

On Migration and National History

Reflections on and from the Youth

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Introduction

I preface my stories of movement, change and transformation by acknowledging my position as a relatively young Bhutanese woman who is operating within a liminal space, where I am exposed to the workings of Bhutan during my fieldwork visits back home, and the diasporic experience of other Bhutanese youths during my studies in Naarm (Aboriginal name for Melbourne), Australia.

While these small vignettes express the views of many at home and abroad, the reflections espoused by such encounters do come from a youth who is also a part of the migrant population discussed.

In early 2023, I visited my previous employer, my fierce dragon lady, who mentored and introduced me to the intricacies of working with national bureaucracy and government agencies, with the utmost nimble tact. While sharing a cup of tea, she joked about the mass exodus of youth, and upon meeting her contemporary in town, she asked him how he was. He replied:

“Paa layshim bayra dey gu wai. Daben nga cha mey future. Future di gara Australia yasa nu. Layshim bayra dey gu wong!”

Which roughly translates to “Of course I’m fine! Now WE are the future!¹ The future have all gone to Australia, so we’d BETTER be fine!”

In a recent youth survey² conducted by Dasho/Dr. Karma Ura, he found that 50,125 Bhutanese citizens have exited the country and not returned in the last nine years, from 2015-2023. This does not include those who have left the country through other land exit routes - Samdrup Jongkhar, Gelephu, and Phuenstholing.

1 ‘We’ as in my employer’s generation.

2 This sample size of this survey consisted of 2402 Bhutanese youths.

Ura reports that within this nine-year timeline, the majority of these departures are to India and Australia, noting that the exiting population is getting younger, with a surge in out-migration of youth between the age of 15-24.³

The overall issue of out-migration, whether it be from rural to urban centres in Bhutan, or from the “developing” States to Global North destinations, is a response to this rapid modernisation and exposure to global networks and consciousness outside Bhutan. This further translates to a gap between expectations in living standards and opportunities for socio-economic mobility, and available resources.

In terms of internal migration, the majority of youths are moving to western Bhutan, partly because the extent of development and material wealth is far greater than the rest of the country. Moreover, Ura clarifies that the majority of youth migrants are not produced from the poorer landscapes of Bhutan; rather, youths out-migrating to destinations in the Global North are predominantly from the western region of Bhutan.⁴

The gender breakdown reveals that more young females within the marriageable age group are leaving the country, immediately disrupting kinship networks of care, as women are most often the caregivers of the elderly and children. Going abroad induces a postponement in the general decision-making timeline for getting married, starting families, etc., thus causing a drop in the national fertility rates.

Commenting on the reduced supply of kinship and social care, among other disruptions, such as soaring national attrition rates and an insecure post-COVID economy,⁵ Ura remarks that safe orderly migration can lead to development gains but unplanned migration can produce equally negative repercussions.

3 Karma Ura, “Migration of Bhutanese,” Kuensel, May 20, 2023; Karma Ura, “On the Topic ‘Migration of Bhutanese’” (Webinar, Deutsche Bhutan Himalaya Gesellschaft e.V., December 1, 2023), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIk6qht66g0&ab_channel=DeutscheBhutanHimalayaGesellschaft.V.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIk6qht66g0&ab_channel=DeutscheBhutanHimalayaGesellschaft.V;); Post-COVID, the number of people applying for NOC and Security Clearances has shot up. Ura comments on the fact that when national banks ceased their education loan schemes, between November 2022 and January 2023, there was a sharp drop in activities and processes required for out-migration to high capital western countries such as Australia, UK, etc.

4 Ura, “Migration of Bhutanese”; Ura, “On the Topic ‘Migration of Bhutanese.’”; Punakha, Haa, Bumthang, Paro and Thimphu.

5 Yedzin Tobgay, “The Paradox of Bhutan’s Australian Dream,” *The Diplomat*, October 19, 2022.

In the case of Bhutan, it has been unprecedented and abrupt, and could very well destabilise the national public infrastructure and economy, if left unaddressed. While migration from the Global South to the Global North may bring about gains in the economic situation, it is often at the cost of emotional well-being and personal status.⁶

Generational Disconnect

These emotional well-being and status opportunity costs undertaken by the youth baffle and puzzle many at home, particularly the older generation. Whenever I would visit my ailing grand-aunt, and wipe the crumbs off her shirt with a fresh tissue from the Kleenex box, she would feel irked and snap at me, “Your generation does not understand the value of resources!”

