Youth in Democracy -- the Reality

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Introduction

I was listening to my aunt discussing challenges related to the COVID-19 vaccine registration on WeChat with the people of Dotey in Paro where I grew up. I overheard the *tshogpa* (village representative): "We are currently providing lunch to our young people who have spent the last three days, going door-to-door and helping us adults register. We are proud of our youth who are naturally better with technology." This was a surprise to me because it described a new relationship between the generations.

I was accustomed to other adjectives when the older generation of Bhutanese describe the youth: "coloured hair", "porcupine-inspired hairstyles", "faded t-shirts", "provocative skirts", and "torn jeans" that were more a harsh reality than a fashion statement during their days – as a reflection of poverty, not an aesthetic choice.

When they describe youth's behaviour, it would gravitate around words such as "disrespectful", "unappreciative", "egotistical", "needlessly depressed", "unproductive" hooligans who recite "rap song lyrics" instead of *mani* (prayer), with the same religious fervour. A cultural and spiritual definition of youth would probably centre around "not bothered", "lost", "misunderstood", "apathetic" and "irresponsible". A biological definition would make use of words like "weak", "unhealthy", "fragile"; and a social definition -- "rowdy", "smokers and drinkers", "nuisance", "loud", "girls acting like boys…".

It is a smaller number that describe and, more importantly, genuinely believe that youth are "energetic", "hopeful", "potent" and "creative".

The government, however, settles for the most straightforward definition of youth, i.e. age. Officially in Bhutan, the youth are citizens within the age range of 13 to 24 years.[1] This definition of youth is chosen for bureaucratic ease and use. We must, however, not forget that youth can be defined in many ways, all of which have very important consequences on how we think, speak, and act on the subject of youth.

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[1] National Youth Policy, Department of Youth & Sports, 2011

The 15-second voice message from the Dotey *tshogpa* is a clear departure from the default narratives about the youth of Bhutan, and indicates that although the predominantly pessimistic narrative about youth still prevails, a fundamental shift is also taking place in our society on the role of youth within our democracy.

Acknowledging this shift, how can we capitalise on this to fulfill the democratic ideals enshrined in our Constitution? How might we channel a generation of youth that is malleable, passionate, energetic, naturally curious, a generation that constitutes more than half our entire population, to "love our country intelligently" as His Majesty calls us to do?[2]

However, before we talk about how to build a vibrant democracy, let us first explore how the current youth are fundamentally different from previous generations, in three distinct ways.

Youth as Digital Natives

The oldest among the youth of Bhutan, by official definition, would have been born in 1997. Two years after that, in 1999, as they took their first steps without assistance from their parents, Bhutan opened itself to television and the Internet. Since then, the deep significance of technology for our society cannot be overstated. Internationally, some scholars have even dubbed this event as "singularity", meaning "an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back".[3] This has led to categorisation of citizens born before this singularity as "digital migrants" and those born after as "digital natives".

Applying this to Bhutan, the entirety of the digital native population is made up of youth.

Such a framing helps us understand the fundamental inter-generational divide in the worldview, beliefs, values, approaches, behaviour and attitudes between youth and adults or, more appropriately, between digital natives and digital migrants. While digital migrants (read adults) may reach for a

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[2] UNFPA Bhutan, 2020
[3] Marc Prensky, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* (MCB University Press, 2001), 1.

book first for information, digital natives (read youth) will automatically reach into their pockets for their smartphones to look up any information.

Similarly, while digital migrants consume information in a linear manner, youth prefer to multitask. Prensky notes that digital natives "prefer their graphics before their text. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to serious work". In short, there is a fundamental difference in the "thinking pattern" between adults and youth.[4]

That is why, to the astonishment of digital migrants (i.e. adults), it is not uncommon to see youth watching television while they do their homework, or listening to their favourite hip-hop tunes while they study for their mathematics examination. Digital migrants genuinely believe that they are distracted and not giving 100% of their attention; meanwhile, digital natives not only feel most at home when they are "overstimulated" (by adult standards) but rely on this environment to be productive. Given this, is it such a surprise that an older speaker who takes more than 15 minutes to get to the point is automatically tuned out by youth as being irrelevant and uninteresting?

With digital technology as their "native" tongue, youth's worldview is much larger, diverse, open, and ever-shifting. Geographical boundaries have little significance to youth as they feel a very real sense of being "connected" with countries, cultures, and people the world over through the Internet. There is a greater sense of "one humanity" that shares the same fears, hopes, and dreams as members of a species.

