

The Destiny is Defined - Are we up for the Delivery?

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During a Royal visit to the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, His Majesty The King asked the students and faculty members what he had asked youth around the country:

Most youngsters will be working beyond 2061... Given the small population of Bhutan and lower fertility rates, Bhutan's demography will see a drastic change. On average, we will be working for 14,600 days, that is, 40 calendar years... How much value will you bring to your workspace? How will you benefit your country?

His Majesty asked how we were going to stay relevant to the changes taking place, what upskilling we would need, and how we would live up to the vision he shared. His Majesty talked about what was happening with our college graduates. Graduates of CST find themselves in countries like Australia, US, and Canada, working in a cold storage, a hotel, babysitting... The question is "Are you practising what you have learned or trained for back home?"

The question stems from concerns about what is really happening in the country. His Majesty reminds us that, no matter where we go, be it Australia or Canada or the US or any other country, we should be able to practise the profession we do at home. If we are an architect or engineer, we should work as an architect or engineer there too. If we cannot work in our profession: "Is it because of our course modules, or is our standard different?"

If that is the case, we must build our competence and capacity to be equivalent, or even better. That was what His Majesty decreed.

What New Reality Do We Want to Create?

His Majesty shared his thoughts on change. We have a very small population, an even smaller youth population, and very few people who are learned and competent. We are not a rich country and have a very long way to go.

His Majesty advised us not to go on autopilot mode. “*Our future must not be built by default but by design -- always by design.*” We make conscious choices about how we would like our country to be in the near future, as we carry on the legacy in a new era that demands new ways of living and surviving. I have had the realisation that if we want to have different outcomes, we will have to consciously approach our lives in different ways. With the same choices, methods, steps and energies we had in the past, we cannot expect different outcomes!

His Majesty spoke about the demerits of producing an excessive number of graduates beyond the job requirements and opportunities. He told us we cannot keep on producing an excessive number of nurses and teachers because the opportunity is reduced. It is worrisome because we cannot afford to produce disgruntled workers with compromised capacity and qualities.

As I reflect on His Majesty’s behemoth concerns, deep within me, I feel more determined and steadfast to be of value, and imagine myself and my friends graduating with renewed zeal and enthusiasm to create an impact, and not become depressed graduates who would feel like our world has ended if we flunk Civil Service exams. I am realistically positive that there are limitless opportunities. Create one if there is none. Go for it if there are alternatives.

As we listened to His Majesty’s concerns, I realised we must dream big and, at the same time, materialise them through education and upskilling. He truly moved the elephants sleeping within us through his speech that touched our hearts, and painted a vision that is compelling and clear. He taught us that we must dream big, see the great potential in what we are doing, and back them up with “education, will-power, and tenacity”. He encouraged us to go beyond the traditional siloed existence.

A Case to Embrace Digitalisation

His Majesty notes that, since we are a small country with a small demography, we can leverage our size, create smart plans, and manage everything efficiently. His Majesty provides one way of moving forward, among others. One aspect of it is that we must do so by taking advantage

of technological advancement. We must realise the immense benefits of AI, Blockchain, and Quantum Computing and use them in our own advancement.

His Majesty recognises and foresees complete digitalisation as one of the most important ways forward for Bhutan. In His Majesty's words: "*It is not what we can do but what we must do.*" I understand that digitalisation is what we must do. I become more assured that if we know what we must do, we will find a way to do it. His Majesty shares his visions tirelessly and with great zest with us because he has the highest trust in us.

This was a stirring wake up call for each one of us, notwithstanding castes, creeds, backgrounds and religious differences. His Majesty sees us as being capable of taking the Royal vision forward. It is time we look deep within and find that compass directing us towards what we are truly capable of, and make them happen. While contemplating this, I asked myself how I can contribute to this grand vision in a meaningful way. I must find a way to do it because we have heard and understood what we must do!

