

The Promise of Broken Youth: A Positive Perspective

Karma Phuntscho

It was a grey evening in the summer of 2014. I was invited to an *ad hoc* meeting in the attic of a hotel in Thimphu. In the wake of the furor over the government’s initiative to start what it called “meat processing units”, and what its critics saw as slaughterhouses, in a peaceful Buddhist country, some animal lovers assembled to discuss ways of convincing the government against its plans. I was asked by an expat friend to join them to share my views. More than a dozen young adults including journalists, social workers, and expats sat around a table, talking mostly in English.

At the end of one row sat two elderly ladies, grey haired, mostly dressed in red, pulling the beads of their rosaries. I knew one of them but both, I discovered later, were staunch animal saviours who have spent their family fortunes to rescue animals from being killed for meat. The meeting went on for about an hour, touching on a wide range of issues related to animal welfare, meat eating, and government projects. A draft document showing the government’s plan to construct large piggeries and cattle sheds was passed around, and the meeting concluded with a suggestion that the group obtain adequate proof of the government’s final decision before planning any action against it. There was no follow up and nothing, as far as I know, came of the meeting towards deterring the government from setting up its meat production units.

The meeting, however, triggered many thoughts on the socio-cultural dynamics of Bhutan. As I walked home, I reflected on how the two generations of Bhutanese, distanced by linguistic and cultural gaps, converged to fight for a common cause—essentially a compassionate society—through different modes and approaches. While the two ladies, steeped in traditional Buddhist spirituality, wanted to do what they could to stop slaughterhouses out of Buddhist piety, most of the young members took a more secular approach to animal welfare and free-range farming.

The young people spoke almost entirely in English and the old ladies only in Dzongkha. Some young ones even looked a little perturbed that these old ladies with strong religious sentiment were taking part in the meeting. The meeting, as

they saw it, was supposed to initiate a campaign against the government's industrial meat farming, not a total objection to killing animals and eating meat. The old ladies had spent much of their time campaigning for a total halt to killing animals for meat. Their efforts had resulted in thousands of bulls, yaks, goats and pigs being set free through a practice called *tshethar*, or life liberation.

On first impressions, the old and young participants looked far apart in what they were seeking due to their different means of communication and modes of thinking. In fact, there was not a great deal of communication between the two generations. Yet, on deeper reflection, one could see a shared value between the committed older ladies and the progressive young people. Both believed in respect for life.

The meeting revealed a common ground where the high ideals of Bhutan's past and the high hopes for its future met, and a strong link between the older generation of Bhutanese engaged in traditional spirituality and younger people imbued with new global, social, political, environmental and health consciousness. It also revealed to me the potential, opportunity, and direction Bhutanese youth could offer in shaping their lives, society and the nation for the better, an avenue for synergising the wisdom of tradition and the promises of modernity, and for seeking a higher plane of living.

In the following passages, I will briefly discuss the impressionable situation of Bhutan's current youth and their emerging progressive values and practices, some of which are also deeply rooted in Bhutan's own heritage, and which our youth can actualise in contemporary form and expression for a better future.

The Advantage of Cultural Crossroads

We very often hear of the changes Bhutan is going through and how youth, in the midst of such change, are seriously challenged and confused. Like many others, I have whined about how the majority of our youth are fragmented and stressed, without a sound footing in either the traditional Bhutanese world or the modern Western culture they emulate, without linguistic proficiency in either local tongues or in foreign languages, and without a calm and clear mind combining critical thinking and moral conscientiousness.

I reiterate here the point I have made elsewhere that modern Bhutanese “live a diachronic life” in terms of both culture and language. Bhutan's youth are in a cultural limbo, having relinquished the old Bhutanese ways of life yet not fully reaching the new modern lifestyle which they see being lived in developed countries. They linger

somewhere between the ancient traditions of the East and the new trends of the West, but are mostly drawn to the popular pursuit of a happy life without a firm grounding in the intellectual and artistic traditions of either.

Many young people claim they are from an ancestral place, which they have never or rarely been to. Many also consider a language, which they cannot even speak, as their native tongue, simply because it is the first language of their parents. Their cultural and linguistic identity is fragmented between a sentimental sense of belonging and the real life they live, between the place of ancestral origin and their actual place of birth and upbringing, between parental languages and the languages they speak, between their ethnic origins and national and global citizenship. The personality of Bhutanese youth is thus made up of many divergent and even conflicting components which they must struggle to reconcile.

