

Agent of Happiness: People in this small South Asian country live in an economically unequal, unjust and oppressive society, why should they be happy?

David Walsh
8 November 2024

Agent of Happiness is a documentary directed by Arun Bhattarai and Dorottya Zurbó about the “Gross National Happiness” survey conducted in the small kingdom of Bhutan (population 700,000), situated between India and China. The film opened in New York City November 1 and will play elsewhere in the US later in the month.

Dozens of agents fan out across the landlocked country (at 14,824 square miles, it would rank as the 42nd US state in area, between West Virginia and Maryland), with numerous Himalayan mountains rising in the north of the country to more than 23,000 feet, to ask detailed questions (148 of them) about the state of mind of those surveyed. A “Happiness Index,” the first produced in 2008, is the result.

Critics have long heaped scorn on this government operation. It has been legitimately characterized in part as a propaganda scheme to distract attention from the brutal ethnic cleansing policies of the Bhutanese regime, which has expelled or otherwise oppressed more than 100,000 people of Nepalese origin and Hindu faith (Buddhism is Bhutan’s state religion).

The government survey is also an effort to divert public focus from immense social inequality. Most of the population, as the *Economist* pointed out in a 2004 article, “live in grinding poverty.” The country ranks 153rd in gross domestic product per capita, making it one of the poorest in the world.

The documentary is primarily interesting and valuable for what it shows about the people of Bhutan, including the “agent of happiness” of the title, Amber Kumar Gurung, who himself has no Bhutanese

citizenship because of his Nepali ethnicity.

Objectively speaking, the people in Bhutan are no happier than people anywhere else living in an economically unequal, unjust and oppressive class-riven society.

In fact, changing what must be changed, the popular responses to the conditions are not so different than one would expect to find in any part of the world. They inevitably follow along the general fault-lines of *social class*, i.e., the rich are satisfied with life, the aspiring petty bourgeois worries about his or her property and status, the workers and rural poor are overworked and angry. Presiding above all this, an absurd, would-be godlike monarch prattles on hypocritically about how the country “is guided by spiritual values.”

One woman is pleased because her cow gave birth to a calf—“happiness” in this case is two cows. A group of road workers, of whom one would have liked to have seen more, “have to work hard.”

“Do I have to say I’m happy?” one asks. They too are deprived of citizenship.

A stupid, wealthy man has three wives. He is obviously a minor tyrant and bully, full of himself and his “religious” talk. The wives get along like sisters. They all came from poverty-stricken families, so “he knew he could do what he wanted.”

“I never loved him,” one wife says. One has a tear in her eye.

A small farmer explains bluntly, “I’m as happy as the number of grains in my rice storage.” In fact, he is sad at present because his wife has died. He erects 108 prayer flags to ease her journey to the next world.

We meet a lovely, innocent young couple. He says, and she shyly agrees, that the “happiest moment” was the birth of their first child. A trans woman, with a mother ill with cancer, is understandably “worried, scared.”

In a ramshackle house, a divorced woman lives with her two daughters. The 17-year-old explains frankly that life is difficult because her mother drinks too much. The family has no car, no refrigerator, no radio, no washing machine, although all three have cellphones. The daughter can’t find a boyfriend because her family is poor. When her parents were together, they drank and fought all the time. “Dad beat mum.”

The “agent” himself, Gurung, is unhappy because he is deprived of basic democratic rights, including the right to have a passport and travel. He writes a letter to “his majesty, the King of Bhutan,” applying for citizenship. “I’ve been working all my life. I don’t feel like an equal,” he tells the king. The citizenship issue is a “never-ending problem.” The outcome is uncertain.

This is the second film co-directed by Bhutanese Arun Bhattarai and Hungarian Dorottya Zurbó devoted to Bhutan, following *The Next Guardian* (2017), about a teenager unhappy with the prospect of becoming the next guardian of a Buddhist temple.

The filmmakers told *Documentary* magazine that they had accidentally encountered “two happiness surveyors” while making their earlier film. They had been “immediately drawn in.”

The pair

were very thoroughly asking hundreds of questions from the head of the family and then converting the replies into numerical numbers. Everything from feelings, dreams, and subjective state of mind to household items. However, what really struck us was the genuineness with which Amber was actually listening to his respondents. His warm personality quickly made people forget the official nature of the interview. He turned the situation into a conversation beyond the survey.

In a final title, the film observes that according “to

the Gross National Happiness Survey this year, 93.6 percent of Bhutanese are happy,” an increase of “3.3 percent from the previous year.” The filmmakers do not add a comment nor need to.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact