

Raising Them Right: Role of Adults in Shaping Youth

Pem Lama

With more than half the Bhutanese population under the age of 25, youth play an important role in building Bhutan's future. In almost every Royal address, His Majesty the King highlights the importance of youth in developing the country and carrying the torch forward. However, it is also very common to read news on youth-related problems and hear parents and older people complain that “youth these days” (*dhari naba gi alu ditsbu*) are irresponsible, hopeless and a burden on society. Youth-related problems include substance abuse (drug and alcohol), juvenile delinquency, unemployment (and thus economic dependence on family), crime, apathy, increasing suicide rates and unsafe sexual practices, to name a few. These issues are of great concern to society and many adults blame youth for these problems.

We have a tendency to demonise youth instead of considering them a beacon of hope. How did young Bhutanese get that image? Are today's youth not concerned about becoming good, productive citizens? Or are they victims of social problems? To address youth-related issues, we must dig deeper and identify the factors that make youth complacent, delinquent, and sometimes dangerous young adults. More importantly, we must find ways to mould young minds into hopeful, passionate, and valuable individuals in our society.

I strongly believe that, among other equally important factors, society and adults (parents, families, teachers and policymakers) play a major role in how a child develops into an adolescent and then a young adult. Based entirely on my personal perspective, this anecdotal article focuses on the role of adults in contributing to youth issues as well as in helping to address them.

As parents, guardians and teachers, adults play a crucial role in child development. What adults teach and model, determines how children around them will think and act. This means that adults play an important role in moulding young minds. Consequently, adults must understand the current context of a fast-changing world and be able to adjust their own mindset and approach when guiding youth. This

implies that adults should themselves be guided by the ethics, values and principles that they deem important in the local and international context. In Bhutan, the older generation's tendency to romanticise the “good old days” and the “good old values” creates a divide between what they think the young generation *should* value and what *is* actually relevant in the current world that youth live in.

Borrowing from the Buddhist framework of *ku-sung-thug* (body-speech-mind), let me elaborate on how adults are influencing youth development through their actions, words and mindsets.

First, let us look at some actions of adults that impact children as they grow up. There is a saying that “It takes a village to raise a child” and indeed it does. Raising a child is not just about making rules and providing for them. Since a child learns mostly through emulation, it is imperative that all adults (not just parents) become good role models. Unfortunately, youth experience much stress, anxiety and depression as a result of exposure to separation/divorce, alcoholism, or violence in their homes and communities in Bhutan.

Exposure to domestic violence—which is not uncommon in our country—can desensitise a young child to violence and, as a young adult, they may use violence as a means of conflict resolution. Alcoholic parents/guardians are not only unable to guide young members of their family, but they also influence them negatively. Punishment and scolding at home and in school hinder child development and normalise violent behaviour. By modelling violent behaviour, adults can indirectly embolden youth to engage in crime, gang-violence, and other dangerous behaviour. The buck does not stop there.

Adults model other behaviours that are seriously damaging to child development such as succumbing to the “show-off” culture, complacency at work, infidelity, altercation with family/neighbours, corrupt practices, disingenuous respect and excessive deference to authority, and hypocrisy. These actions, while not unique to Bhutan, are noticeably present and, I dare say, some of them are socially accepted. Socially-accepted may be a strong term but, in the absence of any real effort to curb such behaviour, it is fair to say we have chosen to live with them. If we expect young Bhutanese to be productive citizens with the right values, adults must exhibit these first.

Second, let us consider some general advice I received growing up in the 1990s and 2000s: “*study hard*” (meaning prioritise text books over extracurricular activities), “*be obedient*”, “*respect elders*” (their opinions), “*become a doctor or an engineer*”, “*get a job in*

the civil service”, “*become a dasho*”, “*don’t speak about that subject in public*”, etc. While delivered with good intention, such advice did little to build my character or hone my analytical mind—two extremely valuable traits for adult life, including in the workplace.

Most young adults today—say from the ages of 21-35—have grown up hearing similar things from their parents, teachers and elders. Let me be clear, I *do* find some value in the advice I received. I fully understand that the older generation, having been brought up at a time when Bhutan was just beginning to modernise (and do away with the feudal system), saw the value of literacy, enjoyed their first desk jobs and bought their first cars and developed similar aspirations for their children.