The aspirations, expectations, values and priorities of youth differ from those of their parents, and vastly diverge from those of their grandparents. It is a new order of life in which they live, somewhere between exogenous modernity and endogenous tradition, sophistication and simplicity, continuity and change. The youth of Bhutan, like the rest of Bhutan but to a greater degree, are confronted with a multitude of new unfamiliar choices, ideas, practices and products either created in the country or imported from abroad, and their response to these new things is spontaneous and callow. The cultural situation of Bhutan's youth, thus, is at once amorphous and adventurous, chaotic and dynamic, confused and exciting.

Being a young Bhutanese today, particularly in an urban settlement, is not easy. In about half a century, Bhutan has gone through changes that most other countries took many centuries to make. As an historian, I often say that Bhutan has changed much more in the past 50 years than the 500 years before that. It is inevitable that those born at the height of such a socio-cultural shift are, to say the least, unsettled.

Bhutanese youth today face a cultural identity issue. They constantly have to balance their Bhutanese cultural roots and global citizenship, relate to the past and prepare for the future, make an honest living in a competitive world and uphold lofty ideals and values. Most of the challenges they face—unemployment, urbanism, social isolation and loneliness, the deluge of unverified information—are new problems.

The country as a whole is grappling with these socio-cultural changes and it has no proper support systems in place to offer its youth help to deftly navigate this cultural evolution and the anxiety it causes. Furthermore, the education system, which is

conducted mostly in a foreign language and excessively driven by the competition of examinations and certification, as well as the poor and corrupt employment scenario only add to the cultural insecurity, making it more stressful for youth. Hence, many young people see only a bleak future. They have become the primary victims of Bhutan's rapid change.

Such cultural and social insecurity creates a serious state of socio-emotional vulnerability and reduced resilience. With their worldview and mindset broken, they exhibit cultural confusion in their behaviour and lifestyle, from dyed blonde hair and Korean hairstyles to saggy pants and ripped jeans, to piercings and tattoos, to rap and hip hop. They are also more prone to distraction and temptation and give in easily to frustration. Thus, problems like substance abuse, alcoholism, petty crime, and suicide are on the rise. There has also been a rampant gang culture among urban youth, which the police have managed to disband.

Yet, looking at the situation from a positive angle, Bhutanese youth today are ideologically and intellectually open and malleable. Their situation resembles a pile of bricks which are yet to be stacked together to form a particular structure and shape. The cultural ethos and mindset of youth is an open and largely blank slate. No established mindset—political, economic, social or religious, such as conservatism, neoliberalism, communism, etc.—has been irrevocably impressed upon them.

As Bernie Sanders said of American Millennials, young Bhutanese are “the least prejudiced generation”. They are at a crossroads and can be led in a direction and way of thinking which is desirable. The unsettled nature of their cultural and intellectual identity is a blessing that opens possibilities and prospects for new ways of thinking and approaches to life. At such a juncture, it is important for Bhutan to see its youthful population as a vast potential and opportunity and instill in them progressive values and practices.

The Progressive Direction

From the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and student resistance to Hindu nationalism in New Delhi to the progressive movement led by Bernie Sanders in the US primaries, we see globally a vibrant social consciousness and active engagement by young people in public affairs. While for some this may be a passing phase of naïve, youthful idealism, it is clear that there is also a widespread social consciousness among today's youth—more so than in earlier generations—seeking a just, fair, egalitarian, tolerant and sustainable society.

The progressive Millennial generation in Hong Kong, Europe and the US, who mostly oppose the rightist and less tolerant ideologies of mainland China, Brexit and Donald Trump, are very well informed, judicious, farsighted and daring young people. They stand in contrast to the conservative older generation on many issues. They are more appreciative of multiculturalism, environmentalism, social egalitarianism, political freedom, economic equality and liberalism. The current technological facilities which enable rapid access to information and bring together individuals on shared social media platforms for discussion, certainly help diffuse such civic consciousness.

