

# **Establishing a Bhutanese Creative Community: The Salient Driver for Bhutan's Cultural Industries**

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## **Background and Introduction**

The focus in 2019's Bhutan Economic Forum for Innovative Transformation (BEFIT) will be on Bhutan's small and medium enterprise sector (SMEs), also known locally as the cottage and small industries (CSI) sector. The aim of the forum is to review the Cottage, Small and Medium Industry Policy (2012), learn from international and regional best practices, and identify remaining gaps and interventions needed. It is anticipated that an assembly of experts at this forum will assist authorities to identify the requirements needed to establish a firm and credible foundation for the development of CSIs in Bhutan.

As a “warming-up act” to BEFIT 2019, the subject addressed in this paper focuses on Bhutan's cultural industry and how to achieve its fullest potential. Like all similar industries elsewhere, cultural industry is built upon the bedrock of SMEs (Pratt and Virani, 2015). This discussion identifies a vital missing link in Bhutan's development plans in supporting the industry. This gap, as analysed, is the establishment and nurturing of a creative community to propel Bhutan's culture industries forward.

## **The Genesis and Development of Bhutan's Cultural Industry**

Culture has always been a part of Bhutanese national consciousness, as it is included in most Five-Year Plans. Cultural activities before the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan (2008-2013) were mostly focused on the preservation and conservation of cultural monuments and artifacts. These included the renovation and restoration of monastery buildings and documentation of religious artifacts (Planning Commission, 1966, 1971, 1992, 1997, 2002). After the 7<sup>th</sup> Plan, the planned activities for culture expanded to include promotion of Bhutanese culture (Planning Commission 1992, 1997, 2002). In terms of national accounting, these activities were primarily expenditures rather than revenue generating.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan, the perspective on culture underwent a dynamic transformation. Although culture still retained its expenditure nature, the word “culture” also appeared under Vitalising Industry in Chapter 3, as “cultural industries” (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008). In the sub-section of 3.2.3: Promotion and Facilitating the Development of Cultural Industries, culture was no longer considered only as an expenditure to Bhutan’s national budget but also “holds considerable potential for generating economic and social benefits, such as employment creation and poverty reduction” (Pg. 33, Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008). In the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan, the government proposed to take a series of measures to promote sectors within this industry while establishing a favourable environment to grow this sector.

When the new government formulated the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan, they promised that a cultural industry would be high on its agenda because of its multiple benefits (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2013). As such, broad strokes for cultural industry support activities were stated in the Plan, while ambitious targets were set. One, for example, was to increase the number of rural households engaged in cultural industries from 208 to 2,000, a growth of more than 900 percent!

The format and structure of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan take a radical departure from all other Plans. Rather than approaching the planning process through a thematic approach, the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan takes a bold step to operationalise the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). The 12<sup>th</sup> Plan has identified 16 National Key Results Areas (NKRA) to achieve its Objective-“Just, Harmonious and a Sustainable Society through enhanced decentralisation” (Pg. 19, Gross National Happiness Commission, 2018). Examining each NKRA, cultural industries seem most relevant to the following:

NKRA 2: Economic Diversity and Productivity Enhanced; NKRA 3: Poverty Eradication & Inequality Reduced; NKRA 4: Culture and Traditions Preserved and Promoted; NKRA 7: Quality of Education and Skills Improved; NKRA 10: Gender Equality Promoted, Women and Girls Empowered and NKRA 11: Productive and Gainful Employment Created. Leading agencies identified by the Plan will draft their own programmes and projects for approval. At the time of writing this paper, these drafts have yet to be approved.

## **Clarification of the Term “Cultural Industries”**

There has been much confusion over the definitions and identification of “cultural”, “creative”, “culture-based creative” and “copyright-based” industries. As it is not the intention of this paper to dive deeply into the different connotations of these definitions, the discussion here will adopt the broad general characterisation used in the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan -- “are essentially based on harnessing the innovative and creative aspects of human capital” (Pg.33 Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008). Thus, the term “cultural industry” here will include the four others stated above. Significantly, during the UNESCO Inter-governmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development held in Stockholm, 1998, these industries were termed as “industries of the imagination” (1999, UNESCO).

## **Recommendations to Develop Cultural Industries**

At the BIMSTEC First Ministerial Meeting on Culture in Paro, 2006 (Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, 2006)<sup>1</sup>, several recommendations were proposed.<sup>1</sup> These included the need to consolidate enterprises involved in the industry, establish a system to support legislation and regulate the cultural industry framework, initiate steps to ease access to financing for those involved, invest in physical infrastructure, make information and communication technology (ICT) widely available and organise relevant training, certification and licensing to up-scale capacities, authenticate products and monitor the quality of services and production of the industry.

