The Science of Happiness and Wellbeing

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Lecture-34

Can We Measure Happiness?

The Case of Cities and States

Good morning friends, in the last few sessions we have been focusing on what we would

call insights. Like what makes it happiest work, the relationship between emotional

intelligence and happiness. The concept of nudging which is both an intervention but more

of an insight and then of course we are looking at the context of the post pandemic which

was a part of the intervention that Professor Mandal did 4 classes earlier.

What is it exactly that we are going to focus on today? Today we are going to again look at

something which relates to insights which is can we measure happiness? When we focus on

the concept of measuring happiness, let us go back to our first few sessions and recollect

that we had a lot of difficulties in first of all articulating what is happiness. And then of

course defining standardizing the term and finding out what exactly can be defined as

happiness.

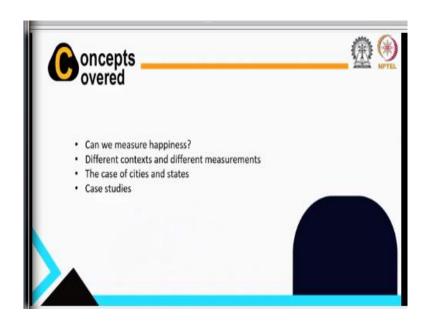
And we realized that culture, context and a lot of things went into defining happiness. Now

the moment we start talking about the measurement of happiness all the problems that we

raised in the first few classes, again come back and become very, very relevant as we go

ahead. Measurement of happiness would have 2 generic contexts.

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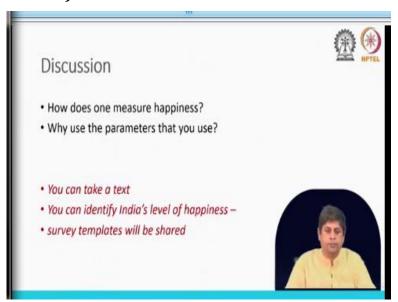
We will go into that, one would be the individual context and the other one would be the collective or the city or the state context. What is very, very relevant here is that? We go back to the same question that we raised earlier can we measure happiness? Then talk about different contexts and different measurements. We will take up the example of how measurements are made in the context of cities and states.

And then we will look at small case studies very briefly, where we have looked into or made an attempt to measure the happiness of 2 specific contexts, one is the New Town in Kolkata and the other one is the state of Madhya Pradesh.

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Now the primary focus is that as we go ahead with this discussion is that how does one measure happiness? In this particular case we will be looking at the various possible approaches that can be taken briefly and in the next session which is again about measurement Professor Mandal will focus on the individual aspect of measurement. And then the other thing is that in the context that we will be talking what are the parameters that are generally used in order to measure happiness? This is going to be the focus of today's session.

Please take note of it that you will be getting a series of very interesting links which you definitely go through and complete where you have already existing scales for identifying your level of happiness. Please correct it as test note, so you can take a text and you can also through the template that we will be sharing, measure your own level of happiness in the context of India.

So, we will be sharing the templates after the session, so that you can actually take that and we can actually share the results with you. So, that you can get an understanding where you stand both as individuals and collectively.

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If you are looking at the various contexts where measurements take place then there are 4 specific contexts that we talk about. If we start from the individual then the first thing and one of the fundamental questions is asking ourselves this question am I happy? I probably believe that all the people who are here taking this course during this course must have asked themselves quite a number of times this question, am I happy?

And that is the subjective aspect of the individual understanding of happiness. And this is generally measured through subjective questionnaires or what are known as self reports. Professor Mandal would go into the details of it. The other way that we can measure individual happiness is by inference. The first one is subjective, we cannot directly

approach somebody reports that he or she is happy; we cannot directly know for sure that this person is happy.

And the other one is inference, so our bodies behave in specific ways when we are happy and then there are physiological changes, there are brain changes. For instance non-verbally I might have manifested my happiness with smiles, a lot of energy and all that, so somebody would infer from my behaviour that this person is happy. There can be also physiological changes which take place because of my happiness, my hormonal levels would change which would get reflected even in my saliva or in my blood.