From the Royal speech, I imagined how innovative and disruptive technologies are changing the dynamics of working conditions and lifestyles around the world. His Majesty talked about our upcoming "National Digital Identity" (NDI) at length. He cites, as an example, the Indian Adhar cards to draw inspiration from. He said they are inexpensive, implementable, and easily accessible, and can be seamlessly integrated with multiple services. Estonia has been successful. In order to implement that (NDI), we could have asked them to develop it for us. Instead, His Majesty said we pondered and asked the right question: "How many countries have a very strong digital ecosystem? Singapore, South Korea, and China. Can we be the fourth one?"

For that, His Majesty said we needed to restructure from scratch, or change everything to be at their level. We need to develop ourselves. We need to adopt end-to-end business models that are scalable, to build Bhutan's legacy forward and help our own economy. Most importantly, I understood that we cannot depend on other countries for every pinch of salt.

On the question of how we can do that, His Majesty is concerned about not having an adequate talent pool. For this reason, His Majesty said

that we are going back to school. We assessed and introduced the Code Monkey (coding programme for kids), and prioritised science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This attempt is to develop a talent pool which can create the systems -- reliable and secure -- for Bhutan.

His Majesty said that the newly established Gyelposhing College of Technology had introduced robotic courses and a degree in Blockchain technology, the first of its kind in the world. We have called on experts from abroad to achieve this vision, and the students are being trained to create our own systems. The NDI must seamlessly integrate the judiciary, civil registry system, banking, health, postal and everything that can be technologically used in real time.

His Majesty calls for an entrepreneurial mindset with the compelling vision to make NDI, with countless other ventures, go IPO. Bhutan could then share our experiences with other states and help them build their systems. His Majesty said that NDI could become a unicorn, based on Bhutanese experiences and values.

Our accomplishments are the results of the choices we make and pursue. Past successes are never a cathartic bliss. Everything is dynamic because the tools we have used are no more applicable for the new endeavours. We cannot plough the field with animals when others have adopted mechanised agriculture. We must keep up with others and develop imperative infrastructure for our own survival. We must have a grand and practical vision. Being content with the mundane cycle of doing traditional work is not enough.

Major Paradigm Shift - What must we do?

His Majesty said that we cannot be naïve, making excuses about being protected in a shell, isolated for a long time. Every time we engage with other countries, we will have to be on our toes, as sharp as a razor, be smart and understand every complexity involved there.

His Majesty also reminds us that we are still in our infancy and, therefore, we have much to learn and prepare. Our generation is not ready. We could have built the interest and expertise way back when we were very young. When we learn about AI, Blockchain, and so on only in college, we are

suddenly thrown into an unfamiliar environment. *“How can we keep up with other countries when we are just learning the basics?”*

Another central point His Majesty commanded is that he wanted us to face the difficulty and embrace the discomfort. This, he says, will filter the weak and fortify the opportunity for those who are resilient and willing to learn. If everything is easy, we would not move forward and we would not be able to create change, innovate, and survive.

It is high time we change the situation in the country. It is inevitable that many youth will go overseas to work. This should not happen, because there is so much to do here. The industry and jobs we create must change. We have aspirations for the future, for which we need capacity. This must be built on education.

Is “good” enough for us? Is “okay” enough for us? If the answer is “yes”, if we just want to chase mediocrity, we will get the “okay” results. The most important takeaway here is that complacency kills, so we must be the best and chase excellence. For that to happen, we must take responsibility for our own education.

It is noteworthy that Bhutan has a young population: more than half the Bhutanese are under 28. The adolescent-youth group (10 to 24 years) constitutes about one third of the total population.

Addressing the 11th Convocation at Sherubtse College in 2007, His Majesty had said:

Today, our country is a nation full of promise and potential. We have the security and confidence of our own culture and traditions. We have environmental wealth and, most importantly, we have a young population full of energy, dynamism, and promise.

