

# Forces Shaping Bhutan's Young Social Capital

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*"I cannot end without addressing our most important citizens -- our youths. The future of our nation depends on the worth, capabilities and motivation of today's youths. Therefore, I will not rest until I have given you the inspiration, knowledge and skills so that you not only fulfill your own aspirations but will be of immense worth to the nation. This is my sacred duty. A strong motivated young Bhutan guarantees a strong bright future."*

His Majesty the King, 6 November 2008, Coronation Address, Changlimithang.

## Introduction

A Royal audience on February 21, 2009, brought me to the capital from countryside Mongar. It was my first time outside the physical geography of Mongar and it shaped my worldview. During the audience for 14 national top students from Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate (Class XII) and Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education (Class X) at the Lingkana Royal Cottage, His Majesty singled out the importance of human resource in ensuring Bhutan's growth and survival.

This article explores the factors affecting youth development in this context. The discussion revolves around the role of education, youths and economy in relation to employment and youth lifestyle in relation to the country's long-held norms, practices, and values. It looks at socio-political activities that enable a grasp of a larger social world. How do young Bhutanese relate to the ecosystem surrounding them?

Widely touted as the great equaliser, education is a state-sanctioned instrument to nurture her citizens. Attributable to the state's sustained prioritisation of education in Bhutan's development journey, there were 242,961<sup>1</sup> students, learners, trainees and novitiates as of 2019. The youth literacy rate of 93.1 per cent, compared to a general literacy rate of 71.4

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education. (2019). Annual Education Statistics 2019. <http://online.fliphtml5.com/cqcmr/svlp/#p=1>

per cent as of 2017<sup>2</sup> suggests expanding opportunities with every new generation. Economically, investment in youths translates into demographic dividends, as 321,668 from the total projected population of 748,931 -- making up to 42.95 per cent -- were below 24 years of age in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The unemployment record over the years, however, indicates Bhutan's inability to absorb her youthful workforce. Youth unemployment has been consistently four- to five-fold higher than the general unemployment rate, as shown in the figure below.

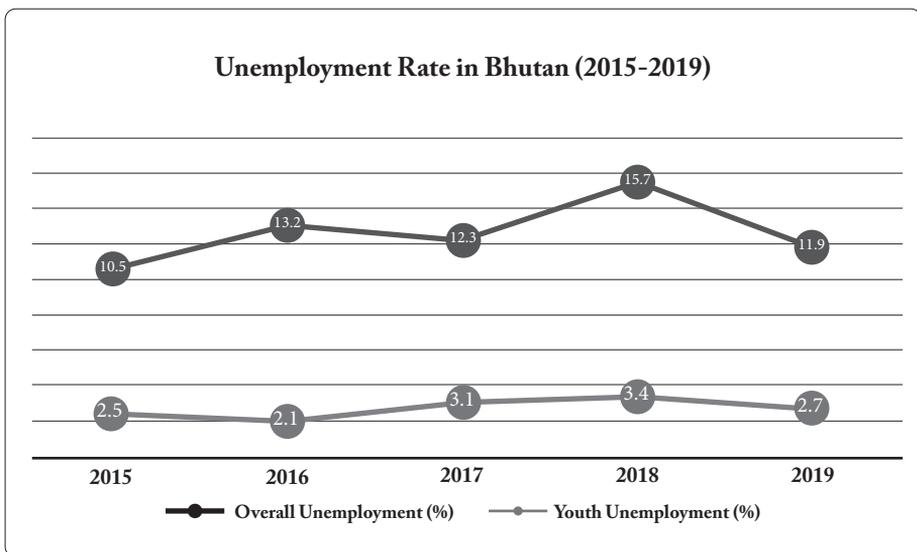


Figure 1: Unemployment rate in Bhutan from 2015 to 2019<sup>4</sup>

Is high youth unemployment caused by the government's inability to create jobs? Citing the country's economic situation,<sup>5</sup> the Overseas Employment Programme (OEP) was started in 2013 with the aim of sending 30,000 Bhutanese youths abroad for work by the end of the 11th Five-Year Plan (FYP).<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, some 50,057 foreign workers were hired between July 2018, and June 2019. Among them, 41,083 were employed in building

<sup>2</sup> National Statistics Bureau (2020). Key Indicators.