And you see that the kind of energy which is released within my body would change. The very mild current flow within my entire body as well as within my brain, they would change. Brain functionalities, activities would change and from these changes one can again infer about the level of one's happiness and as I shared with you this would be taken up in the next session. But then there are communities and relationships there is a subjective and a phenomenologically oriented focus on the element of happiness.

Something which is known as relational well-being, relational happiness, now that is where you look at your relationship with others. But here again the measurement apparently is subjective you go for a more qualitative approach, you ask questions to people, you take their viewpoints and you submit together. And consider whether a person is happy or unhappy in the context of a community, in the context of relationships.

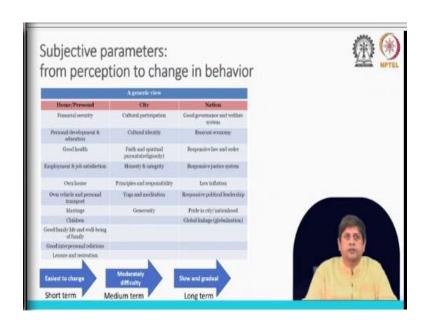
The other approach is a combination of again subjective and objective measures. What do we mean by subjective measures? Again self-reports, you ask people questions in terms of various things which make them happy or unhappy, various things which they feel good with or bad with and that accounts for the subjective measure. The objective measure would be to indirectly again by inference assume that if there are certain conditions which are good then people tend to be happier.

Research has established that there are certain conditions which are conducive to happiness like financial health, physical health, economic development, infrastructure, connectivity, banking and other facilities a lot of things are there. Let us say cultural richness, people's behaviour or generosity, people's trust, so when you start looking at these you find that some of them can be or for instance birth rate and death rate, death due to accidents and diseases.

If you look closely many of these parameters are objective parameters. Like when we are talking about let us say the mortality rate in a country this is an objective parameter, you can get solid statistics on this. Or when you are talking about the GDP of a nation, you can tangibly, clearly measure it in all objective terms. But if you are asking people are they happy with a particular kind of a facility? This is subjective.

But when you take it collectively and you get numbers then also you can translate it into statistics. So, I hope that I have been able to clarify what we mean by objective and subjective ways of approaching the measurement of happiness. And this applies both in the context of individuals as well as collective contexts like communities, cities and states.

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Now you see that this is just to give you an idea as to the significance of looking at subjective perception of people at their personal level, at a city level and at a national level. And you find that many of these things play a significant role in the understanding of happiness on a larger scale for the people. So, in the home front you might have financial security, personal development, employment, jobs satisfaction, owning a house and things like that.

But at a city level you might look at cultural participation, cultural identity, faith and spiritual pursuits, principles and responsibilities, generosity at a national level you might focus on good governance. Of course second and third set of columns can be used interchangeably but you are looking at scales. One is a micro, one is a meso and one is mega, so you can find that at 3 levels at a short, medium and long and small, medium and large at 3 levels and at 3 dimensions.

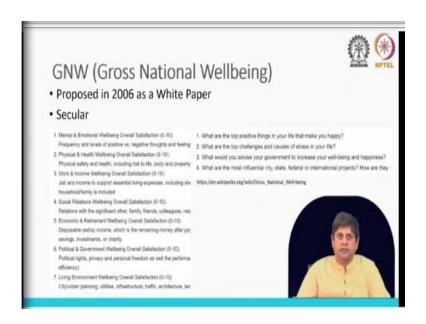
We are talking about the well-being they are interconnected but they are also different. Because the city, when we are talking about the city health we can no longer focus on individual health of a specific group of people in a small community. We have to take a overarching view of things, in a similar way when we are looking at the health of a state the happiness or the well-being of a state then we can no longer focus on specific requirements and needs of specific 1 or 2 isolated cities or villages.

We will have to look at a collectivistic context; we have to look at a more generalizable context. And then what happens is that if we go by numbers, we go by the ability to address a larger part of the community rather than everybody. And this is a very important point which can be sustains very clearly, very shortly and aptly put as you cannot make everybody happy. When you have a condition where you cannot make everybody happy what do you do? You try to make the majority of the people happy.

