

# What makes you not a Bhutanese?

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What does it mean to be Bhutanese, or not? Is there more to it than just being born in Bhutan of Bhutanese parents?

I have a friend who was not born in Bhutan and whose parents are not Bhutanese, but who speaks Sharchokpa fluently, who is totally loyal to Bhutan, and whose every nuance and entire body language is Bhutanese. I myself was born in Bhutan of a Bhutanese mother and Tibetan father, but then recognised as an incarnation of a Tibetan. Which of us is more Bhutanese?

And then I've met Europeans who work harder for Bhutan and who, passionately and at times embarrassingly, are more defensive and protective of everything Bhutanese than those of us born here. Yet we don't consider them Bhutanese, do we?

On the other hand, there are many so-called Bhutanese, born in Bhutan of Bhutanese parents, who have never lifted a finger for their country or people. Of course they talk about venerating the *Tsa-wa-sum* and are seen with all the right people, but are they true citizens of Bhutan if all they care about is a bigger car and their own business, household, land, money, and self-interest?

Never has there been such a challenge in defining identity as there is today. So the question of what makes you or doesn't make you Bhutanese is part of a global identity crisis that is definitely not going to go away.

What do values and culture, for example, have to do with our Bhutanese identity? Are Bhutanese ready to accept the Supreme Court registering a gay marriage or a high lama blessing a lesbian wedding?

Some might argue that our culture is so Buddhist. But isn't Buddhism an import from the Indian subcontinent, and how deeply is it really in our blood? And if we fast forward to a time when there are Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Yazidi Bhutanese, will they also think their religion defines them as Bhutanese?

## **We make our own identity**

Some may think I'm fast forwarding too rapidly with these questions. But perhaps I am actually far too slow in asking us to consider what we really mean by the Bhutanese identity. After all, the rest of the world will not wait for us to ponder this question at our own leisurely pace and will define us according to its own criteria if we don't define ourselves.

Identity is a strange phenomenon it can be created, and for the same reason it can fall apart. When Egypt was expelled from the Arab League and ostracised by other Arab nations for making peace with Israel, its identity shifted from "Arab" to its more ancient "Egyptian" roots.

And even though the concept of India is really a by-product of British rule, many Indians today are more than willing to miss their lunch to assert their Indian identity and patriotism. Meanwhile, Tibetan refugees in India lose their appetite if the Pakistan cricket team beats India. So it is precisely because identity is so malleable, and because we can therefore choose how to craft and mould our identity as Bhutanese, that it is so worthwhile asking this question what makes us Bhutanese, and what does not? Truly contemplating this question requires some daring because identity is both the most stubborn and the most fragile thing we have. We have to be prepared for many rugs to be pulled from under our feet. And when that happens, the real question is who is falling?

## **Do we dare uncover our hypocrisies?**

If we are honest, we will discover huge contradictions in our sense of what makes us Bhutanese or not. Do we like to think of ourselves as an easy-going, good-humoured, happy-go-lucky, fun-loving, generous, hospitable people who like to hang loose and spend half our lives playing archery?

Or is that same laid-back character trait an excuse for waiting around for handouts from foreign donors, and for complacency and laziness? Is it that attitude to life that makes us Bhutanese?

Otherwise, why would we complain of high youth unemployment and yet expect foreign workers to do the tough and menial jobs for us because we don't want to get our own hands dirty? In fact, why do we complain about

unemployment among the Bhutanese and about a rupee crunch when we import 75,000 foreign workers one-fifth of all workers in the country causing an outflow of more than seven billion rupees per year?

Is it Bhutanese to be willing only to work at a desk job in the civil service and to be more concerned about how much Daily Sustenance Allowance we get abroad than how much we actually learn there? Or might it conceivably be more Bhutanese to value the dignity of all labour? Or do we Bhutanese only dignify labour when we leave the country, like those of us who are so good at flipping hamburgers in Jackson Heights, New York?