But the Bhutan I experienced and grew up in during the 1990s was different. Advice such as: “*don’t live your life in front of the television*”, “*do what you are passionate about and what you have skills to do*”, “*be constructively critical of what you hear and see*”, “*don’t discriminate (based on gender, race, ethnicity, etc)*”, “*treat everyone with respect and dignity*”, “*be of service to others*”, would have been more relevant as it encourages children to be responsible, sensible and critical-thinking individuals. Armed with such traits, young people would eventually become productive citizens, contributing meaningfully towards Bhutan’s development in whatever capacity they wish to, regardless of their profession, skills and qualification.

Third, let us examine the impact of the mindset of the older generation on youth. Older Bhutanese—say those that were born in between the 1930s to 1950s—grew up in an isolated Bhutan with traditional values and limited access to the global world. Technologically-driven change, while certainly not unique to Bhutan, has had a more severe impact on our society. We have taken a direct leap, so to speak, from being a traditional society to having access to information available to the rest of the world. Today’s youth are growing up in a very different, more complex world than that of their parents and grandparents. The older generation nurtured a more traditional set of values such as preference for secure desk jobs (non-laborious work), adherence to cultural norms, high regard for authority, and maintenance of strong family ties (dependence on family).

These values in themselves are not bad but with that mindset, adults carry expectations of young ones that are at odds with the Bhutan we live in today. Youth’s disdain for blue-collar or vocational jobs, their lack of initiative or their arrogance (because they have a family security net to fall back on), can be linked to the mindset with which they were raised. What’s more, failure to meet the (unrealistic)

expectations of their parents and society can lead to stress, depression, suicide and drug use.

Today's youth have been shaped by Internet and television in addition to the influence of their immediate surroundings, causing a tremendous increase in the generational gap and compounding the problem of discordant values and mindsets. Young people in Bhutan embody dual or multiple identities based on their experience of living in Bhutan and abroad (for studies) as well as what they see on TV and Internet. For example, young adults seek individuality and independence and are increasingly moving out of their homes—from other districts to Thimphu or even within Thimphu—to lead their own lives.

However, if they have not been well-equipped with the education, skills or attitude to succeed as a young adult, they end up living with friends or relatives with little guidance and may very well resort to stealing, crime or maybe even prostitution in order to support their city lifestyle. By sticking to strict traditional values and an orthodox mindset in a country that is now much closer to the global community, we are raising children who are prone to delinquency and a developing identity-crisis. In order to solve this dilemma, adults must keep up with the fast-changing world and adjust their mindset to raise children in the Internet age.

The sad fact is that the majority of Bhutanese parents will not read this article and will never recognise the responsibilities articulated here. Parents are illiterate or busy, or perhaps just ignorant and complacent which makes it difficult to change the status quo. Therefore, it is important that policymakers and bureaucrats provide guidance to parents in raising children who are responsible and dynamic citizens.

Role of Parents and Society

Since adults play a crucial role in raising children, we must ask, how can they be a part of the solution instead of the problem? The short answer is that they must take a step back and re-evaluate their actions, words and thoughts. They must be role models, they must teach children *how* to think and not what to think and, most importantly, they must also change their mindsets.

Recently, I attended a talk by author and monk Matthieu Ricard who spoke about cultivating altruistic love and compassion as the best means of benefitting ourselves and those around us.¹ A finding from one of his surveys particularly caught my

¹Ricard, Matthieu. *Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World*

attention: when people were asked whether they would function from a place of altruism, 20 percent of the surveyed population said they would, no matter what the situation, and 20 percent said they would not. The remaining 60 percent said they would be altruistic only if other people did the same. This “contingent altruism” from the majority presents an interesting case. It implies that a majority of the population is reactionary. In the context of this article, it suggests that most young people are just reacting to the environment they live in. They are simply emulating what they see around them. Therefore, adults—parents, teachers, policy-makers—need to set good examples.

