

"Zest for Siesta"

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The Editor
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Dear Sir

AN OPEN LETTER TO HIS MAJESTY, THE KING OF BHUTAN

Your Majesty

I am a visitor to your beautiful country, on my first visit. I hope to return to see more on other occasions, as I have enjoyed my visit so much. I have been especially impressed with Bhutan's unique combination of forward-thinking (for example, with regard to the environment and hydro-electric power) coupled with conservation and celebration of Bhutan's past.

Indeed, in most respects I leave Bhutan with the impression that Bhutan's people are blessed with refreshing and enlightened leadership. However, one matter has come to my attention which disturbs and upsets me, to such an extent that I feel motivated to interrupt my rest in the middle of the night while on vacation in order to write to you about it.

I am informed by several Bhutanese citizens that some public works (such as the restoration work in some of Bhutan's historical places) is undertaken by workers, many of whom are working under a forced labour scheme with minimal (token) pay and poor conditions. Some people pay a significant premium to a substitute to fill their place on the scheme, but most have to do the work involuntarily, either living in extreme hardship for several months or getting by through the subsidy of their friends and families.

It seems to me that such a forced labour scheme is in effect a form of taxation, but it is an especially arbitrary and unfair one. I shall return to the subject of taxation below,

I understand that a country like Bhutan, despite its richness in natural resources and man-made beauty, is a small developing nation which cannot provide all the benefits available to citizens in Western nations, and Bhutan can justly expect its citizens to contribute towards the National good. Indeed many more wealthy nations than Bhutan fail to provide comprehensive health and education benefits such as those available in Bhutan. Similarly, many Western nations require citizens to fulfil, for example, several weeks of jury service for the judicial system or several months/years of National Military Service. One could argue the justice or otherwise of such national obligations (but not in this letter).

Yet the notion of forced labour in the manner used in Bhutan as described above seems acutely unjust and harsh. It might be the unfortunate parallel with the forced labour schemes in Myanmar (Burma)

where the forced labour is but one example of mass oppression and injustice. I do not seek to compare Bhutan's leadership with that of Burma. Indeed, it is the very fact that Bhutan's leadership is so enlightened and liberal in most respects that makes this matter of forced labour seem so incongruous. The scheme contravenes the UN Declaration of Human Rights and I suspect the scheme contravenes many policies and guidelines of the International Labour Organization. I am not an expert on these matters but I do have a sense of natural justice and the scheme is at odds with that sense, which is why I am writing to you about it.

From the very limited discussions I have had with Bhutanese citizens, I believe that your leadership is in general very popular but this one matter causes deep resentment and upset amongst your people. Even if you reject my arguments about justice, I believe that you should reverse this policy for pragmatic reasons of self-interest.

It seems to me that you could replace an arbitrary and deeply unpopular form of taxation with a less arbitrary and less unpopular form in order to complete public works without impacting negatively on your net National wealth/debt. Here follow three suggestions, all or some of which could be used in any combination:

1. a small increase in consumption taxes on luxury items (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, petrol, luxury goods) could almost certainly raise sufficient funds to enable you to undertake works using voluntary labour at fair pay. The same principle could and should apply to future public works which cannot be funded through commercial means.
2. consider increasing taxation on corporate profits to cover the cost of voluntary labour at fair pay. Bhutan's major corporations are returning capital to investors through enormous dividends at the moment, so these corporations clearly do not have sufficient investment opportunities. Further, Bhutan's corporate stakeholders are probably in a better position to help fund your public works than those who participate in forced labour schemes.
3. public works (especially the restoration works) could be a significant part of a voluntary apprenticeship and training programme for young Bhutanese artisans. The pay would not necessarily be at full market rates but should be fair, taking into consideration the training the programme would provide and the premium wage rates such skilled artisans could command having graduated from such a (hopefully prestigious) scheme. Most importantly, participation should be voluntary.

It is with deep respect and admiration for your beautiful country and your esteemed leadership that I urge you, your majesty, to abolish the forced labour scheme promptly and replace it with a more enlightened alternative. I believe this would benefit you, your citizens, Bhutan and universal justice for mankind.

Yours sincerely

Ian Harris

cc: Mary Robinson (UN), Juan Somavia (ILO), Bill Emmott (The Economist)