

The Bhutan that we Aspire for: Through the Lens of Millennials

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Introduction

Broadly speaking, “generation” is defined in terms of “age, period, and cohort”. The age is an individual’s age, period is the events occurring in an individual’s life, and cohort is a group of individuals who have shared life’s experiences and events during their formative years, which may have resulted in developing similar attitudes and behaviour in adulthood.¹ Social scientists in the West define millennials as the generation born between 1980 and 2000.²

For this paper, the views of Bhutanese millennials between 18 and 22 years, born between 1999 and 2003, are included. About 14 semi-structured interviews and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), consisting of four participants each, were conducted to gather data. Further, literature and media reports on youth and their issues were reviewed. Most of them are university students, except for one unemployed young woman.

In Bhutan, the introduction of the Internet, television, mobile phone and their direct impact in the form of technology driven globalisation were the early events in these millennials’ lives. Therefore, they are digital natives, highly influenced by global culture, from their choice of food, beverages, clothes, music, idea of friends, family, kith and kin, spirituality, schooling, and learning needs, to their jobs and their image formation. The current trend of young girls opting for Korean hairstyles and outfits, and the popularity of rap songs among young boys, can be attributed to the millennials’ expression of their globalised identity.

Further, Bhutan is a young country with about one third of our population stated to be between 10 and 24 years.³ There is a lot of untapped human resource potential. This age group is one of the most physically, intellectually,

¹ DeVaney (2015, 11).

² DeVaney (2015, 11).

³ Department of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education (2020, iii).

and economically productive category of the Bhutanese demography. Thus, the millennials are our human capital, which can be built and churned out to suit the changing human resource needs of a developing economy and changing Bhutanese society.

Being Bhutanese

The ever changing international and regional environment has influenced the millennials' identity. Youth view Bhutanese society as being reserved, not encouraging open discussions, and lacking analytical and critical thinking. The Bhutanese school education does not prepare young people for the real world. Teaching and learning is based on textbooks and not on actual problems. Some of the youth said that textbook information is sometimes inaccurate.

Youth are not actively engaged in the country's civic life. They feel the generational difference between themselves and their parents. They feel that there are explicit thought differences between the older and younger generations, as a result of education, exposure, and upbringing. The youth see their parents' generation as laid back, backward, culturally driven Buddhists, not rational, superstitious, not tech savvy, do not listen to youth, is gender insensitive and do not understand gender inequality. The older generation, for example, view LGBTQIA+ gender as a "mental illness" not as another sexual orientation.

The youth see themselves as being open-minded, tech savvy, rational and gender sensitive, with a broad understanding of the world around them. Young girls said that they do not want to be dependent on their husbands, like their mothers and suffer domestic violence. They see themselves as being economically independent and leading a violence-free life.

The young feel a sense of belonging to Bhutan, as they feel related to the country's mountainous geography, culture (like the attire), architecture, and Dzongkha language. Some of them feel that they were raised Bhutanese based on these features. On the one hand, youth take pride in Bhutan's culture. The Nazhoen Jangsem Tshogpa, a social media Facebook-based youth organisation, promotes Buddhist inspired Bhutanese values like compassion and generosity, and stories of young people's engagement in

translating these values into action. Youth, for instance, raised funds and sponsored Medicine Buddha statues for some schools in Thimphu, and Guru Rinpoche statues to a monastery in Bumthang.

They educate their peers about the incredible lives of past and present Buddhist and Bhutanese teachers, and about the sacred dates in the Buddhist calendar which affect our daily lives. Ryan argues that this kind of young generation is “Gen G” (Global and Generous) in their behaviour. Gen G proactively volunteers their passion, talent and generosity.⁴

A few model youth exhibit Gen G traits. Fifteen-year-old Tenzin Yangtsho, a Class 10 student from Chang Gangkha Middle Secondary in Thimphu, has sacrificed her birthday parties to support the needy elderly, and to buy a washing machine and television for child monks at a monastery, ever since her eighth birthday. Also, she donated her prize money from the show, “Palden Drukpa”, to the Bhutan Kidney Foundation. Yangtsho said she is happy to help those in need although she is not from a wealthy family. Further, she is an active member of Y-Peer (Youth lead Education Network) club, caring for special children’s needs in her school.⁵ Another 18-year-old university girl student shares this value. She wants to be a good human being, generate compassion, and spread positivity.