So, when you have a choice between not making everybody happy and making some of them happy and given that the first one is impossible would focus on making the larger part of the community happy. And then of course lot of complexities would come in terms of the fact that there might be small communities which are very, very important for the well-being of the country.

May be in terms of the resources, maybe in terms of their intellect, maybe in terms of their wealth and again these communities although small may need to be taken care of and address specially, so those complexities would come in.

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But going back if you are looking at the contexts I will go into a few examples of the way that these issues are addressed. But before that I will go back to some of the points we made earlier which is that how are we going to focus on the happiness of cities and states? And how are individuals going to be connected to those contexts? The first and the fundamental question that probably we have not answered yet, is that can we measure happiness of people?

Probably at the end of this discussion I would be able to respond to that to a certain extent. But the answer is both yes and no, you can capture a part of it but not the entirety of it and that is something which we will look at as we go ahead. So, let us say that there are a few

things which are making waves around the world and 2 of them which distinctively come to our minds and we have already discussed that in the earlier sections.

Happen to be the concept of gross national happiness which we talked about in the introductory lecture itself or the world happiness report which again we discussed about in the context of our introduction. Today it was the end of these sessions; we are going to focus if briefly in a little more detail on what these things exactly mean. I shared the slides and you can go into the details, I will not go into them.

But you are talking about gross national well-being which later got translated into gross national happiness which originated from Bhutan. The fundamental focus was on the realization that economic happiness or economic well-being does not necessarily lead to happiness. Remember that earlier we have differentiated way between happiness and well-being as well. So, you might be financially healthy, you might be physically healthy but mentally you may be unhappy nonetheless.

Now this was a problem how those economists were facing through the 60's 70's right through the 20th century. Because in spite of developments you see that Professor Mandal has already talked about can money make us happy and discussions related to Australian's paradox and other things. I have been touched upon the issues or the challenges that came up was that, if GDP does not make us happy then what does?

And it is in that particular context that we suddenly realize that an alternative concept needed to be brought in. And this was brought in very powerfully by the concept of gross national happiness. And as I had briefly shared in the introduction it caught the attention the scientists got the attention of UN the King of Bhutan proposed it. And then you see that this led to 2 developments one was their development in Bhutan for their own country of a concept known as gross national happiness which not only applied to their policies but could also be a measurable quantity.

That people could be actually asked to respond to a questionnaire through which they are across national level of happiness could be measured, we will talk about that. And the other thing which happened was those insights triggered an emphasis on the measurement of happiness which led to the world happiness report; both the things kind of run parallely.

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Although today we know that GNH is not so much in the forefront as it was right at the beginning, a lot of other things have come in. There are other examples like OECD better index where our own Professor Amartya Sen is a part of the people who have conceptualized these guidelines. You find that the focus is on housing conditions, income, jobs, community, education, environment, governance, health, life satisfaction, safety, work life balance.

Please note the parameters you will find that many of them will repeat themselves. The same things, recent concerns happen to be environmental health because we realize that if the environment is not healthy we human beings will not survive. So, our happiness becomes a question which is secondary, our survival becomes a primary question and that would depend on the well-being of the ecology or the environment.

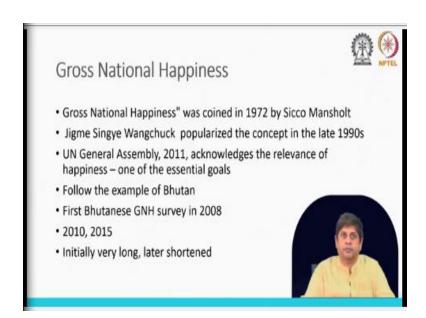
Work-life balance has come to the forefrontin the year 2015, 2020 within this period of time a lot of focus has been placed in the world happiness report itself. On work-life balance Bhutan's GNH also emphasized this to a significant extent. Because you see that the quality of life very often depends on the quality of time that you spent doing your work which is a significant part of our life.

