Tertiary Education, Students' Experiences, and Future Imaginations in Bhutan

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ABSTRACT: As an institution, Royal Thimphu College, akin to other university colleges in the country, is situated at the vanguard of the Bhutanese society that is to come; not just through imparting young adults with specialised knowledge and skills, with patterns of socialisation, and with canons of cultural representation and style, but equally because it constitutes a decisive stage in life-long individual and collective processes of fruition. It is in this stage, when young adults hover around intellectual, emotional and professional maturity, and usually just prior to the societal roles and responsibilities of family and employment, that young adults are engaged in often highly personalised and equally highly socially conditioned quests of self-discovery and self-making. It is when embodied experiences mould their general outlooks, and when they speculate, reflect and worry about the road they are traveling and about the paths and possibilities that fork off in the college afterlife. This essay seeks to capture precisely this moment; a phase that is fleeting, life-altering, uncertain, and often stressful. It does so through the analytics of 'experiences', 'aspirations', and 'anxieties.'

Keywords: College education, Aspirations, Experiences, Anxieties, Bhutan

Introduction

What is a university college if not a site, setting, space and sociality of social signification and change? Who are college students if not key protagonists in the contentiously interlocking of the present, past and future? Our times, like many before, are commonly captured in the language of change, transformation and disjuncture, as the heralding, or already unfolding, of a new epoch in which labour, knowledge, technology, as well as conceptions of what it means to be human, are evolving, and so in ways unprecedented. What is beyond doubt is that the coming generation is inheriting, and will make and mould –and manoeuvre into – a world that, in broad strokes, is devoid of earlier stabilities, emptied of traditional certainties, and characterised by protean horizons of work and society.

How this global future will look like, in the long haul, is for philosophers and prophets to reveal, but about the 'how', what' and 'towards' contemporary societies are evolving, sociologists and anthropologists may have a thing or two to say. This is because they offer a view from below, or a people's perspective, based on an intimate knowledge of the social group they are studying, which in our case concerns college students. They are therefore well placed to discuss contemporary society –

the ways in which it is changing and transforming, the continuities and changing continuities vis-à-vis what existed in the historical prior – informed by the embodied experiences, outlooks, and ambitions of its practitioners and beholders.

This essay, to be sure, does not pretend to contribute to debates and dialectics of youth, education, and the emergent human condition on a global scale. Our focus and ambitions are a great deal more modest, namely to provide a glimpse into the lived experiences, apprehensions and future imaginations of college students as they transition into, for the lack of a better word, 'mature society.' This is important because these students are the constitutive agents of the incipient future, because their evolving, in the upshot, connotes the evolving of society writ large. Our place and setting is Bhutan. More precisely, it is urban Bhutan and Royal Thimphu College, situated on a hilltop at the outskirts of the country's capital city of Thimphu.

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Context, Caveats and Methodology

First some context about modern education in Bhutan. We do so in the briefest of summations. As opposed to monastic education, which has a long and rich genealogy in the country (Dukpa 2016), the history of secular education is a relatively short one. It emerged, sparsely and not without setbacks, in the beginning of the 20th century. The first school opened in 1914 in Haa, in western Bhutan. In the historical prior, modern education was not absent among Bhutanese but was obtained elsewhere, particularly in the Indian hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. This was largely confined to those belonging and descending from prominent social backgrounds, however. It were Jesuit missionaries who played a significant role in introducing and extending education in Bhutan, although so with the explicit understanding that their activities, in negation of the Jesuits' usual manual of operation, would not involve proselytisation. Thus in contrast to the wider region, especially highland Northeast India, where early education was twinned with Christian conversion, in Bhutan modern education arrived without religious implications.

