

Should Bhutan Reimagine its Identity?

Youth Aspirations, Outmigration and Values

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Bhutan's social landscape is undergoing rapid transformation, with youth outmigration emerging as one of the most influential drivers of generational transition. According to the International Organisation for Migration (2022), the expansion of global educational pathways, employment opportunities abroad, and shifting youth aspirations have contributed to a dramatic rise in mobility, reshaping Bhutanese society in both visible and subtle ways.

While migration has long been an unavoidable part of global development processes, Bhutan's experience is unique, because of its closely-knit social fabric. Bhutan now faces the question of how generational shift, which is accelerated by global mobility, reshapes socio-cultural norms and expectations.

Many public discussions and social media posts frame outmigration as a potential threat to national values and identity. Concerns about weakening cultural participation, demographic imbalances and “brain drain” feature prominently in Bhutan's policy discourse.

However, informants in this paper assert that many maintain strong emotional ties to Bhutan and actively preserve cultural practices.

This paper argues that, while outmigration is a profound transformation, Bhutan should accommodate new values without losing the core fabric, rather than reimagining its identity. Identity can be sustained through strategic engagement with the diaspora and by fostering intergenerational resilience at home. This will facilitate outmigration becoming an opportunity and not a threat to national cohesion.

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Context and Trends of Outmigration

Bhutan has seen a significant increase in youth outmigration over the past decade, especially since 2018. Although exact numbers vary, studies estimate that approximately 66,000 Bhutanese now live abroad (Dawa Gyelmo, 2025).

According to Tobden, T., Ugyel, L., & Dorjee, T. (2023), a majority of the diaspora are between 18 and 35 years old, underscoring the youth-driven nature of the trend. These patterns align with global mobility trends in South Asia, where small states increasingly experience outward flows of educated youth (International Organisation for Migration, 2022).

The drivers of outmigration are mainly economic aspirations caused by high youth unemployment and limited job diversity within Bhutan's small economy, and higher remuneration abroad. This has pushed many young people to seek opportunities overseas.

There is also a desire to receive higher education, as international education has become a gateway to professional advancement, leading to many young Bhutanese pursuing their degrees abroad, facilitated by student visas, scholarships and global educational partnerships.

The informants of this paper highlight that, for many Bhutanese families, outmigration is a calculated economic strategy, since remittances significantly support households and contribute to improved living conditions. Bhutanese who have out-migrated and those who are planning to do so, increasingly view mobility as a pathway to self-actualisation.

Challenges and Opportunities of Outmigration

Outmigration in Bhutan generates a diverse set of consequences that can be understood through interconnected themes. These themes discuss how migration reshapes demographic structures, family dynamics, cultural practices, and socio-economic development.

A major national concern is demographic and labour market transitions, leading to the loss of skilled workers, which strains key sectors such as construction, hospitality, health, agriculture and public administration.

Rural communities are particularly affected by the declining population of young people, leading to labour shortages in farming and reduced community vitality.

Despite loss of labour, outmigration encourages workforce restructuring. Vacancies created by migrating youth open opportunities for new workers and stimulate investment opportunities in labour-saving technologies. Migrants also acquire global skills and professional exposure that later enable brain circulation, benefiting Bhutan through knowledge transfer and innovation.

Outmigration also raises concerns about the weakening of traditional practices, declining participation in community rituals, and reduced transmission of Bhutanese cultural knowledge.

As youths spend formative years abroad, generational understanding of culture may diverge, impacting on cultural continuity and eventually on identity.

However, informants of this study shared that Bhutanese diasporic communities actively celebrate *Losar*, His Majesty's birthday, National Day, and other national events, conduct rituals and cultural activities, and even organise language classes for children, enabling cultural reproduction beyond Bhutan's borders.

The informants of this study also underscored renewed pride in their Bhutanese identity when abroad. This suggests that outmigration expands rather than diminishes cultural belonging. This demonstrates the emergence of an extended Bhutanese identity, rooted in traditional values but enriched by global exposure.

It is also important to understand the complex socio-emotional landscape of outmigration. According to parent respondents in this study who have children abroad, the thought of their faraway children generates anxiety and longing, because of the physical separation.

At the community level, outmigration challenges the sustainability of social cohesion. Bhutanese migrants who participated in the interviews

also mentioned that they experience loneliness and weakened social bonds, although they are digitally connected.