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You also have social progress index SPI and here again you find that there are lots of indicators but they can be clubbed under basic human needs, foundations of well-being and opportunity and some non-economic measures as well. They are again inspired by Stiglitz, Sen and others.

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Coming to gross national happiness, I have talked enough about it, I will just let you look at the slides, I will not elaborate on it. But you find that the gross national happiness concept is based to a certain extent on Buddhism but then it moves away and it encompasses a more secular approach to understanding happiness and well-being. If you look at it closely it is more about well-being than about specifically about happiness.

But then as you realize and as I have said earlier the 2 terms are used interchangeably and happiness happens to be a more catchy term. And it could be you could say that it is a more populist orientation but you find it being used in that specific way across the world.

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If you are looking at the GNH you find that there are 9 groups under which classification has taken place and under them you have 33 parameters. See religion is included, cultural diversity and resilience, governance, community vitality, education, time use which is work-life balance, health, mental health. All the parameters that we are talking about in the earlier context also find place over here.

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And the way it is measured is very, very interesting. I will not go into the details of it but if you go to the references which are given here you will get a clear understanding of how they divide it. Very briefly let us say that each of the 9 domains get equal weightage and each of the subsections within that divided based on some kind of an arbitrary understanding of the significance of that particular parameter.

If you do not even go into that we realize that a lot of questions are asked the initial survey we used to take 3 hours, now or a certain version of it with more than 100 questions takes around one and a half hours. And they do it for a significant number more than 6000 people of Bhutan from different districts and different places and they ask a series of questions about these areas that we are looking at. For instance how is your health? How much time you do spend doing work? And things like that.

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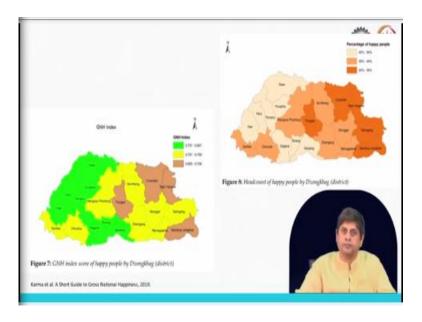


And the end of it what happens is that they kind of classify and they look for each state or for each district what is the level of let us say satisfaction you have derived? Now you see that what I mean by this is that? If you are asking somebody this question, are you happy? Then probably a lot of Bhutani's would say that they are extremely happy. But if you look

closely at them you find that their health is extremely poor, their financial health is extremely poor, they are ill-educated, they are having a tough time.

So, if you are looking at the various domains you find that if somebody is not happy in at least 6 of the 9 domains, then you would say that this person in terms of gross national happiness is not really happy. Why would you do that? Because in a spiritual country the level of happiness may be higher, our understanding is that your material requirements should be less and your level of happiness probably that is subjective happiness would be higher. Why would you do that because in the long run you are focusing on the flourishing of the country and if that is to happen. Then unless the other parameters, developmental parameters are taken care of the continued and sustained well-being of the country itself would suffer. So, it is probably in lack context that you are talking about the various aspects, not just of 1 or 2 or 3 parameters where you are extremely happy or 3 domains where you are extremely happy there are taken into consideration. So, this is explained in detail in this paper and I have given you snippets of that here.

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And in the same way you can identify which districts, which parts of the state are happier compared to other. Now I take a pause because whatever I am going to sum up in the next 5

to 7 minutes would relate to this aspect of things. Because you see that we are asking this fundamental question why measure happiness of states, countries, cities and all that. You do that not just to find out whether people are happy or unhappy but to find out what policy interventions can take place.

If you are looking at this map you might find that in a particular district in general people are less happy than the others then what do you do? You start looking at which are the areas, which are the parameters where they are less happy? Is it in the area of health? Is it in the area of governance? Is it in the area of material well-being? Is it in the area of culture, ecology? Where is it that the happiness is lacking?

Then you can introduce government interventions; try to rectify the situation that is the great significance of mapping out happiness of collectives, all groups of people through a strategy like this. So, it is not just about making a comparison among states or making a comparison among countries or cities about who is happier and who is not but identifying the causes just like a doctor, so that interventions can be utilized or used.

