

India can learn from Bhutan's happiness in electricity for all - The Indian Economist | DailyHunt



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Bhutan measures its progress in terms of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This unique endeavour has been acknowledged by the United Nations in its 2011 resolution as a fundamental human goal. The GNH follows a holistic approach considering material, social, and emotional needs of people. It emphasises on good governance, equitable development, and environment conservation.

Happiness in electricity

The cornerstone of Bhutan's GNH philosophy is its 'universal electricity access'. Universal electricity access has a direct connection to hydropower-the source of 99% of Bhutan's electricity. Bhutan's per capita electric consumption is two and a half times more than that of India and is approximately 90% of the world average. At about Rs 2 per unit, Bhutan's cost of electricity generation is one of the lowest in the world. It also provides 100 units of free electricity to its rural population.

Universal electricity access was prioritised in Bhutan's 10th Five Year Plan (2008-13). Access to electricity was considered as an instrument to improve the quality of life and reduce poverty by raising rural income and employment opportunities. Bhutan's electrification rate, i.e., share of the population having access to electricity, increased from 57% in 2005 to 96% in 2015.

Proactive planning

Universal electrification of Bhutan is an extraordinary accomplishment, given the speed at which Bhutan has achieved it in spite of the difficult terrain of this mountainous country. During this grid expansion period, Bhutan had approximately 70% of the population staying in rural hilly areas and it was a herculean task to take electricity to all corners in such a short span of time.

The Bhutan Power Corporation (BPC) had a Rural Electrification Master Plan of 2005 which aimed to achieve universal electrification by 2020. However, the first elected government of Bhutan in 2008 mandated the BPC to prepone the target to 2013.

Where India stands today

Bhutan exports three-fourths of its electricity generated to India. The revenue from this finances other development goals of Bhutan. A report by Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicates that the hydroelectricity sector contributes to 50% of Bhutan's GDP.

It's time India took a leaf from Bhutan's book to provide last mile connectivity to those who are unserved. Central Electricity Authority (CEA) data for 2015-16 provides that India is currently power surplus. This is a myth as it does not take into account those who are not connected to the grid. The Indian government's real-time dashboard of rural electrification shows that as of April 29, 2017, approximately 26% of households in the country are without electricity.

No constraint to provide electricity

So, what does it take to make electricity reach these millions of people? A personal interview with Mr Bharat Tamang, a Mysore University-educated Electrical Power Engineer, who was the Chairman of the BPC during the time Bhutan extended electricity connection to all its citizens, reveals that such a feat could be achieved because of four factors; state policy, financial support, exemplary honesty of the Bhutanese people, and remarkable efforts of the BPC staff. He ascertained that there is no technological constraint to provide electricity to one and all.

Mr Tamang acknowledged that he enjoyed the political support from the Bhutanese government. The government provided 20% finances. The rest came through grants from the ADB and soft loans from the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Where there is a will, there is a way

The honesty of the Bhutanese people played a critical role. Mr Tamang vouched that theft of electricity is rare in Bhutan. There is no misuse of electricity even among the poor families who are given 100 units free. He hailed the sheer motivation of the BPC staff. Mr Tamang sums up saying, "In the land of happiness I cannot keep anybody unhappy; where there is a will, there is a way".

Bhutan has taken full support from India in building its hydropower projects. Bhutan's National Transmission Grid Master Plan was prepared by the CEA of India. Bhutan has always looked up to India for technical support. But now it is the time for India to tread the path of Bhutan to realise the goal of

6/8/2017

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electricity access to all its citizens.