other culturally distinct countries can offer insights into the applicability of Bhutan's framework in diverse contexts. Research on the potential compromises between economic growth and cultural preservation would further enrich this discourse, ensuring that Bhutan's model remains relevant and adaptable to future challenges.

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