<sup>3</sup> National Statistics Bureau. (2018). Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2017. Thimphu. Bhutan.

<sup>4</sup> National Statistics Bureau. (2020). Labour Force Survey Reports (2015-2019). <http://www.nsb.gov.bt/publication/publications.php?id=1>

<sup>5</sup> Dorji, T (June 6, 2015). Labour Minister defends overseas employment programme. <https://thebhutanese.bt/labour-minister-defends-overseas-employment-programme/>

<sup>6</sup> Zangmo, T. (March 7, 2015). Overseas employment programme makes slow progress. <https://kuenselonline.com/overseas-employment-programme-makes-slow-progress/>

and trade related works.<sup>7</sup> Do Bhutanese not have carpentry, masonry and other vocational skills? Bhutan built grand *dzongs* (fortress), yet needed to import manual workers for the construction of concrete buildings. Was it because the skills of masonry and carpentry which, among the 13 traditional arts and crafts (*zorig chusum*), did not keep pace with the changes brought about by modernisation? Despite major reforms such as Royal Technical Institute (RTI) in 1965 and National Technical Training Authority (NTTA) in 1999<sup>8</sup> being initiated, vocational and technical jobs are yet to catch the interest of Bhutanese youths.

The absence of dignity of labour is often the cited reason for youths' disinterest in vocational and technical jobs. Studies however, found working conditions and wage rates,<sup>9</sup> job security, and well-defined benefits<sup>10</sup> as being the factors influencing their career choices. Mid-career professionals and youths taking vocational and services related works in Australia and the Middle East respectively, suggest remuneration as a key factor. With international borders sealed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to keep the economy afloat by supporting vital sectors such as construction, the government launched the Build Bhutan Project (BBP). The project provides a minimum salary of Nu.13,200 per month for non-skilled workers, with well-defined benefit schemes, including capacity development programmes.<sup>11</sup> As of July 29, 2020, about 1,164 applicants had registered, but with 4,078 workers required, demand far exceeds supply.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, remuneration alone does not solve the labour shortage. When a farmer's child assumes an executive chair, it is equated with success. Would the same appellation be afforded if the same child were to hold spades, hammers, and other tools? Social acceptance therefore, is essential. Would economically well-to-do parents, and those in executive positions, send their children to technical and vocational institutes if the latter do

<sup>7</sup> Department of Labour. (2020). Annual Report. <https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Annual-Report-2018-2019.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Wangdi, B. (June 15, 2019). The status of TVET in Bhutan. <https://kuenselonline.com/the-status-of-tvet-in-bhutan/>

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. (2013). Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Acceleration Framework: Youth Employment in Bhutan. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/bhutan/docs/MDGs/MAF%20-%20Youth%20Employment%20in%20Bhutan%2030%20Dec%202013.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Labour and Human Resources. (2014). Unemployed Youth Perception Survey 2014 Report. <https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Unemployed-Youth-Perception-Survey-2014-Report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Build Bhutan Project. (2020). About us. <http://202.144.155.103/bbp/>

<sup>12</sup> Lhaden, Y. (2020, 30 July). Hundreds apply for foreign workers with MoLHR. <https://kuenselonline.com/hundreds-apply-for-foreign-workers-with-molhr/>

not earn government scholarships to pursue higher secondary and tertiary education? A tracer study of 2,669 Technical Training Institute (TTI) graduates from 2016-2018 reported that 76.55 per cent came from a farming parental background, followed by civil servants at 6.67 per cent.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, 69.91 per cent of their fathers and 88.35 per cent of their mothers did not have an education. Can the findings be interpreted to suggest that vocational and technical jobs are only for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds who do not have other options?