Gradually more schools opened, catering to a rising number of students, a process that accelerated with the launch of the 1st Five Year Plan in 1961 that provided vision and material resources for an

organised, modern school system aimed at free and universal primary education. Secondary education followed over time, as did a range of technical certificate programmes in civil, mechanical and electric engineering. Educational development, policy and processes went through a number of stages, transitions and revolutions, which Namgyel and Rinchhen (2016: 59-64) capture in phases of Bhutanisation, nationalisation, decentralisation, student-centredness, teacher-centredness, wholesomeness, and more recent reforms in the wake and aftermath of democratic transition.

If secular education is relatively young in Bhutan, tertiary education is younger still. The first BA degree programmes within the country were offered from 1983 at Sherubtse College, and so under the auspices of Delhi University, which set the curriculum, graded examinations, and conferred its degrees on students in Bhutan. This continued up until 2003, which saw the establishment of the Royal University of Bhutan, of which existing colleges became constitutive members.[1] The years following witnessed the emergence of private colleges, first Royal Thimphu College, established in 2009, followed more recently by Norbuling Rigter College, which upgraded from a higher secondary school.

Education in Bhutan has now been variously researched. A recently published edited volume titled *Education in Bhutan: Culture, Schooling and Gross National Happiness* (Schuelka and Maxwell 2016) sets itself the task to explore the tenets and framework of secular education in Bhutan. Its first sentences read:

> The fascinating history of schooling in Bhutan starts from Buddhist monastic education well before the modern mass education movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Monastic education continues to this day in Bhutan, but secular education only began, albeit in a very small way, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Secular education for the common people began in the 1960s. Yet, by the early twenty-first century, near-universal mass education has largely been achieved due to the successes of the Ministry of Education (and Health) in the second half of the twentieth century (Schuelka and Maxwell 2016: 1)

This book then sets out to explore, first, 'what are the key ideas that promoted such a development' and, secondly, 'How did these ideas get translated into an education system largely within six decades?' To approach these questions subsequent contributions variously explore the history and development both of monastic education (Zangley Dukpa 2016) and of secular education (Singye Namgyel and Phub Rinchhen 2016), the role of international institutions and influences in promoting educational development (Jagar Dorji 2016), Bhutan's policy of educating for gross national happiness (Pema Tshomo 2016), gender and education (Seden and Maxwell 2016), the role

[1] 2015 witnessed the launch of the second Bhutanese university, the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB) to serve as an 'overarching university for existing institutions engaged in medical and health care education and training programs in the country and new institutions established hereinafter.'

of non-formal education (Powdyel 2016), and the progress and challenges of tertiary education in the country (Schofield 2016).

Other publications that exist on education in Bhutan discuss the relationship between education, employment and development. The work *Youth in Bhutan: Education, Employment, Development* (Lham Dorji and Sonam Kinga 2005) discusses a range of themes including the determinants of drop-outs and non-enrolment of students in the primary and secondary tiers of education and the significance of a rural-urban divide in this regard. It also looks at youth employment, which is presented as a new problem in Bhutanese society and, among other things, results from a structural mismatch between the quantity and quality of college graduates and the jobs available in the labour market. A linkage is subsequently drawn between youth unemployment and increasing levels of youth delinquency.

Research on education in Bhutan also appeared in relation to 'teacher education' (Van Balkom and Sherman 2010), teacher placements (Karma Lhaden 2016), the effects of education, particularly ICT use, on gender relations (Sinha 2009; Roder 2012), inclusive education (Schuelka 2016), pre-school education (Jena and Dechen Wangmo 2016), distance education (Sangay Jamtsho and Bullen 2007), and on the convergence between monastic and modern education (Denman and Singye Namgyel 2008). A general trend in this scholarship is a focus on institutions, policies and procedures. Collectively, and importantly, they present a wider framework of Bhutan's educational sector. With some exceptions, these studies do not explicitly address the actual experiences of students in the tertiary education sector, or, put differently, draw on how education is 'lived' within the extant institutional framework. It is here – through a discussion of college students' aspirations, experiences, and anxieties that this research carries the potential to contribute, even if only modestly, to ongoing debates on education in Bhutan.

