

Silent Transitions in Family and Care in Contemporary Bhutan

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Druza, 92, peers through the window at the cars exiting the village from his three storey traditional house. Gaselo in Wangduephodrang in December used to be filled with the sound of trumpets and drums with a *choku* (annual ritual) being performed almost every alternate day across the village. A rich aroma of incense and fried foods waft through as his wife and adult children prepare for the family's two-day annual *choku* approaching soon. Their house is unusually quiet.

For the past three years, more than a dozen of his grandchildren and great grandchildren moved overseas and now live across three continents – America, Europe, and Australia. As each of them left, *chokus* turned more into a regular religious event gradually losing its charm of family reunion and celebration.

“I heard another couple from our village is moving to Australia soon,” he said, throwing repeated glances at his mobile phone by the window as if expecting a call. Turns out he is expecting a call from his great grandson in Perth. “He’s visiting us soon.”

Druza's story illustrates the subtle yet profound demographic shifts across the country. While the Bhutanese society is deeply rooted in traditions, the fabric of its family structures and care practices has undergone quiet transitions in the past two decades (Lamsang, 2024). These changes stem from increased youth migration, an ageing population, and evolving societal aspirations (Ura, 2025). Understanding how families adapt to these phenomena offers a critical lens into contemporary Bhutanese society.

This article examines the redefinition of family and care in Bhutan through a blend of academic analysis and social observation; the work presents narratives to illuminate lived experiences within changing circumstances.

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Traditional Bhutanese family

A family is defined as people related by marriage, birth, consanguinity or legal adoption, who share a common kitchen and financial resources on a regular basis (Sharma, 2013). This definition is largely limited to the traditional Bhutanese family structure. The traditional Bhutanese family typically featured multi-generational households, communal support systems, and well-defined roles within an agrarian context (Ura, 2023). Bhutanese families were largely agricultural, often residing in extended family units (Phuntsho, 2013). These structures facilitated shared labour, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and collective care provision.

Recent decades have seen considerable socioeconomic development, urbanisation, and greater global connectivity, introducing new dynamics that influence these established patterns (Phuntsho, 2013). Religious and cultural practices further reinforced these familial bonds (Phuntsho, 2013). This model effectively sustained communities in a largely rural and self-sufficient economy. Today, with many migrating overseas to study, work and live, there are fundamental changes in the structure.

In recent times, Bhutan noted a sustained exodus of its young population to Australia, Europe, and America. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019) defines international migration as the movement of people across international borders with the intent to establish a new residence in a foreign country for a variety of reasons, such as employment opportunities, family reunification, education, humanitarian reasons, or other motivations. Tobden et al. (2023) noted that the continuing debate on the causes or drivers of migration persists and observed that the decision to migrate is complex, often influenced by a combination of factors (Selod & Shilpi, 2021). In the case of Bhutan, several factors such as economic prospects, educational advancement, and a desire for diverse life-experiences are primary drivers for Bhutanese outmigration (Ura, 2025).

In just the first half of the 2025–26 fiscal year, 5,916 Bhutanese received Australian visas, close to the total visas approved for the entire previous financial year (The Bhutanese, 2026). Of the 5,916 visa recipients, more than 3,100 were dependents including 783 children and youths (Lamsang, 2026). This is an indication of families relocating.

The spike in departures continues following this outward flow of younger generations, creating households with fewer working-age adults, leaving behind children and, more prominently, ageing parents. The implications include shifts in household composition, financial dependencies, and caregiving responsibilities (Ura, 2025). Studies on parental labour migration in other contexts like Nepal and Vietnam highlight potential negative impacts on left-behind children and caregivers, including mental and physical health issues and difficulties in social lives.

Migration Influences on Family

Despite almost two decades of major Bhutanese migration, for instance, filial piety and community solidarity that were central tenets, ensuring that elders received care and children were raised within a supportive network remain and even thrive in some areas.

Deciding to embark on the journey down under became so much easier for Ugyen Lhendup and his wife once their siblings readily agreed to take care of their three young children and elderly parents. “Otherwise, it would be very difficult,” he said. “For the past two years, they nursed them, and looked after more than anyone could, which pales in comparison to what we could do for them from here.” The couple will return in March 2026, after completing their study and feeling their family bonds strengthened over the period.

