

# Young Bhutanese -- Hopes, Anxieties, and Mandate

*Dasho Kinley Dorji*

## Identity -- Who are the Youth?

Formal and informal demographic discourse in Bhutan tends to stereotype different sections of society. So when we talk about “youth”, we are often categorising the entire future generation of citizens into an impersonalised age group. There is, of course, a ring of freshness, vitality, and promise when we think about young Bhutanese, but there is also, too often, negative nuances connected with citizens of this age group.

Youths are often perceived as being synonymous with problems. In our discussions, be it in the formal media, the social media, or in the powerful arena of gossip and rumour, we associate young Bhutanese with images of unemployment, social discomforts, including substance abuse and crime, different forms of listlessness, and increasing frustrations.

It is because of such concerns that some parents actually see it as a success if their children are not drug addicts or alcoholics, and expect nothing more. This is, indeed, a very low benchmark for a generation that will take the country into the future.

What we are missing, or not comprehending, is the real identity of young Bhutanese, who His Majesty The King describes as “our most important citizens”, a generation entering a very crucial stage in their own lives and in the history of the nation.

The Royal commitment to young Bhutanese is:

*I will not rest until I have given you inspiration, knowledge, and skills so that you will not only fulfill your own aspirations, but will be of immense worth to the nation. This is my sacred duty.*

To the generation of decisions makers, including parents, the Royal advice is:

*Our nation's vision can only be fulfilled if the scope of our dreams and aspirations is matched by the reality of our commitment to nurturing our future citizens... You must take on this solemn responsibility with the greatest determination.*

In the Royal addresses, His Majesty conveys deep reflection, excruciating concerns, powerful determination, and unrelenting hope. How can Bhutanese society sense, reflect, and be a part of this? The contention of this article is that a good start would be to listen to young Bhutanese.

## Perceptions

Just as adults have their perceptions about youth, young Bhutanese develop their own impressions about the older generation. In their early years, Bhutanese children intuitively rely on their parents, teachers, and officialdom to look after their interests. As they grow out of adolescence, they start questioning adult thinking. This reveals differences and disagreements.

More than half of the country's population is under 27 years old, thus the term "young Bhutan". So we need to think about the nature and values that define Bhutanese youth. More importantly, we need to be acutely conscious that the views of young Bhutanese are created and nurtured by the experience of growing up as Bhutanese in Bhutan.

One 19-year-old girl remembers school lunch breaks, chatting about the latest episode of an American sitcom or watching friends dance to the latest k-pop hits in their *ghos* and *kiras*. The only light in the eyes of young Bhutanese these days, she remarks, is the reflection of the screens of which they cannot seem to get enough.

Technology has brought with it the sense that there is "something better out there". Technology has brought foreign films and music, new ideas and values, exposure that fascinates the young and possibly intimidates the older generation. Newness has become synonymous, in many ways, with "non-Bhutanese" values, and it has exacerbated the de-valuing of the opinions of youth.

Do young Bhutanese feel that they are being forced to accept that being Bhutanese means giving up a part of that identity for something new? Is the dilemma here the need to reconcile the experience of being Bhutanese with the need to reject “modern” or “foreign” experiences that do not come from traditional Bhutanese values?

The same young girl says: “I am not trying to say that we must rid ourselves of old values and completely embrace what modernity has brought, but I am also saying we should not reject modernity.” The message here is that we should not make our youth choose between two distinct paths, but allow them to learn from both and define for themselves what it means to be Bhutanese.

## **A New Age**

Young Bhutanese are no longer happy and satisfied doing something only because they are told to do it. The age of blind faith is, apparently, over. This has manifested in detrimental ways, even with spirituality, as thousands of students chant school prayers without understanding them. The image of Guru Rinpoche transforming into Guru Dorji Drolo is far less convincing and awe-inspiring to a young Bhutanese than a science fiction movie.

The concept of generation gap emerged, not just with the age difference, but with socio-cultural changes. Bhutanese parents and teachers comment on the deteriorating Dzongkha, the dress and make-up, school concerts being just “flashy” dances... But many young Bhutanese find this attitude more of a deterrent than encouragement of a genuine interest in Bhutanese culture and tradition. Trying to discipline youth to cling to how things were once done creates more resistance against traditional values that are seen as the only Bhutanese values by older people.

The absence of real communication between the generations heightens the tensions. Teachers discourage questions from students, high ranking officials ignore views of young people. Does this come from a hierarchical society that makes clear definitions between “seniors and juniors”, between “big shots and the *nyamchhung*” (underprivileged), between “officialdom and the general public”?

## Culture

The essence of national identity is driven by culture, which carries multiple and ambiguous connotations in most societies. In its broadest sense, culture means “the way of life” of a group of people -- their behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols. Stemming from the threat perception of being a small and vulnerable society in a region that is home to two-fifths of mankind, Bhutan has stressed the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity to survive in this demography. It has worked; Bhutan not only survived but thrived as a unique entity.

