

Recreation for Youth

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“We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Bhutan has always been in the global spotlight with a positive image especially when it comes to national drivers such as the famed philosophy of Gross National Happiness and environment-friendly policies. The assumption has been that Bhutanese people are happy, being somewhat removed from the global pursuit of material wellbeing. This would include Bhutanese youth, who in the past were given responsibilities within the family and the community. So much so that, just one generation back, children were too busy with household chores to be sent to school.

But the situation has started changing. Youth have been involved in increasing incidences of crime and juvenile delinquency, and the trend seems to be accelerating, if records from the Royal Bhutan Police are any indication. In the past three years, 80 students were convicted for various crimes across the country. In the past year alone 323 drug-related cases were reported in which 515 persons were arrested, 272 of whom were youth between 18 and 24 years.

A drug crackdown carried out by the police from December 2013 to September 2015 nabbed 1,413 suspects, of whom 718 were between 18 and 24 years, 100 below 18 years, and 614 were 25 years and above. Of the total arrested, 195 were students. And this may be just a microcosm of youth crime in Bhutan.

One is naturally tempted to ask: “Why?”

Why are Bhutanese youth increasingly resorting to crimes like substance abuse, drug trafficking, and even gory violence?

One of the most important factors that shapes youth is the way they spend their free time. It is what builds their character and prepares them for the future. Of the total Bhutanese population of 782,721, almost 29 percent fall below the age of 15. How

do they spend their free time? Are they engaged in healthy pastimes, hobbies and extracurricular activities that will hone their talents, refresh them, teach them new skills and make them productive? Statistics indicate that they are not.

A classic example is television. After the advent of the tube less than two decades ago, an increasing number of Bhutanese, including youth, watch TV during their free time, which leads to emotional desensitisation and sedentary lifestyles, making them “fatter, not fitter”. It has been argued that slashing TV time by selecting programmes discretely should be every household’s priority, especially one that has growing children.

Groucho Marx once said: “I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set I go into the other room and read a book.”

Another example of potentially harmful recreational technology is social media. Youth these days are so active on social media that they seem to have forgotten what real networking is. People need people. They need human bonds, warmth and conversation, which unfortunately seem to have been replaced by social media. Arguably, social media is a powerful and useful tool but, as with any other activity, can become an obsession and be misused. One has to know when to draw the line.

There are numerous other interesting, worthwhile and wholesome hobbies like reading, writing, sports and craftwork, art, photography, scrapbooking, trekking, camping and so on for youth. The list is endless given time, inclination, resources and facilities. The idea is to engage youth productively, think long-term and prepare them for a future as healthy, responsible individuals who are also responsible members of society, citizens who care for their motherland. When we have responsible children, we will have responsible adults and that goes a long way to building societal and national harmony.

But currently, a potential avalanche seems to be looming in Bhutanese society with youth plunging headlong into unhealthy pastimes. A cursory glance around any bar, discotheque, snooker room or *drayang* in town will show them packed with young crowds. The most popular pastime is drinking. The Department of Industry of the Ministry of Economic Affairs revealed that, as of 31 December 2015, 666 bars were operational in Thimphu *Dzongkhag*. Another 3,646 bars are distributed across other *dzongkhags*: that would mean an average of 191 bars each in the other 19 *dzongkhags*. In Thimphu alone, there are eight discotheques, 14 *drayangs*, 32 karaoke bars and 29 snooker rooms. The rest of the *dzongkhags* have 12 discotheques, 31 *drayangs*, 112 karaoke bars and 111 snooker rooms.

The implications are huge, the stakes high. What are we teaching our youth? That drinking is okay at a time when alcoholism is one of the biggest problems plaguing Bhutan, leading to health issues, addiction and divorce as well as unwanted pregnancies and abortions? It is worrying that drinking is not considered a serious social evil because it is a cultural norm in Bhutan, especially in the rural areas. Some adults interviewed said they didn't see discotheques or bars as a social malaise. In fact, they were of the opinion that going out made youth smarter, worldly-wise, and exposed them to realities.

The National Assembly's Human Rights Committee reported in the 4th Session of the Second Parliament that women are being exploited in various ways in *drayang*s. They also reported that *drayang*s are an eyesore and a source of noise pollution. The committee raised concerns to the Ministry of Information and Communications inquiring about the rules, regulations and existing norms in place to govern entertainment in *drayang*s. These facilities and the collateral damage they inevitably cause did not exist in the past when Bhutan was isolated. People were poorer but much closer to each other and happier. While development and modernisation have brought wealth, efficiency and ease of living, they have also brought an onslaught of problems.