My message to the young leaders of Bhutan is that we have everything it takes to build a strong economy and to safeguard everything that we cherish, but on one condition... that we start today with big ambition and we work hard. I believe that the time has come for us to stand on our own feet to compete as equals with other nations, and to succeed through

our own hard work and sweat, on our own terms and merit. If we rise to the challenge, change our mindset, our way of working, and think big and work hard, then we have greater opportunities than ever before. So let me ask you something. Shall we sit and dream or shall we work hard and reap the benefits?

This summarises everything His Majesty said at JSW Law. But we are already in 2021. How far have we come? This question needs to be asked again and again. To measure how far we have come, I firmly feel that we must be aware of what we were, where we are, and how far we can go.

The Way Forward

Throughout our lives, we are trying to make sense of the world around us and trying to understand the complexities involved. We are most of the time clueless about what to do or what we are in for. Therefore, it has become more important that we are groomed with sincere goals and directions.

Let us consider a family unit, a prestigious institution, and seemingly utopian governance. If we have a closer look, it is filled with so many conflicts and disorders, and in order to find a solution to that disorder/chaos, one must take action fast. Students go to school to understand the disorder and find a solution. I go to law school and I am in a chaos trying to understand the disorder so that I can learn and specialise to find clarity.

For His Majesty's vision for Bhutan to turn into reality, I see no greater task than to first and foremost understand ourselves, find clarity in the chaos, and move forward. Clarity is power. If we know exactly what it is we want, what our desires are, what we are after, and at the same time we commit everything, that is where we truly grow. I am of the opinion that it must come from us as to what we want to do, supported by an education system that is not 100 years old.

Leo Tolstoy, a Russian writer who is regarded as one of the greatest authors of all time, wrote: "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." I think for the transformation to take place, it must start from us. Only then can we have ripple effects to the community and the society at large.

For this to happen, there must be a motivating factor. We have managed to pull up the literacy rate of youth (15-24 years) to 93 percent, and to 60 percent for adults (15 years and above). But it may not have a transforming effect if we make them sit in the class and spoon feed them without having to speak in the class. There will not be transformation if you are asked the same question of “When did Guru Rinpoche first come to Bhutan”. We want to be asked who this great historical figure was, and what changes he brought to the course of history itself.

For the transformation to happen, we want to develop a habit of asking questions, learning things about mental and sexual health, the odds in history, the shunned topics, so that we are given grounded knowledge of life and how to move forward.

For the transformation to happen, we must be allowed to move out, speak up, take part in intellectual discourses that have polarising viewpoints, and come out with respect and not with enmity.

For the transformation to happen, we do not want to learn just html but all the languages of programming, so that we use the full potential of what modern technology can do. Had we given importance to it a decade ago when the time was prime? How about now?

For the transformation to happen, we do not want to come out with thousands of students in conformity with general knowledge, clueless about what to do in life. There is nothing more concerning than a workforce mass-produced with the same knowledge. The conformity and uniformity inhibit talent and innovation. We want to come out with more clarity, sense, and enthusiasm not experienced by past generations.

What can the government do? What can the education system do? What can the teachers do and what can the parents help with?

There is a need for complete deconstruction of what we have learned; there is a call for complete change in how we look at ourselves, our desperation, anxieties and aspirations. We want to be bold and smart and keep up with what is happening. It must, here, be asked what changes will they bring to benefit us so that we can contribute in a meaningful way.

Above all, I believe that, for a meaningful transformation to happen, we must be youth who are willing to work hard and be thoughtful. What changes can we bring? The path is ambitious and we must be armed with knowledge of modern complexities to move forward. We are on the move, to find clarity in chaos and order in disorder.

It is even more paramount that we must adapt to the radical changes taking place during this pandemic. If there is anything we can learn from this challenging time, it is that we must live, work, and thrive differently. Are the youth up for it? Are the youth up for the new technology-driven world, at the same time valuing the practices and norms that have defined Bhutan thus far? The crossroad has approached and the responsibility to carefully tread depends on the impact each one of us defines and creates.

In conclusion, His Majesty told us that he cannot congratulate us next year when we graduate but he would say the journey has just begun. We have a long way to go.

We will always remember this and make sure that we will dream big, work for it, and make it happen.