The custodians of Bhutanese culture interpreted culture as being synonymous with our Buddhist heritage. The wisdom of this vision is not disputed, but the perception of culture being largely and deliberately a connection to long held traditions of the past now confronts the tensions and dilemmas of a rapidly changing society. What we have seen is that, in this process, the evolving culture has been neglected -- the performing arts, the visual arts, media arts, literature.

This has two significant effects: It discourages creativity and it excludes youth, both key elements of dynamism that is critical for culture to flourish.

## Mindset

It is apparent that such a psychological gap between the generations could create a trust deficit between youth who represent the future and the decision makers who form the establishment. There are signs that the differences in perception have moulded mindsets that impede harmony.

One young woman, just starting her career, says her post-college enthusiasm has been dampened by what she has learnt about the work environment. The impressions she has received on the working culture is predominantly of corruption and exploitation and lack of career opportunities. She is already cynical about the future. She has been convinced that the system cannot be changed and any attempt to oppose the system would spell her misfortune. Young people are warned not to be too vocal or resistant because they would “get into trouble”.

This includes the government system. Young Bhutanese are convinced that the political leadership has short-term goals and the government is more concerned about policies that ensure re-election, be it the thromde, field workers like the foresters and taxmen, the judiciary or the civil service. The perceived condescending attitude of civil servants towards ordinary people makes them neither civil nor servant.

An even more ominous possibility is that the younger generation who join the system is likely to sink into this inertia.

## **Prospects**

In a joint exercise by the UNDP and the government, a number of Bhutanese youth voiced their concerns and aspirations for “the future we want”. Most young Bhutanese, despite limited positions and greater competition, want government jobs for the status, lack of stress, and job security. Social norms and stigma attached to so-called blue-collar jobs play a key role in the youth’s preference for white-collar jobs. Weak social protection and job security in the private sector also lead to the youth preferring public sector jobs.

The private sector has not attracted Bhutanese youth for a number of reasons. Gaps in infrastructure, technology, market linkages, and regulatory challenges create barriers to scaling in the private sector. Cottage and small industries (CSIs) dominate the market and are not able to transition into large-scale industries which can have higher potential for large-scale quality job creation.

Even if young entrepreneurs with ideas manage funding and muster the courage to start the formalities to risk a business, the protracted process of obtaining a licence is a major deterrent. In the age of technology the government’s attempt to establish a one-stop window has failed, and the Bhutanese system sends them from one office to another, trying to meet elusive bureaucrats.

There are limited pathways for skills transfer because education and training systems do not have the capability to adapt to labour market demands. Young entrepreneurs say that they lack career counselling in school to enter

the job or business market and, once they are out of school or college, they have no parent agency to turn to. All this is more difficult for youth from rural areas who have even less access and support.

## Inequalities

The hopes and confidence of youth are shaped by how they see their society. Bhutanese youth seem to be disconcerted by a governance system that has been unable to correct discrepancies in career opportunities, unequal wealth and income distribution, a widening urban-rural gap, as well as the intricacies of gender issues, adolescence, and needs of the disabled population.

The inequities between the rural and urban population place rural youth at a disadvantage in starting their careers. A major disadvantage today is the poorer digital and telephone connectivity and access in rural Bhutan. Today, the facilities offered by the system in terms of exposure to workshops, training, sports facilities, and participation in media programmes are all aimed specifically at the urban population.

One young woman believes that gender discrimination, which was characterised in the past by crude terminology like “*amsu morem*” (inept women) and “*key phogay*” (macho male), has assumed subtle forms on the screen. “With the government prioritising alcohol and tobacco over emergency contraceptives, how are women to feel like the government and the country truly care for them? With abortion banned in Bhutan, many women are sent to the alleys of Jaigaon.”

"It has made me realise that maybe I don't want to live in Bhutan. Why would I want to live in a society that is yet to accept the freedoms of women, a society where I don't feel secure and protected by the government, a society where my existence (as a woman) is not granted the same importance as those of my male peers?"

Disabled youth feel strapped by the lack of amenities. In traditional Bhutan, the disabled were accepted and supported by their families and their communities. In modern Bhutan, education and training institutions, office buildings, public transport and housing and commercial spaces do not make provisions for the disabled.

In recent years, Bhutan's previously unrecognised LGBTQ community has emerged, seeking acceptance and opportunities as productive members of society. In the absence of professional study and analysis, transgender Bhutanese have begun to face the challenges of employment in a job market where their gender is not recognised. At least one transgender female was turned away from an office job, presumably because of a widely shared mindset that does not grasp the notion of transgender people in professional jobs. It is this mindset that has confined them to the entertainment business, basically singing and dancing in night clubs.

## Education

The Royal address to the nation on National Day, 2020, has brought the Bhutanese education system under intense scrutiny. His Majesty pointed out that, while the education goals of the past aimed at numbers, it is time to look at quality. The Royal command, in effect, is to transform the education system to achieve the Royal vision that strikes a chord in young Bhutanese:

*It is no longer enough to say that I'm the best in Bhutan; we have to be the best wherever we go in this world.*

A Bhutanese "topper" describes his experience. When he joined an international high school and college, he felt completely inadequate because the other students were more confident, self-guided, well-rounded and better exposed. "They were passionate about a lot of diverse topics and invested in their own learning, while I had taken most of my education as a 'means to an end'," he says. "How far we are from His Majesty's vision of being 'locally rooted, globally competent'."