“Angay, it’s just a piece of tissue,” I would remark. To this, feisty Angay lectured:

“It’s not just the tissue! You young people don’t understand the value of everyday items that are luxuries to me. Wasting precious resources so frivolously without knowing how much work or labour went into getting it all the way here, to where we are!

“Back when I was your age, we were all roadside labourers irrespective of class and family background. Do you know why? All of us had to contribute corvee labour to the construction of the first national highway.⁷ Do you know how long we took to complete the road? This is the same road that allows the foreign goods that you frivolously waste to enter the country.”

Upon the mentioning of the Thimphu-Phuentsholing highway, I immediately recalled an interview I had with Pawo Ajoh,⁸ during my fieldwork in Haa. He recounted his youth under the reign of the third Monarch, with a tremendous knack for details:

6 Ura, “On the Topic ‘Migration of Bhutanese.’”

7 Tshering Tashi, “174 KMS: Bhutan’s First National Highway,” Kuensel, May 13, 2023.

8 Pawo Ajoh is the Chundu Pawo, a folk religion medium or popularly known as a shaman. He is eighth in a prestigious line of Chundu Pawos, that exclusively acts as a medium for the local protector deity of Haa, Ap Chundu.

“When I was eight years old, I heard that His Majesty was visiting us on the fourth month of the Bhutanese calendar. I still remember His Majesty passionately state, ‘We need a standing army to protect ourselves. Our children, they must attend school, we need doctors, and we need hospitals.’ Those above the age of 15 were required to contribute labour to the construction of a motor road from Ja Pasakha (Phuntsholing) to Kabesa (Thimphu).

“I joined the construction efforts at 15. Five years later, the road finally reached the gates of the Dechencholing Palace, and I was 20.⁹ His Majesty arrived to where we were working and he asked us if we were tired, to which we replied we were. The third Monarch grabbed a hoe and struck the ground thrice. While doing so he prayed aloud,

‘May the roads not only benefit the Wangchuck dynasty, but may it benefit each and every one of my citizens. Let this motor road further propel our development and national building initiatives’¹⁰

“Nowadays you don’t need to dig with your hands; there are power tillers. Before, with axes we could cut just three or four logs but this has all changed with power chains. Nowadays you don’t have to do a single day of corvee labour. If your house catches fire, you get money from the government, kidu from His Majesty. Instead of us giving our sweat and labour, the State gives us benefits now. I don’t see any reason for you all to go to Australia. Things have gotten so easy now, your generation doesn’t have to serve a single day of physical labour for the government like we did during our youth.”¹¹

Unlike our grandparents’ generation, which toiled to “modernise” the nation during the 1960s, the youth of today are far removed from such lived experiences. While this may speak to the success of the progress and prosperity ushered in during the reign of the third Monarch, it also

9 The chronological timeline espoused by Pawo Ajoh is not accurate, as Hardy Pradhan, a section officer, notes that it took a record time of 19 months (between October 1960-May 1962) to complete the national highway but I believe his memories might include other motor road projects as well.

10 Hardy Pradhan notes that during the formal opening of the national highway, the third monarch announced, “No longer do my people walk for seven days from Thimphu to Phuentsholing and seven days back just to buy salt from the Indian border towns. No longer do my people think only of the affairs in their village, for the roads have opened a window to the outside world and made them feel one with the rest of humanity.”

11 Ajoh Pawo, Transcript No. 50, Audio-recording, August 11, 2023.

reveals the unprecedented and dramatic rate of change that the nation has experienced.

In acknowledging this rapid development and all its intended and unpredicted consequences, our current Monarch, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Wangchuk, has vigilantly been observing the mood of the nation and the grievances of the youth. This is evident when tracking the narrative he builds throughout his National Day addresses to the nation every 17th December.

In just the most recent years, His Majesty initiated major bureaucratic and education reforms through the enactment of two kashos, Royal edicts, in 2021.¹²

“As our youth mature and become adults, they have to shoulder greater responsibilities. They will need to take care of their parents, work, and build assets to secure their future. When they do not find opportunities at home to realise their aspirations, they will head abroad inevitably. If we are unable to create better economic opportunities for our people at home within a decade or two, there will be a scarcity of young people in Bhutan... All of us are aware that we are a tiny, land-locked and developing country with a small population and limited resources. As the world around us changes rapidly and the future becomes more uncertain, we are becoming more vulnerable.