Care for the elderly and upbringing of children remain responsibilities shared across family members and the wider community as many other Bhutanese living in the US and Europe similarly have left children and elderly parents in the care of their relatives.

Rajesh Rai, who returned some months ago after more than two years in Australia, said that trusting their only son in the care of his wife’s sister was the best decision. “My son would have easily bullied his grandparents and gotten spoiled, but his aunt is strict with her two children, so he has grown up well disciplined,” he said. The 12-year-old has cemented a strong bond with his cousins which would not have been possible if he were not left to live with them.

Young parents like Rajesh, who entrusted the care of their children to their relatives or siblings, attest to the Bhutanese saying: “*Bu ro dang chha, nor rang da chha*” which loosely translated means one’s children should be raised in the care of others (meaning they will be enabled to mature and become independent faster), whereas one should keep one’s cattle (meaning one can then enjoy the dairy products).

Remittances more than doubled between 2022 and 2024 from USD 82.5 million to USD 164.4 million (Choden, 2025). The remittance in the 2023-2024 fiscal amounted to around 3.5 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. Last year, remittances in the first two months alone saw the country receive USD 36.9 million marking a 30.4 percent rise compared with the same period in 2024.

While remittances from migrating children offer financial support, the emotional and physical aspects of caregiving often fall upon remaining family members. Research from regions experiencing similar emigration patterns, such as Kerala, India, illuminates the gendered burden of caregiving on women left behind, who sacrifice personal careers and endure separation to fulfill filial roles (Dakua et al., 2025).

The shift from immediate physical proximity to reliance on remote support mechanisms introduces complexities that challenge established norms of filial responsibility. Further, as young people move away, the demographic pyramid in many rural areas exhibits a growing proportion of older adults and *gungtongs* (empty homes). This demographic transition poses challenges for intergenerational care, traditionally a cornerstone of Bhutanese society.

Wangchuk from Lhuentse only has his wife who looks after four young children and elderly parents. “My wife is really carrying a big burden,” he said. He came to Australia two years ago. His eldest son could not do well in the board examination in 2025 and now guilt pricks his conscience every time he thinks of home. “If I were there, he would have done well.”

Wangchuk, like other Bhutanese overseas, constantly questions his decision to venture out of Bhutan, leaving family behind. “There are many things I could accomplish after coming here, things I could have never imagined with my earning back home, but the costs of those achievements are equally huge too.”

Some are concerned as they quietly observe their children grow distant. “I get calls from my children and relatives only when they need data (for internet) or something. Otherwise, even when I call, they hardly have time to talk. Children are usually busy with their phones or ipads.”

Children born overseas to Bhutanese parents are learning Dzongkha and Bhutanese dialects, and Bhutanese way of life. It is not uncommon for parents to act as translators when grandparents want to talk to their children. This is a challenge also for children who migrated early in their childhood before they have learnt their mother tongue.

In rural Bhutan, families like Druza’s grapple with depopulation. Villagers often express feelings of loneliness, missing the daily presence and support of loved children. Sonam Choden from Punakha said that teenagers assume greater responsibilities in farm work and caring for their ailing grandmother, representing a shift in traditional care roles. The children left behind face unique challenges, with studies noting potential negative impacts on their social and mental wellbeing (Fellmeth et al. 2025).

In contrast, urban families are predominantly nuclear units, where both parents are employed, necessitating alternative care arrangements for children and elders. Young couples working and living in urban centres like Thimphu and Phuentsholing rely on domestic helpers and periodic visits from rural relatives to manage childcare. Their parents reside in a village, receiving financial support and occasional visits, but experiencing less direct daily interaction. This scenario reflects the increasing reliance on paid care or distant family support, a departure from the immediate, multi-generational care model.

Bhutanese have exploited digital technology to communicate and create a shared, virtual space and time that allows them to participate in religious rituals, maintain kinship ties, and respect the elderly (Wangchuk, 2022). Most family members exchange daily updates in their closed groups on social media such as WeChat, Telegram, WhatsApp, etc. They hang out live on TikTok. “We were not so connected with extended family members earlier than we are today,” said a post-graduate student in Melbourne, Tandin Dorji.