Similarly, US President Barack Obama said that while he does strive to make better laws, some changes have nothing to do with passing new laws and that: “in fact, the most important change may be the toughest of all—and that is changing ourselves”.² Although he was talking about feminism and the need for change in attitudes towards women, I believe the message is equally relevant in the context of raising children and guiding the youth of Bhutan. By being role models through their behaviour and actions, adults can change youth behaviour and mindsets. In practice, it can mean modelling behaviour within the family circle or mentoring in professional settings. There is a poor mentorship culture in Bhutan, so starting one can be a real way in which we change the dynamics of the relationship between adults and youth.

In addition to giving the relevant advice discussed earlier, adults must in fact alter the way they speak to children to nourish positive psychological and emotional traits in them. Children need to feel empowered, accepted and respected if they are to develop any sense of responsibility. Along the same lines, *actually talking* about family values and social values is an important aspect of how young minds learn what is important. Generally speaking, not only are we a muted and inexpressive culture, but Bhutanese families are also too consumed by their mobile phones.

What I find particularly intriguing is that when guests visit, some families turn on the television as a form of hosting and entertaining the guest. In the early 2000s, I recall getting excited about visiting my aunt because I could watch cable television which my parents had not yet subscribed to. Little did I know that this signalled the beginning of a complete upheaval in the way we socialise. But getting back to the point about speaking to one another and interacting face-to-face, I believe a “re-reorientation” to the times when families sat down at dinner or around the fire and talked to one another is essential in ensuring that young people listen and learn about various topics including values, morals and ethics.

²Obama, Barack. 2016. <http://www.glamour.com/story/glamour-exclusive-president-barack-obama-says-this-is-what-a-feminist-looks-like>

Finally, when it comes to changing the mindset of adults towards children and youth, first and foremost, adults must understand and empathise with the younger generation. They must believe that, given the right guidance, youth have immense potential. The constant portrayal of youth in a negative light only reinforces the idea that they are “problems”. But equally, adults should not patronise children because they think they are still “young”. Instead, they must empower them from an early age, give age-appropriate responsibilities, and view them as capable beings who are creative, motivated, and eager to contribute to society.

We must also encourage less dependent relationships between parents and children. While providing a social safety net is a positive aspect of Bhutanese culture, parents should stop delivering their children’s needs/wants on a platter and begin to embrace some aspects of Western society where young adults are expected to stand on their own feet. Adults in Bhutan must see their role as providing their children with all the tools and support to one day become independent. There is a great fear, and rightfully so, that once children are independent they will leave the parents. Some parents may actually try to maintain their relationship with their children through this dependency. I feel there is an alternative approach where parents can grow this relationship without relying on (financial or emotional) dependence.

Role of Institutions and Policymakers

Given the challenge presented by parents who are illiterate or not concerned about the impact of misguided youth on society, it is important for us to consider what types of government intervention can help create a more positive environment to raise children.

Firstly, I believe creating incentives, or at least reducing disincentives, for parents to engage with their children can be effective in developing family-friendly policies. For example, appropriate maternity and paternity leave or work hours that match school hours can be introduced to ensure working parents spend sufficient time with their children. For illiterate parents, schools could create avenues for teachers and parents to engage with each other outside designated parent-teacher meetings (which happens mostly after exams currently). Another creative solution could be to formulate student assignments that involve engaging with family members.

Secondly, the government can encourage positive interaction between youth and adults by introducing more mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities. When pursuing my undergraduate studies in the US, I was impressed by the variety and

amount of internship, unpaid work opportunities and alumni mentorship programs available to us. We could create a similar environment here in Bhutan to ensure young adults are equipped for their working life and have the skills to function and contribute in the “real world”.

Thirdly, the government could take direct action and create an agency (or collaborate with a non-government organisation) to provide knowledge and guidance in parenting and raising children. Interactive programmes, mass communication materials (newsletters, articles, TV shows) and counselling are some of the activities this organisation could provide. Through such intentional and direct intervention, the adult population can be informed and influenced. At the very least, such an intervention can help ignite a wider community conversation.

In conclusion, I feel adults and society at large play a vital role in youth development and thus youth issues. To address these issues constructively, all of us must recognise our roles and responsibilities in raising children. We must be willing to work on ourselves and in our institutions to create the right environment for the young population. Above all, we must start a new narrative based on His Majesty’s hope and faith in young Bhutanese and work on preparing them today so they can deliver tomorrow.