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World happiness index, as I told you a little earlier uses a mix of subjective and objective parameters, you are talking at GDP, you are looking at social support available health,

healthy life expectancy. Now these are all measured indirectly but objectively the stats are

available. But freedom to make life choices, perception about corruption, in general on a

Cantril ladder asking yourself the question, am I happy or unhappy? These are subjective.

Generosity again can be measured from the amount of contribution people make in a

country. And these people feel that if you are taking these parameters into consideration

then you are able to kind of explain why almost 75 percent of why people are happy or

unhappy? There might be a number of other parameters they have not been able to

consider. But why is it that they are focusing on these? Because across more than 150

countries these parameters can be collected, these parameters can be measured, these

parameters can be compared.

So, if you are going to do a pan country, at a global level a measurement of happiness then

how can you do that unless you have scope for comparison? And this is where the debate or

the problem comes up, which is that the moment you start making comparison in different

cultures, in different traditions, different things are emphasized in the context of happiness,

there would be a certain amount of disagreement.

But then in spite of these disagreements at least in terms of certain parameters you can

identify, who is doing well and who is doing not so well?

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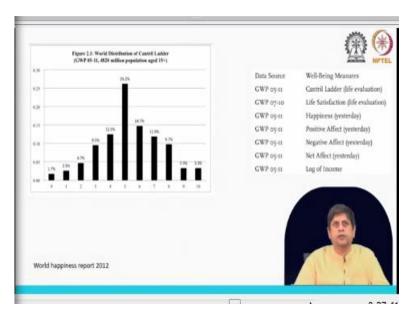
So, that is how you see that in different contexts whether it is WHR or OECD or SPI linkages are made.

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So, I am just sharing these slides to give you an understanding if you look at India, India is way down. And there are others who are way up and you start looking at the columns which deal with GDP, social support and all that. And you find that figures are indicating the amount of if they are high or their load indicating how significant they are? And when you aggregate them and you use sophisticated statistics, you come up with the ranks.

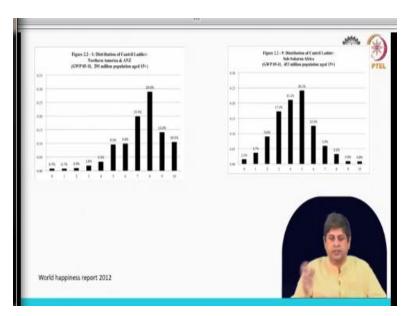
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Now again I am just touching up on some of the earlier reports one of the earliest reports 2012. And on the right hand side you can see the things which were measured where one of the important things which was also measured was the subjective well-being. Because all these parameters that we talked about a little earlier are compared or pitted against the mental well-being that people have.

So, you can say that if the various parameters that we talked about like generosity and let us say social support, health life expectancy all these parameters. And then you pit them against or correlate it with the level of happiness then you can say that okay when these parameters are high happiness level is high that correlated. When the parameters are low you find that happiness levels are low, so that is the way the measurements take place.

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And you can see shifts examples here of shifts at the center left shift or right shift indicating which countries are relatively happier, which countries are relatively unhappier. Based on the question how happy you are on the ladder of let us say 0 to 10. And then you find that these patterns happen to be correlated with the 6 parameters that we talked about.

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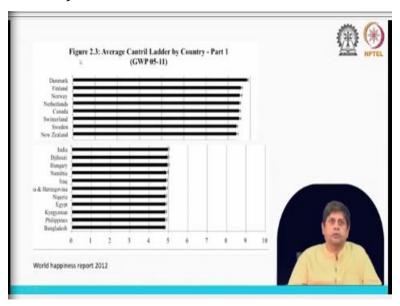


Towards the end of this discussion I will just also indicate that we did such a study in 2017 with 350 participants asking a very simple question of how happy people are. And generally you find that irrespective of conditions difficult or good a majority of the people tend to aspire for happiness. And that is why you find that people who have great potential

for unhappiness like African countries and even some of the Indian districts in different states.

