

How Bhutanese Youth View the Vision for Transformation

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The much-awaited National Day celebration last year was everything that the people of Bhutan had anticipated it to be. It was special, not in an out-of-the-ordinary way but rather a once-in-a-lifetime special - and as His Majesty himself stated, “a moment in history that is very important for us.”

As His Majesty the King announced to his people the plans of a Special Administrative Region (SAR) in Gelephu, the stadium was saturated with the energy of collective hopes and dreams of the people of Bhutan, its resonance undiminished by the surrounding uproar.

His Majesty spoke to all Bhutanese, far and near, with love, empathy, attentiveness and dignity but he made a special mention of the “young people” of Bhutan.

For the youth, the SAR initiative provides a unique window of opportunity to materialise their aspirations for their future in times of constant change and uncertainty. They have borne the weight of disrupted education and unmet expectations more than any other generational groups. So what does the 116th National Day address mean to the young people?

This article will bring together the collective voices of the youth and their perspectives on the significance of the transformation that is taking place in the country with a particular focus on the SAR initiative in Gelephu. Through interviews, surveys, and personal reflections, I aim to capture the diverse aspirations, concerns, and expectations of Bhutan’s young population regarding this historic development.

Hope and Concern

The youth of Bhutan, often regarded as the torchbearers of the nation’s future, have eagerly awaited an opportunity to actively shape their destinies. The announcement of the SAR in Gelephu symbolises more than just a regional administrative change; it represents a beacon of hope, a platform

for innovation, and a gateway to realising their ambitions. However, it is important to approach the subsequent developments with a degree of query and critical analysis as well.

In the wake of global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental uncertainties, youth across the globe and Bhutan have faced disruptions in their education, careers and personal lives. Globally, in 2021, some 75 million young people were unemployed, 408 million were in employment, and 732 million were out of the labour force, according to a report published by International Labour Organisation in 2022¹. Yet, amidst these challenges, many have demonstrated resilience, adaptability and a fervent desire to contribute meaningfully to their communities and country.

The SAR initiative in particular holds immense promise for the youth in Bhutan, offering avenues for employment, entrepreneurship and skill development. It is seen as a catalyst for economic growth, social empowerment and sustainable development in the region. Moreover, the emphasis on youth engagement and participation in decision-making processes underscores the government's commitment to nurturing the next generation of leaders.

However, alongside optimism, there exist apprehensions and questions among Bhutan's youth. Concerns regarding environmental conservation, cultural preservation and socio-economic disparities must be addressed to ensure inclusive and equitable development.

As we listen to the voices of Bhutan's youth, it is important to contemplate the significance of the SAR initiative not only for the present but for the generations to come. It is a testament to Bhutan's unwavering commitment to holistic development, guided by the principles of Gross National Happiness, and grounded in the aspirations of its people, particularly its youth—the custodians of Bhutan's future.

Reflecting on this initiative, Karma Wangmo, a law student of JSW School

1 International Labour Organization, Global Employment Trend for Youth, 2022, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_853321.pdf.

of Law expresses a commitment to serving Tsa-Wa-Sum² and sees the project as a chance to contribute to His Majesty's vision. She highlighted the importance of aligning individual goals with collective objectives and stressed the need for innovation, sustainability and inclusivity in realising the project's potential. Referring to the collective responsibility emphasised by His Majesty, she underscored the significance of seizing this historic opportunity to safeguard Bhutan's cultural legacy for future generations.

Karma's colleague, Tenzin Yuden is excited by the opportunities it presents for Bhutanese talents on the global stage and she reflects on the project's legal considerations and her personal growth as a law student. She is proud of the city's focus on mindfulness and its embodiment of the middle path, and sees it as a golden opportunity for citizens to contribute to a prosperous future.

However, Sangay, who is currently pursuing her Masters of Professional Engineering in Civil Engineering from Curtin University, Perth, Australia, feels apprehensive about initiatives like the SAR in Gelephu, particularly when the outlook seems uncertain and there is not much information about it to the public. She came to Australia to upgrade her qualification and for her chance to pursue her career ambitions. As of now, Sangay and her friends believe that Australia will give them a better chance for career advancements.

A 24-year-old man³, who is working in Bhutan also shares similar concerns, believing that opportunities are limited and the country's trajectory is uncertain. As construction projects unfold and amenities are established in the Gelephu Mindfulness City, job opportunities are expected to abound. But will these opportunities truly benefit local residents, or will they exacerbate existing inequalities? And how will the city ensure that its development is sustainable and mindful of its impact on the environment and local communities?

It is essential to acknowledge these doubts and uncertainties as valid feelings that reflect the complexity of the situation. While an initiative like the SAR may offer hope for change and development, it is also important

2 "Tsa-wa' means the main elements and 'Sum' means three in Dzongkha. Thus Tsa-Wa-Sum is a socio-political concept used to represent the King, the Country and people.

3 The interviewee has requested anonymity.

to recognise the need for comprehensive solutions that address underlying issues such as economic disparities, environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

Unclear but Optimistic

For Choki Pelden, who is also a college student, the Gelephu Mindfulness City holds a special place in her heart, evoking childhood memories of creating miniature cities in the garden. Initially sceptical about the rumours surrounding a “mega city” doubts persisted regarding its potential impact on Bhutan’s economic development and community well-being. However, His Majesty’s address during the 116th National Day dispelled these doubts, addressing concerns about unemployment, national security and the city’s potential benefits comprehensively.

