

Dreams, Opportunities, and Realities

What is it that the young people in Bhutan aspire to? How do they perceive the world they live in? What is their pulse and plight? What are their dreams?

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A Song With a Message

A Saturday in October, 2015.

I am driving my family to Phuenstholing in an old car. In Khasadrapchu, some 15 kilometres away from Thimphu, the car breaks down. My wife is distressed since we are with our two-year old boy. Eventually we abandon the car in a nearby auto repair shop and take a cab. The taxi driver is fond of *rigsar*, modern Bhutanese music, and gives us an earful throughout the 172-kilometre journey. An upbeat, rebellious song catches my attention. My wife asks the driver to play the song again.

It's a girl's voice, and she is responding to a moral reminder from a boy who questions her behaviour and tastes. "Do you know what your grandparents will say if they see you in this unkempt hair and unbecoming clothes?" he asks.

The girl replies:

*I don't know (what they would say)
But I want to live the way I like
Coarse and untidy*

"It's a famous song," says the taxi driver, "everyone likes *raka roko*."

I found myself asking: Is this yet the clearest indication that our youth are breaking away from established sociocultural norms? The assertion that the song makes, and especially since it is a young girl singing, is strong. It has the echoes of Pink Floyd's anti-establishment outcry in their 1979 album, *The Wall*, where a chorus of schoolchildren criticises rigid schooling and demand that their teachers "leave us kids alone".

Times They Are A-Changing

A Saturday in October, 2016.

A year later, on an assignment for the *Druk Journal*, I drive to the public park by the Thimphu River. The park is popular among young people—students, teenage couples and school dropouts. A group of three neatly dressed schoolgirls accost me with beaming smiles. They are all wearing knee-high skirts, and all of them have mobile phones. “Hi uncle,” they ask, matter-of-factly, seeing me with a professional camera, “would you please take our picture?”. “Sure”, I say. And they pose like models on TV.

The three girls are from a private school, all in Class 10. “I love One Direction,” says one. “We also like Taylor Swift,” says another. “What about Miley Cyrus?” I ask. “Yes,” they say in a chorus, “Miley too.” “You know she is the bad girl of pop music,” one of them tells me. “Well, I didn’t know that,” I say.

The girls say they study hard on weekdays. Their parents work and take care of their needs. And they have their dreams: one wants to become a teacher, another a doctor, and the third a businesswoman. But they worry that a college education may not get them a job. They have heard, from their teachers, of jobless university graduates. “All this is confusing sometimes,” says Tshering Dema, 15. “You work hard, do well in exams, and then you fail to get a job.”

The Hong Kong Market area in the heart of Thimphu is not a place to visit at night. Many scuffles involving youth, especially out-of-school boys, have been reported in its narrow lanes and dark crevices. On a Sunday evening, I approach a group of four boys goofing among themselves. They don’t seem like bad boys, and answer my questions politely. One of them, Kuenzang Dorji, 20, says he failed twice in Class 10 and is now working as a dancer in a nightclub. His two friends are studying in Kelki Higher Secondary School, the fourth one is unemployed.

The boys say they are confused about the future. Kuenzang Dorji went back to his village after he failed to make it to Class 11, but found village life boring. So he decided to come to Thimphu and do something on his own. After months of frustrating job hunting, he was finally taken on by a *drayang*. He is ‘OK’ for now, but has bigger dreams in life, to own a nightclub of his own. Kuenzang Dorji’s unemployed friend says he will continue to look for a job although, while in school, he had wanted to be a civil servant.

These girls and boys represent Bhutan's youth, between 13 and 24 years. Official records indicate that more than half the Bhutanese population is below the age of 25. While a majority of them are in schools, both formal and non-formal, many have left school, and a substantial number are unemployed. What makes these young people vulnerable is that they have to confront numerous challenges, as individuals and peers, as they struggle to transit from dependence to independence. And what makes this transition even more complex is that they grow up with the burden of family and social expectations heavy on their shoulders. While parents want them to be “*zhungyogpa*” (civil servants), the society expects them to be “good and productive citizens”.

However, at this stage in life, their common aspiration seems to be about independence: not just in the ability to choose what they want to do, but also in their idea of a future created out of personal choice. Does this mean they are tilting towards the Western idea of individual freedom? This quest for freedom, often spurred by unregulated social media content and TV, is a matter of choice that young people want to make for themselves.

Social Media's Homogenising Effect

In Bhutan, social media is already having a huge effect in galvanising youth into a broad homogenised group. Young people speak a common language woven out of their daily interactions and grow up sharing similar aspirations. Their shared experience and aspirations gradually give them a new identity. Social psychologists like Elliot Aronson, Timothy D. Wilson, and Robin M. Akert define youth identity as self-concept, informed by internal and external factors, that combines with self-awareness to develop a cognitive representation of the self. While internal factors include things like family and social values, external factors increasingly extend to behavioural, attitudinal, and cultural influences from mainstream and social media like TV, Internet, radio, FaceBook and other digital media.