The geographical dispersal of family members introduces significant challenges to maintaining kinship ties. While digital communication tools like video calls and social media bridge some of the physical distance, they cannot fully substitute direct interaction. A Bhutanese post-graduate student in New South Wales, Australia, for instance, recounted the emotional toll of missing family festivals and milestones. “Despite regular calls, the absence of shared physical space affects the depth of connection, particularly with younger siblings or ageing grandparents,” Nima said.

This issue is not unique to Bhutan, as South Asian migrants in the UK and the USA also face challenges in maintaining intercontinental contacts with relatives, despite various forms of communication and financial support.

As their temporary resident visas expire, many Bhutanese are returning home with new skills, perspectives, and better financial potential to contribute to local development (MacArthur, 2025). The country’s leadership consistently emphasises family values, providing a framework for policy responses, yet practical adaptation remains an ongoing endeavour. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay in his State of the Nation annual report 2025 expressed the government’s concerns as 65,000 Bhutanese, almost nine percent of the Bhutanese population, today live overseas (Tobgay, 2025).

The government reported that, of the 573 Bhutanese who registered with the National Reintegration Programme, 170 returned to the country. Following the public announcement by the Prime Minister, a dedicated office was established under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment (MoICE) to initiate the programme and support the reintegration and re-employment of Bhutanese returning from overseas.

The allure of such opportunities and global experiences for a growing number of Bhutanese reshapes individual life trajectories (Ura, 2025), which in turn influences family structures. They see the contemporary Bhutanese family as not disintegrating but rather evolving, adapting to new socioeconomic landscapes. “It demonstrates resilience by leveraging technology for connection and developing innovative, often informal, support systems,” Nima Wangdi said.

Namgay in Australia succinctly captured what many Bhutanese, both within and outside the country, think of the meaning of family: “It has

come to extend beyond physical proximity to encompass transnational networks bound by financial support, digital communication, and enduring emotional ties.”

This evolution presents both challenges and opportunities, prompting a re-evaluation of societal structures and support mechanisms.

A Bhutanese resident in Sydney said: “My children have really bonded well with their grandparents and now they are more attached to them than me because they are so much doted on.”

Sonam Tshering, a health professional in the United Kingdom, said, “Livelihood for my family members have improved now compared with when I was growing up. Today, they don’t have to worry much about crops because they have cash in hand, which was unthinkable before,” he said. “Supporting my family remains important to me.”

Sonam, in his eighth year abroad, dreams of returning home and looking after his ageing parents one day.

Hearing stories of youth adults landing in trouble abroad, parents keep a tab on their children. Sonam Choden, a corporate employee in Thimphu, kept calling every day for a year to check on her teenage son in Australia. “I worried if he was eating well, studying and looking after himself,” she said. “Now, I call him only once a week because he is busy studying and working. He has become more responsible now.”

Many elders and children remaining in Bhutan have come to accept the concept of family that is expanding beyond the traditional co-residing unit to include transnational networks of support and care. They foster an inclusive understanding of family that values diverse arrangements, whether nuclear, extended, or geographically dispersed. Societal discourse continues to call for support for the various ways families maintain their bonds and fulfil care obligations across distances, ensuring that no family member feels isolated or neglected.

Disruptions or transformations within family structures consequently bear broad societal implications. As Bhutan navigates modernisation,

comprehending the evolution of family and care networks has become essential to devise responsive social policies and maintain societal wellbeing.

Therefore, further research into the complexities of the changes is crucial to understanding the undercurrents triggering these changes and developing appropriate responsive strategies and policies. Providing counselling and psychosocial support for both migrants experiencing separation and family members remaining in Bhutan, particularly the elderly and left-behind children, could help in addressing emotional wellbeing.

Meanwhile, some elders like Druza in Gaselo have come to accept the situation and only have prayers and good wishes for their loved ones overseas. He said asking his grandchildren to be around him and, in his words, “to look after me would be greedy. They have children to raise. So, every day, I pray for their safety and one day for them to come home.”

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