On the other hand, there are segments of disengaged youth who dislike learning Dzongkha, visiting *dzongs* and *lhakhangs*. These are mostly young people born and raised in urban Bhutan. Nonetheless, most youth associate the *gho* and *kira* with their youthful cultural image, despite many of their peers preferring jeans and t-shirts. A few of them said that although Gross National Happiness (GNH) is the country’s development philosophy, most of the young do not understand it well. They think that there are peers who seem to take the country’s free education and healthcare services for granted.

Youth’s Idea of an Ideal Bhutan

The young aspire for a politically and economically independent Bhutan. They envisage a visionary government which can formulate sustainable

⁴ Ryan (2020) Retrieved from <https://www.cafamerica.org/generation-g-the-millennials-and-how-they-are-changing-the-art-of-giving/>

⁵ Tshering and Dorji (2021) 15 -year old- student helps needy, kuensel

solutions beyond short-term political gains. They aspire for a peaceful, a progressive, a technologically developed and a well-preserved environment and culture. The young see themselves actively engaging in the affairs of the country, with the right person in the right job, thereby contributing to national development. They also want strong familial relations and bonds between parents and children. The youth think that, while bonds among families in western countries are weak, the social relations among families in Bhutan are comparatively strong, but inadequate.

Further, the young view Bhutan's strict environmental conservation law in the Constitution as the country's exemplary global leadership in addressing global warming and climate change. They feel that our pristine environment attracts international tourists to visit Bhutan and contributes to national revenue. They feel the need to keep Bhutan natural and homely, and not become another urbanised artificial place like many modern cities. In addition, the young are concerned about the growing waste problem in the country which contradicts environment preservation.

Youth and the Challenges

Millennials face varied challenges. One of the serious and growing challenges is the lack of parental love and guidance, siblings' love and support, and poor upbringing. Young people come from broken homes and suffer from mental health problems, like depression.

The existing revised draft National Youth Policy 2020 states that youth experience anxiety and depression disorders.⁶ Depression incidences have risen and youth between 15 and 40 years are found to be prone to suicide.⁷ In addition, adolescents above 14 years contacted Pride Bhutan, LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual) community, through its toll-free number, to seek help related to their stressful experiences with puberty and confusion about gender and sexual orientation.⁸ Moreover, young girls experienced sexual violence, rape, unwanted teenage pregnancy, and loss of education, particularly during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

⁶ Cited in Draft Review of the National Youth Policy (2020, 25-26).

⁷ Drukpa, 2021, 1 and 11, Bhutan is heading down the wrong path of mental health and suicide: UNICEF Representative, The Bhutanese

⁸ Lhaden, 2021, LGBTQI Community launches toll free number to provide support, Kuensel

Millennials see loving homes, parental love and guidance, and supportive siblings as a bed-rock for their success in life. The youth are concerned that the familial bond between the parents and children is weakened as a result of a high rate of divorce in Bhutanese society. Family breakdowns add to increasing trends of dysfunctional social relationships. Such a social milieu does not enable the young to grow up as happy and healthy citizens.

Some of them use drugs as a solace, some out of peer pressure, to be included in their friends' circles, some out of enjoyment, and some to cope with stress amidst a competitive academic environment to perform better and hold top positions in schools. Millennials are open about drug use and it has become part of their young adulthood culture.

In addition, the young lack adequate family and school education about the values of love, intimacy, and relationships during the process of adolescent years and young adulthood. Young people tend to view love and relationships as fluid, without understanding its implication on themselves and the society. They do not understand the meaning of relationship commitment and responsibility.

The youth from wealthy families, for example, do not know the value of family and money. Also, most youth accept "illegal marriage" proposals to get overseas employment with the hope of bettering their lives. Despite the global economic downturn and psychosocial fear in the face of COVID 19, the millennials want to work and live overseas to earn higher wages, gain international exposure and experiences. In this sense, they share Gen G's global trait.

While technology is viewed as a boon for development, it is also a cause of the generation gap in today's technology driven life, as the young see a digital divide between their parents and themselves. Technology is a central part of the millennials' lives. They are digital natives and their involvement ranges from virtual cooking lessons, entertainment, online dating, and shopping to digital art creation and academic studies. However, this has limitations in terms of social alienation from the immediate family members and friends, vulnerability to employment, love and relationship scams, and exposure to unhealthy fashion trends, games, and pornography. Time spent in the virtual world at the cost of sleep has caused insomnia and sleep disorder in youth.