In the context of these global trends, youth in Bhutan can also easily become a strong force for positive change. Politically, today's youth can help Bhutan's ongoing transition from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary democracy. Their voice is vital in promoting a new democratic system which is fair, just, transparent and inclusive. If we look at the older generation, those in positions of power have a tendency to retain the existent power structures and social hierarchies, and those who are powerless victims too often give in to external control and strictures as a karmic nemesis. It is common to find traditional Bhutanese accepting situations, particularly trying ones, as being a result of their own karmic actions in past lifetimes.

Today's youth, on the contrary, are more serious about freedom of thought and expression. Young people, in the true spirit of Buddhism, are beginning to demonstrate a capacity to take their destiny into their own hands with a stronger sense of rights and entitlements. The recent outcry among the largely young social media audience in relation to the defamation case against a young doctor and freelance journalist, suggests youth are willing to engage in a push for an equitable, just, and free system.

Such progressive attitudes align very neatly with the ancient Bhutanese ethos of spiritual and social equality and freedom. Freedom is the highest value and ultimate goal in Buddhism and other ancient Indian spiritual traditions. The Buddhist system aims to free all sentient beings from suffering and bondage. This includes external material bondage like poverty and destitution; internal problems such as ill health or physical incapacity; social chains like servitude, cast, elitism or favouritism; political bondage such as authoritarianism, censorship or occupation; emotional fetters such as craving, hatred, jealousy, pride; and the mental shackles of our conceptual mind. The drive for openness, liberty and freedom in the socio-cultural and political domains of life is thus in tune with the Buddhist pursuit of freedom.

In matters of policy, older generations have also mostly remained stuck in past political thinking, still worrying about the challenges Bhutan faced in the 20th century. In reality, Bhutan, the region and the rest of the world have moved on to a new era with different mindsets and challenges. Youth, with little or no memory of Bhutan's past political challenges and economic hardships, do not generally dwell on these but impatiently seek quicker progress and change.

The oft-cited and so-called unique Indo-Bhutan friendship is a good case in point. While older politicians and administrators feel safe in perpetuating the past policy of Bhutan remaining in the orbit of Indian influence, most young people think of Bhutan's place in the larger world as necessitating relations with and overtures to countries far beyond India. The horizons of their world extend beyond the South Asian region and their point of reference is certainly not limited to the immediate neighbours. From the cultural trends they follow to educational and employment destinations they seek, today's youth are much more international than the generation before them.

In the same way, the Machiavellian mode of thinking still common among senior political strategists, has little appeal to young leaders who are more inclined to an ethical, peaceful and compassionate form of governance. The fervor of nationalism, which the state promoted in the late 20th century in response to dissidence from southern districts, has seen a decline among Millennials who have neither memories of the problem nor the zest for such nationalistic sentiment. On the whole, young people are more passionate than prudent, compassionate than cautious. Having been born and brought up during peaceful and prosperous times with no serious political upheavals or conflicts, they are politically very open and liberal to the extent of being carefree, with little fear or apprehension.

Often born to parents from different backgrounds and raised in multiple places, youth have less proclivity for regional or ethnic discrimination. They have a lesser sense of traditional divisions based on region, class or other social positions. Their world is more fluid and dynamic, more meritorious and egalitarian than that of older generations. They do not notice the ethnic and religious fault lines which scarred Bhutan's political landscape in the 20th century. Their social milieu is very diverse, encompassing people of different races, professions, social backgrounds and political thought.

Youth generally possess a more egalitarian outlook and are evidently more open-minded and tolerant of cultural diversity. They are also less bogged down by the

notion of success in material or financial terms and willing to explore education and professions in areas of little or no financial return. Thus they have a stronger interest in art, aesthetics and athletics, despite very dim prospects for making a respectable living from such professions.

They also resent the corrupt practices of nepotism and discrimination which run deep in the older generation and the established system, and they wish to build an efficient and ethical system. The progressive desire for more transparency, integrity and justice in political and social systems and institutions, whether or not youth are aware, concurs with ancient values such as *le judre* and *thadamtsbi*. Thus, the Buddhist ethos of Bhutan has much in common with the new progressive culture emerging today, and there is much that youth can draw strength from in our cultural heritage and even political and social practices.