From a globalist vantage, tertiary education increasingly etches itself at the centre of contemporary development discourses and praxes. It is thought to expand an individual's greater freedoms that are deemed necessary for holistic development, to facilitate upward social mobility, and to benefit society at large (Sen 1999). It is for such and similar reasons that both international organisations such as the UN and most national governments, including the Bhutan Government, situate higher education as central to development efforts. But not only institutions and governments focus on education. People themselves, in Bhutan and elsewhere, often equate education with employment and progress, and pursue it with zeal and, at times, at great financial expense.

It is a period of social, psychological, economic the concept of education is nevertheless also a contested one with some arguing that education instils false hopes for many because of a disconnect between education and employment (Jeffrey 2010). Others highlight how education works to erode traditional values and knowledge and so puts a strain on social reproduction: the perpetuation and preservation, that is, of culture and community (Reed-Danahay 1996), or argue that education, rather than manifesting itself as a social leveler, ends up perpetuating, even exaggerating, pre-existent socio-economic inequalities based on divergent levels of cultural capital students possess (Bourdieu 1977).

This essay proposes to analyse tertiary education at the level of 'process' through an exploration of students' lifeworlds while they pursue higher education. In proposing thus, we recognise the heuristic value of seeing tertiary educational engagement as a distinctive phase in the life-cycle both

of an individual and of society more broadly; a stage during which young adults acquire not just the training and degrees that prepare them for employment, but which also shapes their personalities and aspirations. Said otherwise, tertiary educational engagement may be seen as central to the contemporary transition to adulthood in Bhutan. Such a transition to adulthood, Lyod (2005: 1) writes, 'is a critical stage of human development during which young people leave childhood behind and take on new roles and responsibilities.' She continues:

> It is a period of social, psychological, economic, and biological transitions, and for many young people it involves demanding emotional challenges and important choices. To a large degree, the nature and quality of young people's future lives depend on how successfully they negotiate this critical period.

The research that informs this essay was conducted at a private college, which, as noted, is Royal Thimphu College. There are notable differences in the form and functioning of government and private colleges, as well as in the diversity of students they attract. We will not go into these differences here, but mention this as a caveat, namely that findings presented here must be seen as reflective of the students in Royal Thimphu College, and not necessarily, or necessarily to the same extent, reflect those of Bhutan as a whole.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 students across cohorts and degree programmes. The interviews were conducted by two student-researchers, namely Kuenzang Norbu, who is also one of the authors of this essay, and Vebaka Chhetri. In this way, interviewers and interviewees were also peers, in the sense that they were both students, and this was done to narrow the social gap and to foster an ambience in which students would be able to open up more freely. This essay – and this is another caveat – is exploratory in nature. It offers glimpses and snapshots, rather than a set of undisputable facts and conclusions, and in so doing its primary aim is to draw attention to the pursuits, dreams, and concerns of a crucial demographic, which is university college students.

Experiences: Freedom, Confidence, and Social Alarms

This section discusses some of the experiences of students, from the moment they first walk through the college until they depart three years later, in most cases with a college degree. We do so through three themes, namely freedom, personal growth, and social issues that student encounter and talk about. The latter primarily refer to substance (ab)use and instances of suicide.

'I had this western thought of what college would look like. Without any strict rules. But I think the expectation was too much as RTC is strict with the students', Sonam says.[2] Pema adds: 'I didn't know what to expect at first, but I thought college life would mean we get to do anything we like.' Tashi also speaks: 'I was quite shocked with the rules and regulations of RTC since it is a lot more

[2] All names in this essay are pseudonyms.

similar with those for high school level. Though there is freedom for the students, the college tries to bind us within a boundary, which is surprising and tough for me.'