“What we need now, more than ever, is a corresponding degree of resolve and determination for our national interest. The strength of our national character, courage, grit, and fortitude must define every aspect of our national endeavour.”

The 115th National Day address in 2022 revealed His Majesty’s own reflections on governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which he identified his concerns regarding the need for further preparation for unforeseen disasters and calamities, reconfiguring the struggling national economy, addressing the increasing rates of drug and substance abuse, whilst continuing to harness and sustain the momentum of effort and national commitment garnered during the pandemic years.

¹² “Translation of His Majesty’s Address to the Nation on the 114th National Day,” Kuensel, December 18, 2021.

Unfortunately, post-pandemic statistics demonstrate an even greater surge in visa applications, with the easing of travel restrictions. Yet, in the latest 116th National Day address, a deep empathy and understanding of youth disillusionment is expressed by His Majesty as he states: “I empathise with our youth who are at a crossroads. Given limited opportunities at home, they are faced with the challenging decision to move abroad for better incomes. Even our professionals – doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, lawyers, architects and engineers - are in a similar position. Separated from their families and friends, they make sacrifices to venture abroad for the sake of their children’s future.”

This crossroad extends beyond the scope of the youth. We are truly at a national crossroads, much like our grandparents were when they were also faced with the decision to commit to King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk’s vision of modernising the nation in the 1950s.

Building on these early gains, our parents were also tasked with quickly educating and skilling themselves within the framework of “modern” western education, across boarding schools and institutes in the Himalayas and Greater India. They returned to take over running the newly established civil service from the hands of Indian experts advising the Bhutanese government.¹³

I would like to share section officer H. Pradhan’s most distinct observation of the generation with whom he built the first national highway. Struggling to explain the concept of affection and loyalty towards a Monarch to westerners, he notes: “They were proud to be participating in the building of a modern nation and worked hard simply because their King had asked them to do so.”¹⁴

Reiterating the most recent address, we truly are at an inflection point in national history. Debuting the Gelephu Mindfulness City, His Majesty has shared Bhutan’s new sovereign prerogative - a Special Administrative Region (SAR) intended to consolidate a secure source of economic surety,

13 Constructing a strong foundation for Indo-Bhutan diplomacy, a sizeable number of Indians were stationed in Bhutan to fill a crucial human resource shortage in implementing Bhutan’s five-year plans from the start of its first plan in 1961-66 Dhakhal D.N.S, “Twenty-Five Years of Development in Bhutan.”, *Mountain Research and Development* 7, no. 3 (n.d.): 219–21.

14 Tashi, “174 KMS: Bhutan’s First National Highway.”

whilst ensuring that such development measures are isolated, hence protecting and preserving our current social and environmental conditions outside the SAR.

This new sovereign prerogative was conceived in response to both the Bhutanese at home and the diaspora - who may long to be home but are economically constrained/compelled to earn abroad - as well as to those who yearn to create, move and thrive within our own national borders.

Yes, the Gelephu Mindfulness City is a massive and ambitious undertaking, and we are not without sceptics who question its feasibility. These apprehensions stem from past cases of major infrastructure initiatives that failed to be executed with transparency, nor were they completed; thus these concerns are not entirely misplaced.

But as I dwell on my perspective and experiences as a youth, I cannot help feeling seen, heard, and understood by my Monarch, and I am confident I am not alone in this sentiment.

As a realist, cynicism comes easily compared with hope and commitment which require great effort and courage. Should all generations of Bhutanese collectively overcome our mindsets and institutional obstacles,¹⁵ the Mindfulness City could be our means of showing the world that a small, humble, loyal, and deeply resilient nation can produce alternative, Buddhist-based, people-centric approaches to development.

I arrived at this conclusion when I was able to recognise that the enduring faith and collective commitment that our grandparents possessed during their youth still persist within the hearts of all Bhutanese. Should we falter and question our progress, I leave this quote to recentre and reassure us:

“My confidence comes from my deep and abiding trust in our people. Bhutanese are loyal, responsible, capable and resilient. They are innately intelligent, adept at learning new ideas and care deeply about our country and our future.”¹⁶

15 Jeffrey D. Sachs, “Institutions Matter, but Not for Everything,” Finance and Development, n.d.

16 “Translation of the National Day Address,” Kuensel, December 18, 2023.

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