However, despite socio-emotional challenges, families in Bhutan benefit from better livelihood and security through their improved financial situation. Remittances are used to improve houses, support religious events, build local infrastructure, and fund education for younger siblings.

At the national level, remittances strengthen foreign currency reserves and stimulate local economies. Outmigration brings benefits beyond remittances, such as global exposure and new forms of cultural exchange. It also expands opportunities for international networks that support entrepreneurship and innovation. Further, the emotional resilience built through navigating distance strengthens family bonds and expands social networks beyond the nation's borders.

Traditionally, older generations emphasised communal responsibilities and cultural continuity, while younger Bhutanese who are influenced by global norms prioritise autonomy and individual achievement. This intergenerational expectation gap has widened with outmigration, but the informants of this paper underscored that, despite the difference, strong intergenerational bonds persist, supported by digital communication. They assert that the two generations have negotiated their intergenerational expectations because of their strong will to stay connected, resulting from a sense of belongingness and affinity.

Public discussions and social media posts highlight concerns of loss of skilled workers, weakening community structures and cultural participation and declining rural populations.

Regarding loss of skilled workers, informants of this paper challenge the notion of permanent “brain drain”, emphasising instead “brain circulation”, whereby skills and experiences gained abroad will later benefit the home country.

Outmigration also creates opportunities for offering professional expertise remotely. According to respondents in this study who live abroad, there are many cases where Bhutanese living abroad generated business ideas, invested in them and operate with business partners in Bhutan. Thus,

outmigration becomes a developmental asset in the long term rather than brain drain.

Some scholars also argue that the spread of global values, such as individualism, competitiveness and consumerism, requires Bhutan to re-evaluate its cultural foundations. Concerns arise about whether migration will dilute traditional Bhutanese identity, language and values.

Yet diaspora experiences reveal that cultural identity remains resilient. According to the informants in this study, many migrants express feeling more Bhutanese abroad, demonstrating that identity adapts rather than disappears. Instead of re-inventing the Bhutanese identity, the challenge lies in sustaining belongingness and strengthening intergenerational pride in being Bhutanese. Outmigration thus invites Bhutan to affirm its identity while engaging confidently with the world.

In essence, outmigration in Bhutan presents both challenges and opportunities. While it reshapes the labour market, impacts on family relationships, and raises concerns about cultural continuity, it also brings economic benefits, cultural revitalisation and global learning, and enhances the sense of belonging.

Identity, Tradition and Global Exposure

Identity is anchored in values, which are beliefs about what is meaningful, ethical and desirable. In the 21st century, individuals often negotiate between traditional systems and global value frameworks, such as human rights, individual freedom and equality (Giddens, 1991).

Migration caused by hope for better education and career prospects has become central to identity formation. According to Giddens (1991), life trajectories are less linear and more open-ended, making identity a reflexive project shaped by choice, uncertainty and adaptation.

Bhutanese identity has long been shaped by Buddhist values, language, tradition and state policies emphasising cultural preservation (Thinley, 2005). Now, the large youth outmigration has exposed the Bhutanese diaspora communities to new values, such as individualism and merit-based achievement.

According to the informants of this study, parents, out of necessity, are increasingly supporting overseas education and work, even when they desire cultural continuity. This shift demands a negotiation of expectations. According to parents interviewed for this paper, Bhutanese youth today express new forms of aspirations shaped by global exposure, which represents a broader worldwide pattern. They said that the families and communities are re-interpreting identity and bond in relational ways. For instance, parents who once expected their children to inherit land and care for elders now negotiate new forms of connection through digital communication, remittances and periodic return visits.

Communities are ambivalent. Some people fear the decline of cultural rituals while others welcome remittance-driven prosperity. These mixed narratives should be viewed as a reflection of Bhutan's transitional moment.

Further, in the 21st century, identity is shaped by rapid globalisation, digital connectivity, migration and social transformation. Rather than being singular or fixed, identity today is multidimensional, fluid, and negotiated across local and global contexts. Thus, being Bhutanese living abroad becomes less about physical presence and more about socio-emotional responsibility and bond.

Should Bhutan reimagine its Identity?

Global mobility requires reflecting on Bhutanese identity. Can one be fully Bhutanese while living abroad?

The diaspora narratives assert that identity is adaptable but should not be re-invented. Informants of this study shared that identity can remain rooted in cultural values while embracing global experience.