The mobile phone and Internet are the most popular networking tools among youth. Easily accessible and downloadable mobile applications like short messaging services, WeChat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc. have become popular interactive platforms. Young people connect instantly to each other using these social networks, and the bond is often cemented by shared experience and aspirations.

There are increasing numbers of young music and dance bands. There are those interested in volunteer activities, and there are others exploring entrepreneurial

ideas together. These shared experiences and aspirations have also led to a common lifestyle, especially in the way young people dress, their idea of relationships, and in their taste for music and films. Young people say their lifestyle is changing and will continue to evolve.

For many young girls, equal rights have become an important agenda in their quest for a more just society. While life for women is becoming less stereotypical, they feel women still have a lot of catching up to do in areas like leadership and politics. They say the present generation of girls is more comfortable about who they are and who they want to be than their elders were.

Give Us the Skills

At the Royal Thimphu College (RTC) in Ngabiphu students are preparing for their final exams. It's a bright sunny day and the blue sky is spotless. I introduce myself to a number of them to talk about what happens next in their life after RTC. Many are unsure. Some haven't thought about it. Some are worried. They say it has been a substantial investment for their parents to send them to a private college for a three-year bachelor's degree. Are they happy with what the formal school system has made out of them? The response is mixed.

The current education system doesn't prepare them for the real world. They say it doesn't provide them with opportunities to pick up life skills even as they progress from junior to higher classes. Some say the learning environment must improve in the country's schools. There must be change in teaching methods and curricula, and more focus on vocational and technical training. They want training, they want entrepreneurial skills, and they want cognitive skills. So, given that more than 4,500 of the currently 8,660 unemployed are youth, is Bhutan's education system failing its young people?

A recent report by the Labour and Human Resources Minister to the members of the National Assembly states that there are enough jobs available if the unemployed are willing to take them up. The construction and industries sectors could absorb around 8,000 workers at any given time. The minister also reported that the unemployment rate had slightly reduced from 2.9 percent in 2013 to 2.5 percent in 2015. However, youth unemployment still stands at 9.2 percent, and is likely to increase with thousands of young educated people entering the job market each year.

Employers say these young people rarely have any real skills. In fact, an Indian expatriate worker recounts a case where his plumber colleague had taken on a young Bhutanese as his apprentice only to find out that the boy was drinking his wages away every evening. And one day the boy just disappeared without any notice.

The good news, however, is that young people seem to be realising that life after school is all about skills. Tshering Khenden Namda is an 18-year-old high school graduate in Thimphu. She is currently undergoing a short tour guide training organised by the Guides Association of Bhutan. She also attends Chinese language school in the evening. Guide training and language class, she says, are giving her some serious life skills. She feels the country's education system must spread options to non-traditional fields like acting and theatre so that young people are able to do what they want to do.

In the near future, according to some interviewees, the government must prioritise building better colleges with better teaching-learning environments. There have already been some positive indications, especially from the Education Ministry's recent nationwide exercise in revisiting the school curricula. The best solution perhaps to bridge the ever-widening gap between current employment opportunities and young jobseekers is life-skills training.

Taking advantage of Information Communication Technology for self-employment is an option youth must explore, say experts. Thimphu TechPark CEO, Dr. Tshering Cigay Dorji, says that although the number of self-employed is small right now, there is potential for more people to be self-employed through jobs on online platforms like onework.com and freelancer.com.

The TechPark currently houses five foreign companies, a data centre, and an incubation centre for entrepreneurs and employs around 830 Bhutanese youths, about 60 percent women. A major mandate of the Park is to support youth with business ideas to start businesses through its incubation centre.

Entrepreneurship Is a Serious Option

A large number of youth participated in observing the Global Entrepreneurship Week 2016 from 14 through 20 November in Thimphu. Most young people came to listen to experts and some successful young entrepreneurs. They were hoping to be inspired about the potential of self-employment through small and micro businesses.

While some were interested in agriculture-based small business, others were looking at youth-led social ventures. However, as successful entrepreneurs shared their stories and expert panels discussed the business climate and opportunities available, many young men and women were left bewildered, vacillating between hope and despair. Access to finance was still difficult, and markets were often hostile, they were told.

Ram Bahadur Tamang (name changed on request)—a university graduate from Sherubtse College who has given up hope of landing a job after applying to several places for the past two years—tells me he is seriously considering agribusiness back home in Tsirang. He wants to experiment growing kiwi fruit and is planning to seek help from the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries. But he has a problem—he has no money. His hopes were further dashed when, during one of the panel discussions on ‘Access to Finance, Opportunities, and Impediments’, a Bhutan National Bank official said banks are wary about young people and their business ideas.