Echoing some of these recommendations, a report by the Intellectual Property Division, Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2011 added others. The report proposed the need to improve data collection of the industry so that it would be in line with national statistical standards, and to disseminate the information to all who are involved. Other suggestions included strengthening of the intellectual property division in terms of its recognition and status. Finally, the report advised the government to create public awareness on Intellectual Property (IP) issues, build capacities within the government and the public on matters related to IP, and intensify the linkages between both sectors.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, 2006), several recommendations were proposed.

## Work So Far

In many ways, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) has taken up these suggestions and significant steps were achieved. For example, in terms of the recommendation to authenticate Bhutanese products, a “Made in Bhutan” certification was launched. In 2011, the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MoEA) established the Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) to help structuralise, lead and co-ordinate the SMEs within the crafts sector. The government also drafted a film policy under the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan.

## The Missing Link

The recommendations cited in the reports and the activities undertaken by the government were all necessary and relevant to develop Bhutan’s cultural industry. Unfortunately, none of these had addressed the main fuel of the industry: “cultivation of innovative and creative minds as human capital”, as referenced through the definition of cultural industry in the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan (Pg. 33 Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008). This is essential because, after all, it is the industry of the imagination. Therefore, a reservoir of imaginative ideas and inspirational thoughts are essential to power this industry. People working in this industry need to be innovative in their thinking, their dispositional state should be one that is inquisitive, with a hunger to explore and discover.

Although these qualities may appear illusionary and elusive at first glance, they are character traits that can be found within a group of people. Richard Florida, an American urban theorist, has identified this group of people, and they are termed the “creative class” (Florida, 2002).

The relevance of identifying this category of people is to study their values and understand their personality, so as to identify similar groups here in Bhutan. Nurturing people with such values and profiles will act as a catalyst to engender these fundamental resources to fuel Bhutan’s cultural industry.

## The Creative Class

Florida’s article in *The Washington Monthly* (2002a) found that people from the creative class worked in a diverse range of jobs in a wide range



rather than passive institutionalised forms, and are often involved in outdoor activities. For example, Florida observed that American cities where a significant portion of the population is identified as the creative class, share some common physical characteristics that facilitate outdoor activities for its citizens. Cities such as the Greater Boston area, Seattle, the San Francisco Bay area and Austin all offer good quality outdoors sporting facilities with beautiful scenery and parks, while also hosting important sporting events. In these cities, beyond traditional outdoor activities such as bicycling, jogging, and kayaking, other non-conventional sports are included, such as trail running and snowboarding (Florida, 2002a).

Finally, according to Florida (2002a), it is important for members of this class to pursue dense, high-quality, multi-dimensional experiences that are life-enriching. For instance, in his research, Florida (2002a) found that high on their list of interests are activities such as hearing different types of music, tasting different types of cuisines and socialising with different types of people who are unlike themselves. Members of the creative class also preferred cities that offered a wide diversity of nightlife, such as interesting music venues, neighbourhood galleries, theatres showcasing experimental performing, street-level culture that is vibrant, with a mixture of cafés, bistros and buskers.

As such, the values inculcated by the creative class are creativity and the ability to self-express their thoughts and feelings. Because of their “non-standard” personality, they appreciate individuality, differences and diversity in all manifestations. Values such as authenticity, uniqueness and original experiences are highly treasured, as these are principles upon which they carry out their work.

## **Creativity, Innovation, and Design**

Creativity and innovation are intimately connected. Creativity is the birth of ideas, while innovation is about how ideas are used (Andari et al, 2007; Von Stamm, 2008). The success of the American cultural industry can be attributed to the high quality of innovation that is generated by the creative energy of the creative class. It is their creativity that has given birth to many successful innovative products that we see on the market today.

Bettina Von Stamm (2008) has linked creativity and innovation with design; she explains that design is a process whereby a creative idea is transformed into a tangible commercial product or service through conscious decision-making. Design is an indispensable aspect of cultural industry as the process is also based upon aspects of human capital. Therefore, it is imperative that a creative community in Bhutan be established and nurtured, in order to generate innovative ideas that are converted into well-designed products to drive Bhutan's cultural industry.

## **Creating Visibility for Creative Personalities in Bhutan**

People with such qualities and values are present in all communities. However, in Bhutan's case, because of its context, there has never been a conspicuous creative community (although there has always been creative and talented people). The challenge is for Bhutan to bring to form a visible and vibrant creative community, and importantly, to nurture this group of people. It will result in a readily available pool of resource for the cultural industry to draw upon.

One means to make this community vibrant and visible is to create a platform where talented and creative people can come together, so that a creative community can evolve, while their interaction with each other, and the industry, will result in dynamism. This paper advocates that this platform could be a design resource centre, a facility that will become a design hub to foster a creative climate, attracting creative personalities while cultivating their creative potential. Currently, such a space is not yet in existence.