The city symbolises a dream come true, offering a blend of natural beauty and modern infrastructure akin to a mythical sanctuary. It represents a long-awaited solution to Bhutan’s needs, inspiring a deep dedication to serving the country and embracing change with confidence, guided by His Majesty’s reassuring words.

Kinley Dhendup Namgyel, student and an aspiring politician, says that the National Day address emphasises the importance of discipline, focus and values in realising His Majesty’s vision for the Mindfulness City in Bhutan. He sees this as an opportunity for personal growth and contribution to the nation’s development during the city’s establishment. Kinley expresses excitement and commitment to becoming competent and resilient, aiming to serve the country effectively. Overall, he seems to reflect a sense of patriotism and optimism for the future of Bhutan.

Thritsuen Lhazey, a recent high school graduate who will soon head to Canada to study chemistry, sees the Mindfulness city project in Gelephu as a visionary initiative aimed at fostering mindfulness and well-being. For her, Gelephu Mindfulness City stands as a beacon of holistic living and conscious development rooted in the ethos of promoting mental health and inner balance. This initiative not only holds the potential to attract tourists seeking respite from the fast-paced world but also promises to invigorate local businesses through its unique offerings.

Gelephu Mindfulness City is poised to become a magnet for travellers seeking authentic experiences that nourish the mind, body and spirit. By offering a serene environment conducive to introspection and rejuvenation, the city is positioned to draw visitors from far and wide, thereby infusing vitality into the local economy. As tourists flock to experience the tranquility and serenity that define the city, local businesses—from quaint cafes serving organic fare to wellness centres offering meditation retreats—are poised to thrive, creating a ripple effect of prosperity throughout the community.

Thritsuen also feels that as construction projects take shape and amenities are established, job opportunities will abound, providing local residents with avenues for meaningful employment and skill development. From architects and builders to hospitality staff and wellness practitioners, the city's development phase will serve as a catalyst for job creation, empowering individuals and families to secure stable livelihoods.

Rigzin Dorji, who is a Desuup from the 48th batch, expresses excitement and gratitude towards His Majesty's vision for the establishment of a mindfulness city in Gelephu, as announced during the National Day celebration. Rigzin, like many Bhutanese, sees this development as a significant opportunity for personal and professional growth, particularly for the youth. As a desuup, Rigzin feels a deep sense of duty to serve the nation and contribute to the success of this noble vision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the SAR initiative represents more than just a regional administrative change; it symbolises hope, innovation, and opportunity for Bhutan's youth to actively shape their destinies. Despite facing unprecedented challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental uncertainties, Bhutan's youth have shown remarkable resilience and a strong desire to contribute meaningfully to their communities and country.

His Majesty the King's announcement of the SAR initiative undoubtedly stirred excitement and hope among the crowd, but amidst the fervour, scepticism arises. Can the SAR truly address the multifaceted challenges faced by Bhutan's youth, or is it just another ambitious project with uncertain outcomes?

While His Majesty's address resonated with love, empathy and respect, one cannot help but question the feasibility and long-term sustainability of the SAR initiative, especially in the face of global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental uncertainties. How will the SAR navigate these challenges, and what measures are in place to ensure its success?

The aspirations of Bhutan's youth are indeed diverse but are their voices truly being heard in the planning and implementation of the SAR initiative? Is there genuine youth engagement, or is it merely tokenism?

The SAR initiative holds promise for economic growth, social empowerment and sustainable development, but what concrete steps are being taken to address concerns regarding environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and socio-economic disparities? How will inclusivity and equity be ensured in the development process?

While some express excitement and gratitude towards His Majesty's vision for the SAR, others like Sangay voice apprehensions and uncertainties. How can these valid concerns be addressed, and what measures are in place to mitigate potential risks and challenges?

Overall, while the SAR initiative holds promise for Bhutan's future, it is essential to approach them with a critical lens, acknowledging both their potential benefits and potential pitfalls. As Bhutan moves forward with these transformative initiatives, it is crucial to prioritise transparency, accountability, and genuine youth participation to ensure that they truly serve the best interests of all Bhutanese citizens, now and in the future.

The testimonials of young Bhutanese underscore the deep sense of patriotism and dedication among Bhutan's youth towards realising His Majesty's vision for the Mindfulness City in Gelephu. Their voices serve as a reminder of the collective responsibility shared by all Bhutanese in shaping the future of their country and embracing change with confidence and resilience. At the heart of Gelephu Mindfulness City lies a profound commitment to nurturing mindfulness among its residents and workforce.

Gelephu Mindfulness City embodies Bhutan's visionary approach to development, placing the well-being of its citizens at the forefront of

progress. By prioritising mindfulness and holistic living, the city not only serves as a model for sustainable urban planning but also as a catalyst for social and economic advancement.

As residents embrace mindful living practices and businesses thrive within the city's tranquil embrace, Gelephu Mindfulness City stands poised to contribute significantly to Bhutan's journey towards Gross National Happiness, fostering a society where prosperity is measured not only in economic terms but also in the richness of human experience and well-being.

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