“So, where do I begin?” asks an exasperated and desperate Ram Bahadur, when I catch up with him after the panel discussion. “You just heard from the banks. Tell me, shouldn’t they support the youth who are enthusiastic about doing things on their own?”

Officials of Bank of Bhutan say loan applications are appraised on the merits of the proposal based on the viability of the project, and there invariably are cases where project proposals are rejected. The Bank of Bhutan was also a stakeholder in the Labour Ministry’s Entrepreneurial Development Programme (EDP) under which the Bank provided collateral-free loans to young entrepreneurs. The idea was that these trained and aspiring entrepreneurs would develop viable business plans and the Bank would fund them in the range of Nu 500,000 to 1 million. If the project failed, the government covered 60 percent of the loss and the Bank wrote off the other 40 percent. Officials say the programme failed, possibly because entrepreneurs did not have a personal stake in the project. Almost half of the 44 EDP borrowers defaulted on their loans.

These stories of loan defaults certainly discourage young men and women like Ram Bahadur who are eager to begin their life independently. They want economic opportunities and show a genuine desire to start their own enterprises. But access to finance remains the biggest hurdle for them. Rural lending is further limited. And officials say the lack of regulation in financing business start-ups limits banks in funding new projects.

Experience abroad has shown that when young entrepreneurs start new businesses they create jobs and help shape local economies. Many young Bhutanese entrepreneurs have already proven this. This includes scores of Vocational Training Institute graduates who have started tailoring shops, bakeries and furniture shops across the country. The scale is small but people are guaranteed a decent livelihood. This indicates that tailored youth development strategies do have an impact almost immediately.

Global Outlook, Local Identity

In what appears like a dispiriting local climate, young people have now started to look abroad for opportunities. While the Ministry of Labour's overseas employment programme is absorbing increasing numbers of young jobseekers, others are taking the initiative themselves to go to destinations like Australia and the Middle East.

“Our students must be taught to look at the whole world like a potential job market,” says Tshering Khenden Namda. “Young people must go abroad, work hard, and bring back different experiences. However, wherever we live and work, we should never forget our culture and tradition.”

Indeed, most youths I talked to for this assignment echoed Tshering Khenden Namda's nationalist sentiments. They see the country's culture and tradition as the major anchor of national identity. Some feel the value systems must be strengthened given the onslaught of imported values. Globalisation is real and young people will certainly internalise some foreign values because of continuous exposure to mass media. But the quest to preserve and promote the country's unique national identity plays a big role in reining in occasional stray attitudes.

“I find it sad when I see my brother's interest in our festivals dwindling,” says Tika Devi Pokhrel, a student at RTC. “In the past when festivals approached all of us used to get excited about celebrating it with our family and relatives. Today, festivals have become holidays for young people to spend time with their friends.”

Happiness Is the Ultimate Goal

Bhutan's development framework of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has continued to guide the nation's and its people's life. However, the larger concept is constantly put under the scanner when people measure the levels of their individual or family's happiness. In a similar vein, youth say GNH must result in real-life happiness for the people. What does this mean?

For young people it means economic independence, ability to do what they want to do, equal opportunity for women and men, and a level of individual freedom. Attitudes seem to be changing too. I met Yangchen Om, 20, a high school graduate, selling homemade chilli pickle door-to-door. She feels a part of the problem lies with youth and their attitude towards menial jobs. She is optimistic that people like her will always find decent jobs if they are willing to take them up. “We must face the truth, and be willing to work hard,” she says. “We might not always get what we want and that shouldn’t disappoint us. At the end, it’s all about being able to stand on your feet. It’s about finding some happiness.”

In a way, Yangchen Om more or less sums up what the lofty vision of Bhutan’s National Youth Policy calls for:

Generations of Bhutanese young men and women, boys and girls, sons and daughters, nurtured with love and care, the benign image of the useful and the graceful, the living, flowing breath of the ideal of Gross National Happiness, at peace with themselves, at peace with society.” Similarly, the National Employment Policy states: “Happiness is not possible if people are not gainfully employed and are unable to provide suitable and sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families.

As I figure out the best way to end this assignment, I decide to revisit the protest song. And every time I listen to it I imagine the young boys and girls I come across in the streets of Thimphu. What a treasure they are, I think to myself. Like me, they are all trying to find happiness, give purpose to life, and live meaningfully. I too sat for interviews to land my first job as a teacher, and in the past 16 years of my career I have changed jobs six times. There have been happy moments and there have been moments of regret and sorrow. But this girl, who calls herself coarse and carefree, wakes me to the philosophical reality of life with the last two lines of her song:

Happiness and sorrow are part of life
But I would rather sing about happiness.

[the end]