Of late, entrepreneurship has gained traction among young people. For some, there are perceived opportunities; there is excitement. For others, the lack of opportunity makes them venture into entrepreneurship out of necessity. A significant number of youths has ventured into entrepreneurship, ranging from information technology, waste management and an incubation centre to agricultural cooperatives. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the perseverance, determination and resilience of businesses, including entrepreneurs. A young entrepreneur commented, "...this is not the right time to be an entrepreneur. A nine-to-five steady job is much safer." Are such comments a reflection of our lack of endurance, or the reality? Even during normal times, the market, competition and duplication by government sectors, and access to finance, are reported to be recurrent issues confronting young entrepreneurs.

Interest in sports and recreational activities and the creative arts is also growing among the younger generation, but these are hobbies rather than professions, because they do not provide a livelihood.

For Bhutan, culture preservation is synonymous with national sovereignty, which means that understanding of our culture and the disposition among youths of this long-standing national objective is of paramount importance. To what extent are youths conscious about community-based culture? Youth and culture, from the perspective of age-old practices, norms and beliefs, are seen as synchronous. Phuntsho (2016) argues that Bhutanese youths are in a cultural limbo, wherein they have "relinquished the old Bhutanese way of life, yet are not reaching the new modern lifestyle."<sup>14</sup> These changes are

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Labour and Human Resources. (2020). TVET Graduate Study Bhutan: Multi-cohort online tracer survey report of TTI and IZC Graduates (2013- 2019) [https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Online\\_Tracer\\_Manuscript\\_30\\_7-2020\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Online_Tracer_Manuscript_30_7-2020_compressed.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2016). The Promise of Broken Youth: A Positive Perspective. Druk Journal. P. 33-41. Winter 2016, Volume 2 Issue 2.

imminent, with the fast-growing influence of globalisation, wherein western individualistic driven ideas come in the guise of “modern progressive reform”, putting collectivist ideas on the fringes. For example, old age homes were never a public policy issue. The extended and nuclear family structure ensured the old age social support built around the values of parent-child (pham-butshu), neighbourhood (khyim tshang dangri) and sibling (puen-puencha) relationships.

Access to information through the Internet and television, and exposure gained through education, are largely responsible for the shift in values and belief system. A present-day maxim of “intergenerational gap” is a reflection of how divergent the views and norms have become between the older and younger generations. A young Bhutanese was invited to audition for America’s Got Talent, the Korean language is learnt through movies, and English is spoken fluently. Youths have exposure! Generally, people are taken by surprise when young people perform *zhungdra* and *boedra* flawlessly. Backpacking gho and kira while visiting *lhakhangs* (temple) and sacred sites has become a norm. Furthermore, there is growing concern that the younger generation is not competent in Dzongkha, the national language. To an extent, acceptance of English as the *lingua franca* in both official (unless having to adhere to certain directives) and informal conversations shows the status of English in juxtaposition with Dzongkha. Language not only communicates verbal messages but also helps transmit values and norms that are laden in every language, including colloquial expression. Language essentially is a cultural expression. Is it because of English -- by virtue of being the medium of instruction -- that Dzongkha is relegated to secondary importance?

Modern education accelerated Bhutan’s economic development. To enhance education and gain exposure -- given limited options in the country -- Bhutanese going abroad for studies has been a growing trend. In 2019, out of 16,227 Bhutanese pursuing tertiary education, 3,930 were overseas.<sup>15</sup> Exposure helps leverage innovation and reforms only if it is context relevant. Otherwise, changes brought about by so-called modern ideas potentially become detached from reality. Schofield (2019), commenting on the flipside of Bhutanese studying abroad, stated that “...

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Education (2020). State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan 2019. <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/HEPD/State-of-Tertiary-Education-2019.pdf>

international experience influenced them in a manner that was not totally consistent with traditional behavioural norms for young people.”<sup>16</sup>

For leaders in the making, civic participation is important because it helps youths understand the broader social environment. Issue-based voluntary initiatives among youths, such as awareness programmes on waste management, sexual and reproductive health, and youth engagement programmes, are encouraging signs. However, their participation in the mainstream political process -- at least in terms of voter turnout -- is not encouraging. In the 2013 primary round of elections to the National Assembly, the voter turnout among the 18 to 30 years of age was 47,885 out of 180,251, or 26.56 per cent. The figure was little different in 2018: from a projected 100,765, 21,833 persons between 18 and 24 years old exercised their adult suffrage, accounting for 21.66 per cent. What keeps young people away from ballots? Do “apolitical” educational institutes keep them uninformed of their potential representatives? Or are young Bhutanese apathetic about serious topics?