## **Design Hub**

The establishment of a design hub should embrace all aspects of design, the arts and creativity. It should also facilitate and service both creative people and creative enterprises. For example, a library can be created to house books, magazines, journals and periodicals on all subjects related to the arts, design and other subjects that may interest artistic and creative personalities. Besides printed materials, music, film and other digital forms should also be part of the collection, enabling members of the emerging creative community to study and reference, or serve as sources for inspiration

for their work and interest. Disseminating the latest information on the arts and news regarding design development can be a service of this design library. It will keep cultural enterprises abreast with the latest international development of their respective fields.

This hub should also provide facilities such as co-working spaces, workstations and design studios with designing equipment, such as high-resolution scanners, printers, 3-D printers, etc, to aid independent designers, artists, etc, in their work. Specific public areas can be set aside for informal music sessions, ie, jam sessions; this will offer emerging musicians to showcase their music to the public. Designated rooms for exhibition should also be part of this hub to present notable works. Social areas such as cafes will encourage creative people to “hang out” and develop networks. Retail spaces in the hub, selling design and art-related products, will attract both the specialist crowd and the general public.

Beyond providing physical resources and facilities, the hub can also conduct diverse activities to sustain the attention of creative people. For example, talks and forums on different topics that are related to the arts, design or any other related subjects may be organised periodically. Other social activities like outdoor movie nights and jam sessions can also be conducted, attracting like-minded individuals. Design bazaars at weekends will be a venue for young designers to test their products with the public and obtain feedback. In order to sensitise the next generation, art and craft courses should be conducted to introduce and expose children to creativity.

Besides seeding a visible creative community in Bhutan, such a design hub will have possible spill-over effects onto the general public. Most fundamentally, this hub will serve as a space where creative people and the public can connect and interact. This itself will initiate a new form of relationships, perceptions and dynamics between the emerging community and the public. One example is organising design competitions to benchmark a design standard, and then showcasing the winning designs or products to educate the public on design excellence. Such activities will help to increase the value and respect for good designs.

## Cost of Not Establishing a Creative Community

This paper appreciates that the cost for setting up such a platform to germinate a creative community in Bhutan is high. However, more pertinently, the question that begs to be answered is: “Can Bhutan afford NOT to set up a design hub?”

Citing Bhutan’s hand-woven textile sector as an example, a general analysis conducted recently by the team from Smithsonian Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage found that Bhutanese youths are no longer interested in weaving as a means of livelihood because of its low prestige, labour-intensive work and non-professional vocational framework that lacks formal recognition. Consequently, the recruitment to train new weavers has been reducing year-on-year. At the same time, youths today live in a knowledge-propelled world that is technically advanced and globally connected. Rather than producing textiles that are based on traditional designs, they are more interested in expressing their own creative energy through designing their own products.

At the same time, traditional Bhutanese textiles are being mass-produced by Indian manufacturers at a fraction of the cost of locally hand-woven ones. This includes hand-woven pieces from India that are identical in form and quality. This competition from an external source has upset the status quo of the Bhutanese hand-woven sector and, if left unaddressed, it will face an inevitable downward trend. One means of reversing this trend is to re-configure the value of Bhutanese hand-woven textiles.

One method of re-configuring the value of Bhutanese hand-woven textile is to include the design factor, or transpose the value of weaving from a labour-intensive activity into one that is creative-based, design-led, from a weaver to a designer-maker/textile designer. In this way, rather than combating Indian-made Bhutanese textiles on production cost, Bhutan can inverse the competition by factoring in the element of design. With a design-centered value system, the market focus will be on textile designs that are renewed and refreshed, rather than solely focused on labour. Significantly, the focus on design will attract the attention of youths, facilitating a creative outlet for them to express themselves through the medium of weaving.

Reflecting on this scenario to address the question posed at the start of this section, the negation to establish a design hub for the Bhutanese hand-woven sector will be detrimental to its existence. Rather, establishing a favourable creative environment to nurture and cultivate Bhutanese textile designers, while engaging the public in appreciating and valuing textile designs, will be imperative to contest the challenges faced by the hand-woven textile sector.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on BEFIT's agenda for 2019, this paper has shown the connection between cultural industry and the SMEs. It has traced the genesis of Bhutan's cultural industry and analysed its development plans. The creative community, as an important input to the industry, was found to be missing in the planning agenda. This paper outlines the characteristics and values of this community via its identification with Florida's creative class. It proposes that a design hub be established to germinate this community and support its growth while also serving the needs of the cultural enterprises. A list of facilities and services of the design hub was described to paint a general picture of its functions and activities. The paper then cites the Bhutan hand-woven textile sector as a concrete example to argue that the industry can ill afford not to have such a facility, as it would be detrimental to its very existence.

The RGoB has aptly identified the suitability of cultural industry as a key contributor of the growth of Bhutan. Furthermore, because of its nature, it is able to satisfy a multitude of 12<sup>th</sup> Plan's NKRF. As creativity is the foundation of a vibrant cultural industry, support given to develop Bhutan's human capital will positively transform Bhutan's CSIs that are engaged in cultural industries. A combination of all efforts will only bring Bhutan to greater heights of prosperity and happiness.

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