Not just Sonam, Pema and Tashi. Nearly all those interviewed imagined college to be a life of near absolutely freedom, away – especially for boarder students – from the restrictions of either (or both) high school and family. In this, they were to be mistaken. Their admission was soon followed by a college orientation programme that divulged a set of rules, regulations and requirements, including class attendance, night curfews, gender exclusive spaces, and regular checks and controls. 'They tell us we are adults and should take responsibility for our own decisions, but when we have attendance shortage they immediately call our parents. Isn't that a contradiction?', Tshering poses. 'I'd never thought college life would be this strict and systematic', Thinlay agrees.

Despite these unexpected – to them – rules, most students *do* experience a substantial increase in their personal and social freedoms: 'When you go to college from class 12, you feel like freed from a cage.' About the consequences of this increased freedom, and the use and disuse of existing rules, students' opinions are diverse, of which the following two expressions are illustrative:

> I feel maybe because Bhutan has a really conservative environment, till high school every one is suppressed with strict rules and even in home, as they get into college they have this notion that we are adults now and I can do anything I want so when people sneak other people into their rooms or so, at first it was a bit of a shock for me. But now I think that I can't really say that person is bad or shameless because it's not like they have hurt someone. Since they have been suppressed so much, they are just doing stuffs now because they can.

> The biggest problem in College is that students aren't being monitored strictly at the dorms. They should be given freedom because they're adults but they need some regulations and rules that guides them and I think we should uphold them and not just keep it in black and white.

College life is what students broadly experience as a rite of passage. In this, they not only speak about freedom and responsibility, but also about the personal growth they notice in themselves. 'I have seen myself grown a lot after joining the college', Tashi says. She continues: 'I was never this confident in my high school. College helped me to get out of my comfort zone and turn into a butterfly.' Being responsible, feeling responsible is a positive experience', Sonam agrees. To this, Pema adds: 'Doing presentations have built up my confidence. Teachers also let us know our capabilities and guide us, giving us compliments when we need them, and constructive criticisms when required.' Making new friends, too, is seen as a positive and personality-building experience: 'You can build family, in the sense of bonds with your roommates. They are completely different people you have never met before. It's nice to know that you can build relations with other people and have trust in them.'

Such and similar statements are given by several respondents, who, on reflection, detail how their personalities change and develop while in the college. A few other responses in terms the 'college

experience' go thus:

> I would not describe what kind of experience but till now college has been an 'experience' itself. Experience is a large word, I feel that staying in college life I have gone through almost everything. I have studied about almost everyone, talked about anything I have learned. I have evolved myself from what I was to what I am. The way I speak to people was different two years back and now it's a great difference that I see in myself. So, my experience of college till now has been 'life-changing'.
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> When I joined, I was near sighted. I just wanted to indulge in what I was doing now, I felt that because I was in college, I just had to have fun and live it up. It's good to enjoy but I now want to focus on my academics and I think this is because I am close to graduation so I am more future oriented and my focus is on my family and also personal relationships and education
>
> Yes. I am having fun, in my high school, I used to go to school and interact a lot but going back home I used to stay in my room all alone. Staying in the College made a lot of difference. I met a lot of people and had to interact a lot with everybody. This made me an open person.

While students generally speak about college life in terms of positive experiences, the interviews also reveal a range of concerns, social issues, and negative encounters students invariably experience during their time at the College. Central among these are encounters with substance (ab)use, and the anti-social behaviour and occasional disturbances that may result from this. 'I see people using substances all the time', Dorji says, then continues: 'The magnitude is very high. What I feel like is that it is to do with peer pressure. Even I have been a victim once… I think that people should actually be educated about this, saying no and dealing with peer pressure, instead of imposing rules which they are not going to follow anyway.' Many of our respondents emphasise the use, which now then then descends into abuse, of substances as a social problem within the college premises. On the general use and abuse of substances, mostly alcohol but also various types of drugs, a range of opinions were expressed, including the following:

> I have seen that substances like smoke and alcohol are easily accessible to the students and it is very common. I think it is fine unless they don't forget their purpose of being in College. College is just three years and I think everyone should enjoy their college days as they like. But as they are adults they should also know their limits.
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> I have seen a few people who have abused substances and when it is someone I know personally I try to make them control their habit. But it has been fruitless till now. I just hope that they figure it out themselves before it's too late. Maybe to an extent

this is due to easy availability of these stuffs. But we can't really blame the College because what can they really do if the students themselves is interested in these habits.