But this comes as no surprise. The introduction of the development process in the 1960s offered many new career opportunities for educated Bhutanese. For decades, teaching was a last resort for young Bhutanese seeking a career in a developing society. The current education system does not prepare graduates from schools and even tertiary institutions for professional careers. The education focus on academia and desk jobs has deterred youths from available employment, which is largely in the skills necessary to provide services. Thus they are over-educated and under-skilled in a society grappling with the needs of distinct rural and urban cultures.

The mismatch between jobs and qualifications is a recognised problem and, in the age of creativity, the creative industry has not taken off. The school curriculum has taken the children of farmers away from manual work, inculcated values that do not respect blue collar jobs, and provided no counselling for post-school life. The academic curriculum is weak on science and technology, rendering youth unable to navigate the 21st century world.

## Policy and Vision

Young Bhutanese, in fact most Bhutanese, do not know that there is a national youth policy. The current policy was drafted by bureaucrats with input from foreign consultants. When the youth are invited to discussions, they are only the students who top their classes and hold positions in formal groups. One young man laments the absence of proper student representation on all committees dealing with youth-related issues: “I would appreciate seeing less of the panel of experts or adults talking about an experience they grew out of long ago.”

It is only in the last update of the policy, in 2020, that there has been an attempt to involve the youth and seek their views on the education policy. This policy needs to be based on a long-term Royal vision that is emerging.

Bhutan is not without dreams and aspirations for the citizens of the future. For His Majesty The King, youth is synonymous with the future.

*For Bhutan to excel, our future generations must always be better than those before them. A strong, motivated, young Bhutan guarantees a strong bright future.*

Among numerous Royal initiatives to encourage Bhutanese youth, His Majesty has been emphasising the importance of being relevant, conscious of, and up to date with global trends. This now manifests in an emphasis on Science and Technology, with projects in technological infrastructure and STEM education that include a tentative step into the space age with the launch of a satellite by a Bhutanese team.



## Inspired

His Majesty advised university students in Thimphu:

*We all love our country but remember, to love your country is one thing and it's quite another to love your country in the most intelligent manner.*

For one girl, just out of her teens, her aspiration is to understand and live up to His Majesty's advice: "I think there are two ways in which you can love Bhutan," she concludes. "You can love Bhutan passively or you can love it critically, both of which can be applied to love at an individual level and love at an institutional level."

This girl always carries a kira and a Bhutanese flag when she travels outside the country. "I boast about my culture and my country... I come from the only carbon-negative country in the world; our culture is still intact, education and health care are free, and we have had the blessing to have had the most farsighted and benevolent leaders in the world." But passively loving the country means being detached and not being in touch with reality and, even worse, not making the effort to do so. For example, expressing how grateful you are to be born in Drukyl but complaining about how uncomfortable the *gho* and *kira* are.

She concludes that "to love Bhutan intelligently on an individual level means to try to better yourself and to realise that when you come from a small country, teaching yourself a skill could mean teaching the whole nation a skill. To love our country intelligently means to recognise that, while there are several materialistic and monetary reasons that are attractive outside of Bhutan, there are too few of us to not come back and make Bhutan the country we want it to be.... To love Bhutan intelligently we must first be useful to ourselves, our families, and those around us. If you are a hindrance to the ones closest to you, there is no way you can serve the kingdom."

Another young thinker points out that His Majesty The King personally inspires children to perform better, supports children from less fortunate backgrounds, and provides equal opportunities for success for all youth in all circumstances. She knows a student who received a card, personally

signed by His Majesty, congratulating her for achieving one of the top positions in school. She learnt that His Majesty signs more than 2,000 cards every year for the toppers in each grade in every dzongkhag in the country.

His Majesty grants individual scholarships for students through a “Gyalpoi Tozay Programme”, from notebooks and pencils to school uniforms for families who are unable to cover the associated expenses of attending school, despite education being free in Bhutan. His Majesty reminded the university graduates of 2018 that he has made it a point to speak to the participants of the National Graduates’ Orientation Programme every year since he was 21 years old.

## **Being Young is a Mandate**

As inimitable as the situation facing today’s youth may seem, it is a dilemma that every generation has confronted and will continue to do so. One young man realises that youth must stop relying on adults and parents and take up their responsibility. “Instead of complaining, we must start by voicing our opinions and concerns and hopes for our country.”

“This needs to be the turning point. When imagination is the only limit, as technology enhances human capability to achieve their dreams, it is the right time for young Bhutanese to ask themselves, what is there for this generation to do? What is this generation’s responsibility in nation building?”

Even as His Majesty inspires young Bhutanese into the space age to launch a Bhutanese satellite, he constantly reminds the youth population that they are also “custodians of national identity, guardians of sovereignty, peace and unity ... It is important, in this day and age, to be well educated, tech savvy, and to have a good worldview, but it is also imperative that we understand that we are the custodians of our heritage.”

In that sense, His Majesty The King is encouraging Bhutanese youth to reach for the stars, but with their feet on the ground.