Unemployment and low wages are the biggest challenges the youth face. The existing data shows that it is a national issue beyond youth's concern. In 2019, there were 3,626 unemployed youth in the country. This translated into an unemployment rate at 11.9 percent. The female unemployment rate was higher, at 13.8 percent, than male unemployment, at 9.7 percent.⁹ Further, the 2020 Labour Force Survey states that youth unemployment is about 22.6 percent. There are more than 6,900 young people looking for jobs.

COVID 19 has aggravated youth unemployment, with many young people losing jobs in the travel and entertainment industry.¹⁰ Young women and girls have resorted to prostitution. The number of female sex workers increased in the capital city, Thimphu, as a result of the pandemic. The female sex workers from border towns migrated to Thimphu for work. Women are said to engage in unprotected sex, as most of their clients dislike the use of contraceptives. Their subservient economic and emotional position makes women vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. Although prostitution is a crime in the Penal Code of Bhutan, young women have risked their lives to provide for themselves and their families.¹¹

Most millennials say that Bhutan has fewer employment opportunities, and they feel the need to work abroad. However, some of them shared concerns about the loss of human resources and the importance of preventing brain drain. They think that the present education system should be reformed, and knowledge be taught through discussions on varied topics affecting the young people beyond textbook-based teaching and learning. Further, they feel that blue collar jobs must be made attractive to the young and the government could consider providing interest-free loans for youth entrepreneurship and gainful employment.

Youth and Responsibility

Millennials feel unsure about their future. They attribute their uncertainty to school and university education not equipping them with relevant and adequate knowledge and skills. They feel that they are not nurtured and trained to be leaders and to be responsible. They feel inadequate in the

⁹ Draft Review of the National Youth Policy (2020,70).

¹⁰ Editorial 2021, Employment and Youth, Kuensel

¹¹ Pem 2021, 1 and 7, Sex Workers on the rise in Thimphu due to Pandemic, The Bhutanese

global job market, and citizenship skills like competent communication, critical thinking, questioning skills and civic engagement. Some young people shared that they are not innovative and tend to copy business ideas and lack the passion to build quality and sustainable enterprises.

Further, most urban youth seem apathetic and simply want to pass examinations. The urban born and bred youth appear less rooted and skilled, and are unprepared for life. They seem “spoilt”, overuse the Internet, and “do drugs” more than their rural peers. The rural raised youth are rooted, closely connected with their parents, mature, friendly and warm in disposition. They have basic problem-solving skills based on real-life experiences such as growing food, using farm tools, and doing household chores, and are responsible. Therefore, the rural context seems to have assisted millennials to prepare for life and shoulder responsibility. But the recent Golden Youth Award (GYA) recipients reveal that well-loved and raised youth in any environment thrive at the school, home and in the community.¹²

Conclusion

Millennials born since 1999 in Bhutan are digital natives and exhibit a globalised sense of identity, right from their choice of food, attire, and music to lifestyle and career choices. They have embraced multi-cultural traits in their daily lives. The impact of the Internet, television, and mobile phones in their formative years has had a big influence in their world-view. Most of them shared that they see a generation gap between themselves and their parents, due to education, exposure, and upbringing. They see themselves as open-minded, tech savvy, independent, rational and gender-sensitive, as opposed to their conservative, digital immigrant, superstitious and gender insensitive parents.

However, the young feel a sense of belonging to Bhutan, as they feel related to the country’s mountainous geography, culture aspects, attire, architecture and Dzongkha language. Most youth associate the *gho* and *kira* with their youthful cultural image, despite many of their peers preferring jeans and t-shirts. It is heartening that some young people demonstrate Buddhist inspired values of compassion and generosity and show this ethos in their practical lives.

¹² Wangmo, 9,2021, Knowing the Golden Youth Award Recipients, Kuensel

Further, millennials aspire for a politically and economically independent Bhutan and want to build self-reliance. They envisage a visionary government which can formulate sustainable solutions beyond short-term political gains. They long for a peaceful, a progressive, a technologically developed and a well-preserved environment and culture and strong family bonds. The young see themselves actively engaging in the affairs of the country with the right persons in the right jobs, thereby contributing to national development.

Despite the challenges of a rise in unemployment, dysfunctional families, drug use, mental health issues, negative impact of technology and bad impact of COVID 19, they seem to have a certain degree of aspiration to build Bhutan.