I think using substance by the youth is not a new thing. If they use it secretly in their rooms or when alone, I can't say much because they are not affecting anyone else and they have that right. But students who use substances and create problems with other students or the RAs [Resident Assistants], it is a big issue for the College. And I think that the college rules which are not so strict compared to high schools are encouraging students to try using substances.

The College is the last step where you have the chance of being a better person or staying the same, but we should not be stricter with things. The stricter we are, the more people try to break the rules. I would say, for those who use substances, let them do, if they want to change, they will. If they want to continue, they would. The college, I have seen does put effort in helping the students. But pushing them too much is not good, as it is their personal life.

There are people who want to try something new because they're in college and everything when they don't know how to use them and stuff and they could get into trouble. But I feel like as long as that doesn't become your identity, it's fine to try new things. And I feel drug issues are because of mental health which people don't know about so people need help in those cases. And then there's the pressure of whether or not you've experienced something from your friends especially when you're social and go to social events so you're pressured to experience these stuff.

Another negative experience most of our respondents highlight is the occurrence of suicide within the college community. 'Yearly, people commit suicide. I think about why it happens so it is a bit concerning', Yeshi says. She explains: 'When I see people go through something, I am scared they might just do that and they're gone.' 'After a certain period, there is a case of suicide. I think suicide is becoming a national issue', Ugyen opines. On further probing, most students ascribe suicide to failures both in examinations and in relationships (more on this below). For Ugyen a remedy must be sought in the realm of religion:

We leave the students a bit too free is what I feel. Also, for Wednesday [distinguished guest] talks, I think if we get religious masters to come in and teach us about the issues of suicide, I think it can change the way our students think. Another thing, our rimdros at college aren't really taken seriously. It's up to the students whether they want to go or not. I think we should have an off day when we have our rimdro, get our blessings and I think that will help

Suicides, when they occur, impact not only the student community. It also worries parents. Tshering reflects: 'The recent suicides at RTC made my parents fear about my condition. They now tell me that if I don't know something in class, "it is okay, it is fine, don't take it too personal or don't take it too serious. Get help from your friends and if you still don't know, leave it." So their perspective changed from them wanting me to excel in academics to a more relaxed stance now, even telling me that if I fail, it is fine too.' This observation that suicide occurrences change parents' expectations is corroborated by another respondent: 'My parents were initially pressurising me, but after a suicide happened they become anxious about my condition and they told me that even if I don't do well in my academics, it is okay and that I should not take things too serious.'

Expectations and Aspirations

To capture students' aspirations, we need to start with the 'why' and 'how' of them joining a university college, and Royal Thimphu College in particular. For some students, joining RTC was not their first choice. 'I had no other option, if I am honest', one student says. This is because he aspired to study abroad, but applied, and was granted, admission in RTC after those efforts failed. Others had hoped for a scholarship in one of the government colleges, but opted for RTC after their name was not on the list with selected candidates. Again for others, RTC was their parents' choice, on account of them preferring to keep their son or daughter close to home. That said, for many others RTC is the first option, informed by the College's rising reputation for academic excellence, the good reports they received from kin and friends already studying there, and because of the top-notch facilities the College is known by.