They claim that Bhutanese diaspora communities recreate home abroad and cultivate the Bhutanese identity; for instance, by investing considerable effort in sustaining socio-cultural ties. They celebrate Losar and major national events like His Majesty's birthday and National Day, conduct rituals, wear Bhutanese dress during celebrations and graduation days, play archery, and invite spiritual masters to bless them.

Interviewees also shared that some have even started to prepare *zaw* (parched rice), *juma* (blood sausage), *doma khamto* (betel quid of areca nut and betel leaf with a dash of lime) and do business. Bhutanese restaurants have emerged. Some entrepreneurs have also started to offer Bhutanese language (Dzongkha) classes.

There are a few cases where parents who have permanent resident status sent their children to participate in Gyalsung. These practices cultivate a familiar socio-cultural and emotional landscape in unfamiliar environments and reaffirm collective identity.

Further, it demonstrates the aspiration to continue being a Bhutanese and the will to pass on the identity to their children who are born and raised abroad, despite the challenge of living and working in English-speaking environments shaped by multicultural societies defined by new norms, communication styles, and professional behaviour.

Till this point, the diaspora represented Bhutan as its ambassadors in a foreign environment. These practices illustrate cultural continuity beyond national territory. The informants of this paper also assert that outmigration generally expands rather than diminishes Bhutanese identity. Thus, Bhutanese identity has become portable, since it is carried across borders and expressed through evolving cultural practices.

While public discussions and social media posts raise concerns about loss of Bhutanese identity and associated risks as a consequence of outmigration, it must also be admitted that, in the 21st century, identity is best understood as plural, dynamic, and relational, which is formed at the intersection of culture, nation, technology, mobility and values.

The new influences and outmigration trends do not erase cultural pride but strengthens “Bhutanese-ness”. The informants of this study also assert that they, generally, feel more connected to Bhutan after moving abroad. Thus, Bhutan has to accept that, rather than replacing traditional identities, contemporary conditions transform how they live, express and sustain themselves.

In the context of preceding discussions and within the framework of Bhutan’s small population, youth outmigration challenges the state to

rethink strategies to sustain its identity, by designing an enabling landscape at home. Bhutan is no longer defined solely by those who reside within its borders, but also by its diaspora, whose economic contributions, skills and global exposure increasingly shape the country's future. This raises the critical question of how can Bhutan's identity accommodate change without losing its ethical core?

It must be admitted that Bhutanese diaspora communities often experience a gradual and uneven loss of certain dimensions of identity, not necessarily by choice but through distance, structural constraints and everyday adaptation to host societies. This loss is complex, as it is less about abandoning "Bhutanese-ness" and more about the erosion of lived cultural practice that is difficult to sustain outside the homeland.

However, people interviewed for this study expressed the view that many migrants living abroad plan to return to Bhutan for retirement, invest in Bhutanese property, or send children home for cultural immersion. Thus, Bhutan should recognise that outmigration has opened a window into the possibilities of a more interconnected Bhutan, where youths bring global experience, where families learn new ways of caring across distance, and where identity becomes adaptive and resilient.

As Bhutan navigates this transformation, people at the helm of affairs should recognise that a society that understands outmigration as part of its evolving story can design policies that strengthen and not strain intergenerational relationships and erode Bhutanese identity.

Grounded in this logic, Bhutan should create spaces through policies, dialogues and community practices that honour lived histories of older generations, value their sacrifices and nurture the aspirations of young people, so that younger generations are prepared to embrace the realities of a global era without compromising their core identity.

Enabling policies should attract Bhutanese talent abroad to return and be retained at home, through policies such as structured diaspora engagement that includes knowledge exchange and innovation networks, economic reforms that create meaningful work, conducive environment for private sector, investments that propel attractive employment and global labour agreements that facilitate Bhutanese skilled labour to periodically work

abroad. National Re-integration Programme (NRP) and Gelephu Mindfulness City initiatives are apt examples to attract Bhutanese talents back home.

For the benefit of Bhutanese who live and work abroad, the government should explore opportunities to invest in capitalising on digital platforms to offer services to learn Bhutanese language, history, culture and even astrology consultations.

In conclusion, the way forward for Bhutan is not to reimagine its identity but to harness the new possibilities and opportunities by strategising enabling policy landscapes. Bhutan should recognise outmigration as an integral part of its development trajectory.

Rather than viewing it as a loss, Bhutan should invest in framing migration as an opportunity and capitalise on it to further strengthen its identity by accommodating new values without losing the core fabric that support aspirations of Bhutanese youth to thrive in the dynamic global environment.

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