This vast worldview also shapes and informs the values and beliefs that youth hold as digital natives. No longer are parents and teachers the sole (or even the most effective) shapers of youth's values, as was the case for decades. We have several traditional proverbs as evidence of this: "*Pha zang gi bu, Ghi zang gi shup*" (Good sons from good forefathers, good scabbards from good swords). One need only look around to see that youth spend more time being "connected" on the Internet than with either parents or teachers these days.

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[4] Prensky, 2.

Youth as Social (Media) Creatures

During one of my college breaks while I was in the US, I decided to visit New York to spend two weeks with an aunt. Since it coincided with the New Year, my aunt took us to a convention centre where Bhutanese were gathering to celebrate the event together. To my shock, I walked into a huge room with more than 250 Bhutanese people decked out in their finest *ghos* and *kiras*, with *boedra* and *rigsar* songs blasting through the PA system, *doma (areca nut)* laid out in plenty on the long tables, and hot *suja (butter tea)* being served. That day I realised that the essence of being a Bhutanese lies in our need to be socially grounded with each other.

It is this social fabric that I also see in the critical stages of life in Bhutan: our neighbour's house construction, my friend's marriage, my nephew's birth, an uncle's promotion, sickness, death and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. However, youth are a rare sight at these gatherings. Whereas an adult in Bhutan values being physically present with each other for hours, a young person may fulfil this same need through virtual mediums and format.

This shift in the form of socialisation is evident in the language that has also undergone a shift, from words such as "meeting", "visiting", and "gathering" to "Instant Messaging (IM)", "video calling", "chatting", "liking", and "sharing". It is now a common sight for youth to be dedicating their time and energy to posts, selfies, and meticulously edited TikTok videos to establish a social reputation. Needless to say, digital migrants remain baffled by the determination that youth seem to have in these endeavours, which they believe is a complete waste of time.

While a youngster from the pre-social media era might ask for a toy or a colouring book as a gift, modern youth value Internet data packages much more as the resource to socialise with friends. Apart from the changes in the platforms and language of socialisation, even the centuries-old tradition of gift-giving has been made virtual for the first time in Bhutanese history! Nevertheless, it would not be entirely correct to think of youth as anti-social creatures who are losing touch with the socially-rooted essence of being a Bhutanese, simply because they do not socialise in the way that has been common so far. The youth of Bhutan are social media creatures.

Youth as Global Citizens

Dr Karma Phuntsho mentions in an article that "Bhutan has undergone more radical change within the past 50 years than the last 500 before that".[5] I would like to build on this to reflect on the past 25 years, and compare it with the 50 years before that, or even the past 10 years compared with the 10 years before that.

It becomes clear from our experience that globalisation has taken the country by storm and remains unmatched in its speed, scope, and impact. Along with globalisation, we have also been swept up by the Fourth Industrial Revolution -- the digital revolution. We continue to witness the full impact of globalisation and the digital revolution in the dread of the COVID-19 pandemic currently.

Being born within this wave, and with no pre-digital revolution frames of reference, the youth have been significantly shaped by its forces. A young Bhutanese no longer feels confined by the boundaries of the country for work and life. As a result of globalisation and exposure, the youth of Bhutan now have a more complex value system and a global mindset. This system is based both on real life experiences and guidance from role models, as well as their digitally expanded awareness to include issues and inequalities at home and in other contexts.

If a Bhutanese accepted the status quo in earlier times and unquestioningly obeyed elders, youth now have a more awakened social consciousness. Taking youths like Greta Thunberg and Malala as role models who are passionate about ushering social change, the youth of Bhutan too can do their part in creating a better world. Compared with past generations, youth seem to carry a deeper and clearer sense of morality that has not yet been compromised by "realistic considerations" to which morals and ethics become secondary.

Supporting this observation, Dr Karma Phuntsho calls the youth of Bhutan "the least prejudiced generation".[6] Global issues such as climate change, that used to be in vogue only among specialists and policymakers,

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[5] Karma Phuntsho (Ph.D), "The Promise of Broken Youth: A Positive Perspective" in *The Druk Journal* (Kuensel Corporation Ltd, 2016), 35.
[6] Phuntsho, 36.

have now become conversation topics among youth, as they dream of a shared greener future. Likewise, youth are also more accepting of different gender identities and alternative lifestyles that challenge traditional hetero-normative beliefs.

Now that we have outlined how the current generation of youth is fundamentally different from earlier generations in three distinct ways -- as digital natives, as social media creatures, and as global citizens -- let us move on to how these unique characteristics can be leveraged to build a vibrant democracy.