Youths are often associated with substance abuse. A study on crime involving young people showed that in 2013 alone, from 2,925 crimes recorded with the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP), 40 per cent of perpetrators was between the ages of 12 and 24. As villages grew into towns, footpaths gave way to streets, folk songs and dances were less attractive than pop culture, and the evening times around the hearth became obsolete as restaurants and bars offered comfortable seats and multiple options on the menu.

The social space grew disproportionately high, affecting the positive development of youths. For example, there were 631 bars in Thimphu in 2017.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Thimphu has only around eight bookstores today. Public libraries are few and far between, operating like government offices (from 09:00 to 17:00). Sports and recreational facilities are exclusive for fee-paying users. These do not engage young people meaningfully.

Young Bhutanese are making progress. Ugyen Dorji became Bhutan's youngest elected Minister at the age of 32. Bhutan's first satellite (a

<sup>16</sup> Schofield, J. W. (2019). When Bhutanese Study Outside. Education Bhutan, The Druk Journal. Volume 5 Issue 1; 105 – 113

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Economic Affairs. (2017). Operational Cottage and Small Industries as of 30th November, 2017. <https://www.moea.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A-CSI-Report-as-of-30-November-2017.pdf>

CubeSat), BHUTAN-1, was launched in June, 2018<sup>18</sup> and Sonam Pelden was listed for “Forbes 30 under 30 -- Asia” for her technology services in Malaysia. Nonetheless, much remains to be accomplished. The Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) 2019 found Bhutanese students having “...higher success rates in items requiring lower cognitive skills, but there is a significant gap in performance in more demanding tasks.”<sup>19</sup> Overall, Bhutanese have performed at par with PISA-D countries such as Cambodia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Panama, Senegal and Zambia, but it is significantly below OECD average and of the best education systems in Asia.

## Way Forward

As young people begin to make headlines -- both for good and not so good news -- His Majesty the King during the 112<sup>th</sup> National Day on December 17, 2019, made the historic declaration to institute *Gyalsung* (National Service) from 2022, for youths above 18 years old. The overarching goal of *Gyalsung* is to equip young Bhutanese with knowledge, skills and values which are integral to “uphold and promote the unity, peace, security and sovereignty of our nation for all times to come” in this rapidly changing world. His Majesty’s announcement gave hope, joy, and relief to different sections of the population. To sustain such initiatives, reforms ex-ante and ex-post *Gyalsung* are critical.

In the short term (one to two years), youth unemployment is a major issue that impinges on different aspects of young people’s lives. First, employment is a source of livelihood. Second, it keeps young people engaged in meaningful pursuit, otherwise they are vulnerable to undesired outcomes such as substance abuse and conflict with the law. Equally important, meaningful engagement would channel productive workforce in nation building which otherwise is short. Hence high remuneration should be accompanied by comprehensive social security schemes, including pension and insurance, among others. This can be complemented with capacity development programmes.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Information and Communications. (2018). Press Release. <https://www.moic.gov.bt/en/press-releaselaunch-of-bhutans-first-satellite-bhutan-1/>

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Education. (2019). Education in Bhutan: Findings from Bhutan’s experience in PISA for Development. <http://www.education.gov.bt/wp-content/downloads/publications/other/Bhutan-PISA-D-National-Report.pdf>