Regardless of the background of their initial joining of the College, students often speak about distinct aspirations of what they hope to achieve. Performing well academically is often highlighted, as does Penjor: 'My main goal right now would be getting into the top three of my programme.' This, thinks Penjor, will help him to clear the coveted Royal Civil Service Examination in the college afterlife (of which more below). Tells another student: 'I didn't come to RTC for a degree as such, but because of the course offered, which is Political Science. The degree that I get may or may not be of use in my future, but it will definitely broaden my knowledge. That is my ambition, to broaden my knowledge.' Another motivation is to learn and experience as much as they can, both academically and socially. On acquiring new knowledge, Tshewang says:

> I had no idea about political science when I first joined, but RTC has made me become a better person in terms of knowledge. Now I have some insight about what the course is about. Generally, the belief is that taking political science means you have to become a politician but that notion has changed for me. Further, like I expect to learn how to be a better person... I want to perform well, get good marks and graduate well

Ambitions, however, may also change while at the college. Kinga recounts: 'I did not think of going

for further studies at first, but after I have been to Japan [on an RTC exchange programme], I feel inspired to go for further studies.' Or as another student has it:

> Before joining college, I always dreamt of being a successful businessman, after joining college, especially after taking this program I now think that it is not just about becoming a successful person, its more about being a good human being. So, after this I came to a conclusion. I have decided that what I have learnt till now and what I will be learning in the next two years to come I would make a difference in lives. Helping ones in need with NGO's.

In general, students also feel that RTC is preparing them for the future that lies ahead: 'I feel like RTC opened me to a wider range of challenges, so it definitely helped.'

Another clear source of both aspiration and motivation relates to parents' influence. If parents may already play an important role in admissions for many, their influence lingers and translates in them instilling expectations in their college-going children. At times, this leads to the clear convergence between the expectations of parents and those of students. Pema says: 'I think my expectations and my parents' expectations of me are the same. My expectation is that I land a white collar job after graduation, preferably in the government sector, and this is also what my parents are expecting of me.' Most of our respondents tell that their parents contact them frequently and never fail to remind them of their expectations. For some this works as a source of motivation as they are desire to fulfil their parents' wishes. Others, however, experience this in terms of pressure, at times to suffocating effects. Kesang, when asked about her parents expectations of her, laments that 'theirs is quite extreme.' She explains:

> My mother is quite pressurizing when she talks to me, but I don't tell her that because I don't want to hurt her feelings. I think it is because almost everyone in my family has been very successful till now and even the fact that I had to take a year gap before I joined college was a big step back, especially to my mother. And my mother is always telling me to be reminded and thankful of the opportunity that I have so that I constantly remind myself to work harder.

Another responses, along similar lines, go thus:

> My mother wants me to be a good son, good student and she always calls me and reminds me that I should study hard. I am her only son so I think I have to be accomplished and competent enough to look after her when she is old.
> My parents would want me to be able to get a job and stand on my own feet and be a responsible citizen. I have been able to keep up academically and not disappoint them till now so, even when it comes to their future expectations, I will try my best.

What we discerned, as we analysed the transcripts, is a differential, albeit anecdotal, in parental pressure based on whether parents themselves are college educated. Samdrup says:

> I don't feel any kind of pressure from my family. I think it is because of their lack of education. If they were educated, they would be concerned about my marks. But being a farmer, they are never concerned about my marks. Still I show them my marks that I have scored and they appreciate that. Otherwise they only have advice for me not to hang around town and abuse my time. Academically they only tell me to get pass marks

From expectations we now turn to aspirations. To inquire into what students aspire to achieve in the long haul, we asked interviewees to sketch the post-college life they would deem successful, as well as outline what they would deem a 'failed life.' The answers we received are highly personalised. Yet, they reveal certain trends, which we discuss presently.

One such trend, and which figures from one transcript to the next, is a strong predilection towards securing government employment through trumping the competitive Royal Civil Service Examination. Obtaining government employment is preferred on various counts. Once obtained, it near mechanically elevates social status. It also offers financial security, and, not in the least, it is emphasised as the most effective conduit to serve King, people and country. The allure of a government job among college students is such that even as some students express that, deep down, they would prefer a career outside the government, for instance in business or abroad, they would readily forego this for the prospects and perks of government employment. Students also tell that becoming a government servant is also what their parents wish them to become. This is an expectation that weighs heavy on many students, especially in a context in which civil service exam takers outnumber vacancies many times over.