Do we not offer enough opportunity and facilities for our youth to overcome the temporary lure of nicotine, alcohol, drugs, raucous crowds and deafening music? For instance, reading offers the keenest pleasure to book browsers and bibliophiles alike and is a simple activity that can transform even the most base personality.

As US president, Abraham Lincoln, said: "A capacity and taste for reading gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others". Extensive research shows how reading the right material develops the intellect, enhances creativity, activates the flow of ideas, makes us well-spoken, whets the appetite for learning, boosts confidence, keeps us open-minded and up to date with current affairs and helps develop etiquette.

Maybe the questions that parents, policymakers, society and civil society organisations need to ask is: Are we offering the right recreational facilities to our youth? What does Bhutan have to offer youth who want to relax, unwind and basically just have fun? Do we have enough standard reading material for our youth? Do we have outlets to channel their energy and creativity in ways that would do them good? Do we give opportunities to youth to learn life values as they play?

Currently, the Thimphu Thromde has constructed recreational parks in four locations: Changlimithang, Changjiji, Motithang and Babesa, and several outdoor gyms plus the Clock Tower Square. However, there is just one public library and only five bookstores in Thimphu for a population of 120,000.

There are two full basketball courts and three half courts in Thimphu, apart from the school courts. The Bhutan Football Federation (BFF) has constructed two football grounds (one at Changjiji and another at Changlimithang). Schools in Thimphu have one each. Full basketball courts can be hired at Nu 500 per match from 1-2pm and Nu 1,000 per match after 5pm. The football grounds constructed by the BFF can be used for Nu 4,500 per match in the mornings and daytime, while at night, as electricity is used to light up the facility, Nu 5,500 is charged per match. These facilities however are available only to those who can afford to pay the fees.

The National Sports Federation (NSF) also conducts summer/winter coaching camps for various sports. Meanwhile, the Bhutan Olympic Committee (BOC) is making available 15 sports including two new sports (judo and karate) to youth in collaboration with the NSF during numerous sports camps and coaching courses after school. All this is good. But is providing good recreational facilities enough? It does not matter how much money is pumped into these facilities if the average youth does not have access to them.

According to police, peer pressure is the dominant reason given for substance abuse by youth but stress and lack of parental involvement in children's lives also play a part. This is a worrying matter which more rules and regulations do not address at its root. What is needed is an innate sense of values and principles. And how do we go about inculcating these principles in our youth?

Again, it starts early in the family. If parents are to bring up children with stellar values, they have to "walk the talk". Be there for play, during meal hours, during rough days. Instill the habits. Take them for a walk in the woods (we have plenty), or spend time with them in a park. Enjoy. Play. Talk. Listen. Or just let them daydream. Browse through books with them (with a little research, you can find plenty of quality reading material). Help them love stories and reading. Teach them to appreciate nature. Teach them not to litter. Teach them the value of money. Teach them to love and share. Teach them to respect and wait their turn.

American author Anne Ortlund writes: "Like it or not, what you are and do will speak so loudly that they (your children) can't hear what you say. They will become

like you.” Instilling the right values in children will help them adopt the right habits and behavioural patterns through their teens and adulthood. Basically you are teaching them right from wrong, and encouraging them to cleave to what is right.

It is heartening to know that Bhutan is concerned and taking steps towards fostering a community of healthy and sound youth. The Department of Youth and Sports under the Education Ministry has been allocated a budget of Nu 8.9 million for the financial year 2016-17. Some of the major interventions identified by the department for the year include capacity building for out-of-school youth, promoting governance and democratic principles among youth groups, and initiating the National Youth Award.

Additionally, in the 11th Five Year Plan (FYP), sport has been identified as a separate sector in the national development agenda. Therefore, with support from the government, the BOC has planned multi-sports halls and football fields across the country besides other sports facilities. BOC, with support from the Olympic Council of Asia, has already managed to construct some multi-sports halls in the *dzongkhags*. In collaboration with other international partners, it is planning to establish more sports facilities in the near future. The government has allocated approximately Nu 350 million to BOC for developing these sports facilities.

Meanwhile, Thimphu Thromde is planning to build three more parks in Olakha, Dechenchholing and Taba. Not making recreational facilities exclusively Thimphu-centric could also prove a boon to youth across the country.

“As the twig is bent, the tree inclines.”

-Virgil, 70-19 B.C