Is it our insatiable Bhutanese obsession with prestige, hierarchy, and different coloured robes that stops our socially prominent elites from stooping to do work that we expect foreign workers to do at home, while we are freed from those constraints in New York? Would it help dignify labour at home if we did away with distinctions among car number plates and robes where we can barely keep up with which colour is higher than another or how orange is orange enough? Or would abolishing those symbols make us less Bhutanese?

### **What is Bhutanese culture?**

And if we Bhutanese are such a laid-back and relaxed people, why do we so zealously guard our so-called culture and tradition to the extent of sacrificing innovation and creativity? I see nothing innovative being offered in the long row of craft stalls in the middle of Norzin Lam. Even something as simple as weaving a bangchung is stuck in a time warp and of poorer quality than most bamboo weaving from Indonesia. But does being Bhutanese mean rigidly sticking to the way things were done a hundred years ago? Or could it be that some innovation actually maintains tradition, especially if it inspires the younger generation?

In fact, how much do we have to offer the world in the way of arts and crafts? Most of the souvenirs we presently flaunt are actually from Nepal, India, and China, and are then ironically bought by Chinese, Indians, and other tourists as mementos of Bhutan. And though we like to boast about our woodwork, silverwork, and sculpting, aren't these crafted more expertly and less expensively in Nepal, India, and China?

And wherein lies our culture, anyway? Is it really in arts and crafts? Or is it in Thimphu's thriving bar culture a city with about 60 bars for every one bookstore and hardly any performing arts spaces? After all, if Thimphu's 710 bar licences far more than in many much bigger cities elsewhere indicate that demand determines supply, then maybe what makes us Bhutanese is that we are barflies.

Speaking of culture, why worry about Bollywood's influence on our songs and movies, when we don't seem to care about outside influence on our education system and bureaucratic attitudes and style? If we are concerned about outside influence, those are surely more worth worrying about.

And what about the younger generation of Bhutanese dwelling in Changjiji and Olakha? Are they expecting too much or being un-Bhutanese when they keep signalling new priorities and a profound alienation from the hierarchical bombast of the past? Or did we train them to expect things from us that we cannot give? And if we want our educated youth to grow up as responsible adults, why do we treat our Sherubtse students like children by imposing curfews on them?

If we are going to shape our identity as a nation creatively and beneficially, we must come to terms with some of the most glaring contradictions in our current words and behaviour. Are we Bhutanese a species that is so good at cooking a picnic for thousands of people at lightning speed, but hopeless when it comes to routine, non-spontaneous briefings, meetings, and planning?

### **Who will define what makes us Bhutanese, or not?**

I have no answer for this question of what makes you and what does not make you a Bhutanese. But the question is really important, and it must be asked again and again, honestly and courageously, by anyone who wants to consider themselves Bhutanese. And if we don't ask the question ourselves, will we continue to leave the definition of who is Bhutanese, as so often happens, to the enamoured tourists who come here for 10 days and get so carried away by the exoticism, costumes, landscapes, sites, and quaint architecture?

Or will we leave the definition to those of our fellow countrymen who are so proud of being Bhutanese that they cannot distinguish their overbearing pride from genuine confidence, and worry only that anything less than pompous self-assertion might be interpreted as being disloyal or unpatriotic?

Instead, shouldn't we Bhutanese all learn to ask this question of what makes us Bhutanese or not, and in the process learn to be critical of ourselves, and even to laugh at and make fun of ourselves? Indeed it is the asking of this question itself that perhaps makes us Bhutanese. After all, who else will ask this question except a Bhutanese? And who else cares?

There is a lot at stake because the present confusion between political correctness and genuine patriotism may possibly be one of this country's greatest downfalls. Instead, perhaps, might not asking and contemplating this question of what makes us Bhutanese (or not) honestly and self-critically actually be the ultimate act of patriotism much more patriotic in this present day and age than self-righteously glorifying the past?