In reflecting on the future that lies ahead, most students speak about the need to secure financial independence in order to both support their parents and to establish and raise a family of their own. Some students are very explicit about this:

> For me, I want a job that comes with a huge pay because it is money that decides what you will be, what your children will be, and for this status is less important. So, a job with a huge pay is all what matters to me.

But whereas for this student, social status is clearly secondary to monetary gain, other students reason differently and value social status and standing greatly. 'In our society', Pema reflects, 'a lieutenant and a teacher may draw the same salary. However, if you become a lieutenant you get a title of dasho, which make it a more desirable thing in the society. For me, salary is second to social status.' Again others emphasise how an elevated social status and serving the country are intimately connected: 'When you have a better title, you are able to help more people because of the position of power you are in. I want to serve the people well and if I do that, I think the title of a dasho would show that I

am doing a good job.' Another student talks about wealth and status thus:

> I want to get a satisfying job, I want to earn enough so that I can spend it the way I want. I want some sort name or reputation of my own, till now I have been living under my dad's shadow. In my family I am the eldest and I have brother, but he is the person who easily gets socialized with people and then people like him for who he is. For me, compared to my brother I am super hardworking. Whatever I do I feel that's it has not been enough till now, so I mostly want to become independent and earn a name.

Serving the people and the country is, as noted, a reason why several respondents prefer a government job: 'If you get a government job, you get more respect as well. So the main reason I want to appear in RCSE and do well is because I want to make a difference and make a change in our country and I think you can only do that if you get a government job.'

In envisioning the future we again note a class differential, with students who are first generation college students being predominantly focused on securing a job that would allow them to a sedentary life, away from the village and farming, and support their family, while second or third generation college students tend to explicitly associate 'the good life' with several other factors as well, including a passion for the job, the ability to travel, and to pursue their hobbies. Yeshi explains that both he and his parents want him to get a government job, but Yeshi himself emphasises the importance he allots 'to pursue some of my hobbies in the future, but which my parents are not thinking of.' Adds Karma: 'My ideal job would be something where I feel I have a purpose with whatever I do. I feel like I don't look for a job where I enjoy every minute of what I do because that is, for me a bit unrealistic and I set myself up for disappointment but I feel like to a certain extent, I shouldn't be hating my job, I should be okay with it.' Sonam tells: 'I would want to be financially independent, take care of my mother and family. I would also like to be more independent in a more personal sense also, I would like to be able to travel and do things for myself without relying on other people.'

The above goes for a successful life. In terms of an unsuccessful life, students have the following to say:

> I would define an unsuccessful life would be if we do not do any productive work that could help ourselves, parents or to the society and this would be very unsuccessful because after spending that much money and time on education if we land up doing nothing, it is very unsuccessful.

> Unsuccessful life, I think depends on the people, how we perceive them and tell about it. For me, it would be graduating from RTC, which is a well-known college and doing nothing. Contributing nothing to the country and just staying idle would be an unsuccessful life for me.

> If I was dragged down by society. I don't want to be a machine for the society, that's

all I want in life

The worst possible life would be just staying at village and working in the fields. We have enough land to divide and work among ourselves but I don't want to do that.

Am always expecting a better life after 10 years. Because I don't want to remain like my brothers who dropped out after high school, so I think I will bring some changes in my family at that time, some good changes.

I am not able to study well and become fairly useless without a job. My family wouldn't consider me a part of them and my friends would also leave me. I think that's the worst.
For me, that would definitely be me unemployed. That is the biggest worry I have. 10 or 20 years, I won't be unemployed necessarily but I will be involved in some uninteresting works with less pay. I think that would be unsuccessful for me. I don't get my dream job, working under a small business, that would be unsuccessful but again, my biggest fear is being unemployed and being an unproductive citizen because I want to serve my nation.