Environmentally, youth today are more conscious of the challenges the earth is facing through climate change and excessive extraction of natural resources. They have a deeper appreciation of biodiversity and the interdependence and coexistence of all forms of life. While the generation before them has been mostly preoccupied with economic development through modernisation and industrialisation, the younger generation shows more liking for pristine nature. The frequent tree planting programmes and garbage clearing initiatives in schools may have inculcated in youth deeper regard for a clean and green environment, while their knowledge of modern science and global affairs helps them comprehend climate change and its ramifications.

Thanks to environmental training in both mainstream education and the media, youth today are acutely aware of Bhutan's rich and diverse ecological heritage. There are youth groups engaged in cleaning toilets, planting trees and collecting plastic garbage. In this way, the ancient Bhutanese culture of respect and intimate connection with nature can easily find revival in the new environmental consciousness of the youth.

There is also growing consciousness of health, nutrition and appreciation of physical fitness. More and more young people are concerned with the quality of the food they consume and the air they breathe—although many young people are still addicted to junk food. Exposed to cities grappling with serious pollution issues, Bhutanese youth today cherish environmental conditions in the countryside. It will take more time before the Bhutanese population takes full civic responsibility to look after their immediate environment and stop littering, but youth are becoming increasingly

sensitive to environmental degradation and pollution, and are on the right track as far as conservation is concerned.

The most encouraging development is the interest of current young adults in Bhutan's spirituality and culture. When many of their school-educated parents were young adults decades ago, they were enamoured of the new attractions of modernity and secular scientific education in English, and were sometimes contemptuous towards Bhutan's spiritual and cultural heritage. This attitude has changed today and there is a strong interest among young people in Bhutan's Buddhist heritage, partly because of the rise of Buddhism in the West. Besides, many young Bhutanese today know more about Buddhism through new writings in English than their parents did when they were young. The growing interest has been heightened by the fact that Buddhism is perceived as a spiritual tradition that has withstood the test of time and appeals to the modern rational mind.

As a result of their renewed interest in Buddhism and their general humanitarian tendency, young people today show more respect for life and care more about animal welfare, as this essay pointed out at the beginning. There are animal shelters now which are mostly manned by young people, something unheard of in Bhutan in the past. For a traditionally meat eating society, vegetarianism has grown rapidly in the last couple of decades. Today, it is quite common to find a young person becoming vegetarian. With more awareness of the economic, environmental, health and cultural costs of meat eating, the number of committed vegetarians is increasing every year and many others refrain from eating meat products for a significant amount of time in a year.

There is also a strong appreciation of Bhutanese cultural traditions among its youth. As people get more and more disillusioned with modernity and its broken promises, there is a revival of interest in traditional practices, exemplified in Bhutan's initiatives to return to traditional organic farming, disillusioned with the use of chemical fertilisers. Similarly, there is also an emerging interest in simple, happy and meaningful living over an economically successful life. Rising beyond the trappings of materialism, the culture of ostentatious wealth and the glamourisation of vanity, some young people are embracing an ethical way of living and a more frugal lifestyle without snobbery and decadence but with high thinking and deep consideration for inner values.

Many young people today enjoy spiritual pursuits such as prayer, attending religious teachings and going on pilgrimage. Traditional festivals such as *tshechus*, which a few

decades ago some people feared would diminish due to lack of interest, are today witnessing such unprecedented numbers of spectators that the new extended festival grounds are running out of space. Interest in traditional arts has also seen a new vigour with many popular reality TV shows in which youth contestants perform traditional songs, debates and other types of cultural performance. There is a rise in youth participation in art schools, studios, film production, music schools and dance troops with more and more young people seeking artistic careers such as in photography and designing.

Youth today are living in very exciting times. While it is undeniable that many of them go through stress with the burden of homework and exams in school and college, and bleak employment prospects later, young people today, have greater access to information and hence, the opportunity to dream bigger and aim higher than their parents did. Given their exposure to creative thinking and technological innovation around the world, they are more inclined to disruptive and progressive ideas and action for change, while also remaining grounded in wholesome values and civic responsibility.

With over 60 percent of the population under age 30, many of them imbued with progressive thinking and action, and a vast majority still with malleable characters which can be steered in the right direction, Bhutan has an astounding wealth of unharnessed human potential and a bright future in her young citizens. How it capitalises on this good fortune and blessing is the most pressing and beneficial task facing the nation today.