In the medium term (three to five years), education should be linked with the labour market. The job-education mismatch, even among graduates of technical institutes, is a recurring discussion topic, but nothing seems to be done about it. The retrospective assessment of the overall relevance of the TVET programmes found 53.57 per cent of graduates of 2016 – 2018 rating them as “good”, while 12.43 rated them “very good”. Close to 30 per cent of graduates found the programmes not relevant. Unless certain restructuring is done, TVET as a solution to unemployment is not comforting. On-the-job training, apprenticeship and internship opportunities with nominal stipends, need to be facilitated. Erstwhile internship programmes such as the Graduate Internship Programme, needs to be revived and extended even to those undergoing studies, so that they get exposure and experience in the world of work. The Royal University of Bhutan, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, corporate and private sectors need to collaborate. This should be accompanied by workplace and labour reforms. High staff turnover in private companies is attributed to lack of regulation around private enterprises, especially in terms of labour contracts.<sup>20</sup>

In the long run (five to ten years), reforms in education should see schools become an integral part of the larger community. As it stands, student activities and field trips remain in theory for want of time, financial resources, and having to follow a series of administrative protocols. As a result, learning is detached from real events unfolding in schools. Schools can customise Grassroots Immersion Programme (GRIP) offered for the Foundational Leadership Programme (FLP) at the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies, wherein participants experience a week-long life in a pre-identified community, prior to sessions on national goals and objectives. Such an approach helps in understanding local context in relation to national aspirations, thus facilitating reflective learning. Beyond academic learning, restructuring the school system as a part of the larger community is the last hope in connecting diverging pathways between youth and culture.

Moreover, the current approach offering optional subjects needs another look. The existing approach is such that students have to opt for one or the other, while in actuality, subjects are inherently interlinked. For example, in Class IX, students are required to choose between information technology,

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (2014). Unemployed Youth Perception Survey 2014 Report. <https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Unemployed-Youth-Perception-Survey-2014-Report.pdf>

agriculture and economics. This has implications at multiple levels. At the individual level, students would not have a basic understanding of certain subjects. In 2019, from 12,614 students sitting for BCSE, less than one-third of students (2,677) sat for economics. As a result, a majority of students might not have the economic literacy which is essential to understanding basic economic concepts, reasoning and its application in daily lives as citizens, workers, and consumers.<sup>21</sup> At the country level, it hinges on human resources that is central to resource planning and management. And agriculture is offered as a standalone subject. Given agriculture is one of the important sectors of an economy, it can be subsumed under economics, so that students are positioned to see things holistically. Doing so would also open career options for young people. For example, students of business management are reported to opt for entrepreneurship as a career more than general graduates.<sup>22</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed another important issue -- the digital divide. Some 16,884 students who did not have access either to television or Internet apparently had to figure out a way on their own, until Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) was launched on May 2, 2020,<sup>23</sup> almost two months after the commencement of e-learning. As Information Communication Technology (ICT) becomes a medium of learning, fundamentals of ICT need to be offered to all students, rather than making it exclusive for a certain group of students.

These entail additional resources, which are scarce. Hence, resource prioritisation is critical. Unless equivalent reforms and investments are made, *Gyalsung* in itself would encounter a daunting task, to transform young minds and sustain their motivation beyond *Gyalsung*. The National Youth Policy (NYP) is one mechanism which would complement such a grand vision. The NYP 2011 came and went without much footprint, as it did not have a National Youth Action Plan (NYAP). There is, perhaps, one last hope in a revised NYP to have a concrete plan of action to create enabling conditions for young Bhutanese to realise their full potential. Hopefully, such policy instruments will bring individuals and institutions together and complement *Gyalsung* as a national project.

<sup>21</sup> Khadka, C.B. (2016). Effectiveness of Teaching Economics in Higher Secondary School Level, Nepal. *Economic Journal of Development Issues* Vol. 21 & 22 No. 1-2, pp. 99-126. Combined Issue

<sup>22</sup> Tenzin, U. (2018). An Empirical Assessment of Entrepreneurial Intentions Amongst University Graduates in Bhutan. [https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Final-Report\\_UT.pdf](https://www.molhr.gov.bt/molhr/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Final-Report_UT.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education. (2020). Launch of Self-Instructional Materials (SIM). <http://www.education.gov.bt/index.php/launch-of-self-instructional-materials-2/>