Youth and Democracy

The current conversation on youth in democracy goes something like this: for adults, one stubbornly prevailing assumption is that youth cannot be trusted with important matters like "nation-building". The manifestation of this assumption can be seen in the roles that youth are invited and expected to play in our society, which largely means either following our elders' directions unquestioningly, or being token participants to help "progressive" decision-makers believe that they have given a platform for youth to voice their views. Examples of such entrenched views can be found in youth being "entertainers" at celebrations marking significant days of the year; as an "audience" when important officials visit; as "recipients" of rules, code of conduct, etc. As far as nation-building is concerned, the most that youth are invited to do is volunteer for cleaning campaigns.

For youth, the word democracy itself brings post-traumatic anxieties and stress, because it is like a question that they might see in an examination. Even if they are able to move past this initial fear and realise the everyday meaning of democracy in its various facets, they often do not know how to go about exercising their civic muscles, and taking up responsibilities without feeling that they have spoken out of place. Additionally, democracy is equated almost exclusively with just elections, and most youth fail to understand its deeper significance and implications on society.

To simplify democracy, let us take the definition as meaning "*a government of the people, by the people, for the people*". To state the same thing differently, it concerns representation (of the people), agency (by the people), and outcome (for the people). Therefore, Bhutanese democracy could be said to

be *a government of the youth, by the youth, for the youth at least half of the time* where we see democracy in action, since youth constitute roughly half of the so-called "people" in democracy.

Youth and Democratic Representation

Representation is an essential element of a democracy, because it allows representatives to reflect the views and opinions of the represented accurately, and enact policies and decisions that are in line with the collective aspirations. On the flip side, when representation doesn't find its way into democracy, decisions are made based on assumptions by representatives and decision-makers who operate completely in the dark, out of touch with the needs of the represented. Decisions made this way almost surely backfire, since they reflect, not the needs of the many, but the assumptions of a single person, or a few people.

The landscape in Bhutan currently aligns more closely with the latter, not just generally but more acutely in the case of youth.

Additionally, under the Constitution, a political representative needs to be at least 25 years old to run for office, which takes it just beyond the category of youth (i.e. 24 years). Due to this political set-up, youth do not qualify to become representatives. However, this does not impinge upon the capacity of our democracy to represent the youth's voice in decision-making, given that the channel of communication between the representatives and youth are strengthened, sustained, and transparent. Youth can offer their honest views to their representatives, who would then serve as the collective voice of youth and ensure that decisions are made in line with the aspirations of youth.

To this effect, while genuine consultations might have been an enormous challenge in the past, it has now been eased dramatically by digitalisation as well as social media, which is where youths spend most of their time. Decision-makers and representatives could leverage on the natural capacity of youth as digital natives to design and collect the youth's views on issues that are of direct relevance, through youth-friendly digital platforms. These platforms could serve, not only to collect their voices, thereby ensuring representation, but also to educate youth on how a particular issue is of relevance to them.

For example, if the education ministry is debating whether or not to remove the cut-off point for secondary education, then a platform that consults with youth and their guardians on this matter can also explain why their participation matters and also how their voices will inform the decisions that are ultimately made.

Youth and Agency

When we speak of representation, we also make two implicit assumptions regarding the ability of youth to represent their voices and views: first, that youth are able to express their voice and trust that their voice will be heard by their representatives; and second, that there are platforms available to exercise their views and engage with representatives and decision-makers.

This is where democracy goes beyond the procedural aspects of voting, which is the current level of understanding among youth, as well as some in positions of power. To add salt to this wound, our education system falls short of producing critical thinkers, coupled with societal values that discourage speaking openly and honestly. As a result, we are left largely with passive agents that do not explore the deeper significance of democracy. Due to a lack of proper democratic channels, citizens often take to social media to express their grievances on matters of current issues.

However, we must look to our democratic journey as an opportunity to nurture democratic values of exercising freedom of thought and expression, which our Constitution guarantees, along with other values of compromise, healthy discourse, impersonal exchange of ideas, equality, social justice and fairness, etc.

Such an approach is also in alignment with the sensibilities of the youth, who are by nature drawn towards dynamism and have access to global ideas. Additionally, such an inclusive approach towards youth will ensure that the youth feel that they have a stake in the country's future, and learn to care deeply about the fate of our society and country. This will also help them navigate the dangers of living within echo chambers, as digital natives who are currently at the mercy of algorithms that seek to hook their attention for as long as possible.

Another case for enabling agency within youth also concerns the moral component of our democracy. If youth are empowered to exercise their rights and responsibilities, then those in power are also held accountable. A continuous and healthy system of check and balance will ensure that representatives are in touch with those they represent. It will also allow the decisions made to reflect all relevant perspectives so that, over a long period of time, members of society do not become divided in their abilities to participate as equal citizens of a democracy.

By doing so, we will be able to nurture rational, socially intelligent, responsible, and courageous young citizens who will embrace democracy, and work hard in realising higher ideals.

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