Nonetheless people in spite of all the challenges try to move in the direction of happiness. On an average if a population is flourishing in terms of material well-being the number of people who are generally extremely unhappy would be very low 2 to 5 percent. And the level of unhappiness would not exceed more than 15 to 20, 20 to 25 percent and that is what you find in many of the European countries.

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So, if you are looking at the average level of happiness through the Cantril Ladder where you ask the question how happy you are? Look at the countries at the top and look at the countries at the bottom, if you find by looking at Denmark, Finland and others you find that their level of happiness is between 8 and 9. And if you are looking at countries like India, Egypt and others you find that their level of happiness is less than 5 on an average.

Well, these are figures but this kind of give some idea as to where country stand and you can identify which of these 6 parameters are playing significant roles in the level of happiness or unhappiness of these countries.

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But then these are attitudes, approaches, highly debatable, people fight about them, people come up with alternative skills to negotiate challenges for instance Gallup does a survey in India every year for 1000 people. And Gallup does a survey in India for every year; a Gallup does a survey in Bhutan every year for 1000 people. Bhutan has a population of 6 lakh; India has a population of more than 130 crore.

So, one of the fundamental questions which people ask is that is it really comparable? The sample size is it really comparable? Political affiliations are there when we visited Dubai world happiness summit these questions were raised, we had discussions related to this. Because we were not happy the way it was done, does this really represent the Indian context? 2000 people over a period of 2 years in India, does that represent the level of happiness and unhappiness of a country?

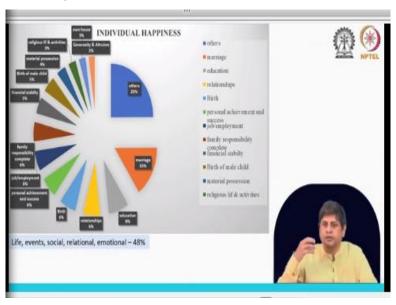
So, vast as this is Gallup doing justice to the measurement, these problems come up. But nonetheless let us look at the fundamental idea behind measurement they are very, very scientific, logical and meaningful because they can help policies.

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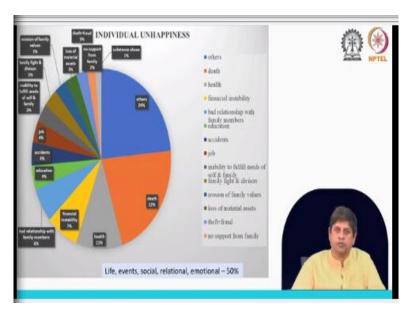
And this was an experience which helped us do 2 studies, one in New Town and the other one in Madhya Pradesh. I will not go into the details but based on the specific needs of the city or the state we identified certain domains and parameters.

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We went for detailed survey of the people ask them questions about their individual levels of happiness and unhappiness.

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And based on that we identified in each case in case of New Town 11 parameters.

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In case of Madhya Pradesh 15 parameters and these were again validated by a group of more than 60 experts in the field of happiness from across India and the world and we came up with survey templates.

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Various components of relationship
Why they are so relevant
Implications for our life and wellbeing

What I am trying to say is that these experiences that we gain and these experiences and these approaches that we have talked about so far, what are they all about? And the focus you see is that they primarily focus on the element of measurement being a very, very significant way of understanding how to improve things, entire objective the entire focus of the work is on how to improve, how to bring about a change a transformation?

And hence in that particular context whatever the approach to measurement whether it is at an individual level or at a collective level or at a state level is relevant. It can always be modified, improved, enhanced approaches; different approaches can focus on short term or long term, collective or generalizable aspects of happiness and well-being but at the end of the day this aspect of measurement of happiness across the country even inside India.

In communities, in organizations and across the world is a relevant exercise which can bring about significant changes, if the politicians across the world take heed to it. And actually go by the basic trends that are indicated by that.

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So, I hope that covers the relevant points that we have to make.

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And many of the references are within the slides and you can also go for the references given here. And I hope that those readings which our TAs will share with you, if you are interested will give you a lot of exciting food for thought about countries and their happiness, thank you.