Anxieties: Present and Future

College life is also a period in which anxieties are felt, some of which have already emerged in the previous sections. A commonly felt anxiety is related to academics, and the possible failure in it. Students indeed express mixed levels of anxiety about not being able to keep up academically, about the possibility of getting a 'back-semester', and about 'wasting' their parents investment and trust in them. Tandin says: 'My greatest fear is not being able to achieve in academics because of my time-management issues, so not being able to achieve what I want is the greatest fear.' Anxiety and stress figure strongly in relation to assignments: 'When I have to do assignments, I feel stressed', Kinley confesses. This is a sentiment echoed by many; it is a stress students themselves readily link to their difficulty in time-management.

Apart from academics, there are social issues as well that are generative of anxiety. As noted, occurrences of suicide is one. Substance abuse is another. A third and major one are intimate relationships. Some students comment on this in a neutral or favourable manner, such as Tshering:

I think a lot of people who come here and see that they like someone, and they get into relationships. They are of an age where they know what is right and wrong, so it is not a big issue for the college as compared to drugs. And if they know their limits and stay in a healthy relationship, I think it is what a young growing adult needs. If you have a good and sound relationship, you have the required support.

Karma agrees:

> When it comes into relationships we can't say much. There is so much freedom in the college and some people just get into relationships for time pass while some are serious about it and the person. But it is based on individual opinions, so relationship isn't a big problem. I see it as a good thing.

Others, however, emphasise that relationships in the College often become unhealthy, grow awry, and that it negatively affects both students' academic performance and mental well-being. The following responses indicate this:

> I think that the major social problem is relationships, when they break up. People go mental sometimes. I think that's the biggest social issue in college right now.

> Because everyone thinks that now we are mature we don't need any help or someone to tell us what to do. That is what leads to so many social issues and I think bad relationships are one of the issues. Relationships in college are at a serious level and sometimes it turns out to be good, but since people think that they should be private and no one should interfere in one's life, this is a very wrong thought. And it leads to so many other problems when you keep the tension to yourself. Other than relationship issues I think that this kind of attitude leads to drug abuse, groupism and fights.

> I think they number of relationships is quite high and they tend to show it to the public. I think it is inappropriate in front of our senior citizens and teachers and staff. I think it is disrespectful.

> Wherever I go, I hear girls crying and when I ask them what happened, they all tell me the same thing about how their boyfriend did this or that, most of the time I see girls and I advise them. So I think it's the biggest problem here.

> I'd say unhealthy relationships leading to suicide or depression. Because some people aren't used to these kinds of short lived relationships so once it hits them, they can't handle it. It is like poison for them. The people that haven't experienced such things tend to avoid the people who try to advise them and those people went through it before.

While relationships can lead to an embodied anxiety, a major source of anxiety, emphasised by the students time and again, is the competitive college afterlife that awaits them. 'Whenever I see people become successful, I feel like there is one less opportunity for me now, and that worries me a lot',

Sangay confesses. It isn't a nice thought, as Sangay also accepts. However, it is indicative of the heightened sense of competition students experience in the contemporary historical moment in which desirable jobs are experienced as increasingly scarce. This statement was indeed echoed by many. Says Anita: 'All sorts of students graduate and bring different qualities to the table and those qualities might outshine mine. So I suppose it is competition for places [that worries me].' Or again:

> I am very worried about my future I think that is my greatest fear. Like I said earlier it is very competitive and I don't want to be stuck doing a job that I don't like. Also because what if I don't even get a job? That would be a constant reminder of how much I have achieved or failed in life. So it definitely is my greatest fear.
>
> Yes, I am all the time worried about my future, like whether I would be left without a job or if I don't make my parents proud.

Some, however, have taken a more lucid, or more measured approach, to the future. Tashi tells: 'No, not really am I worried… My mother always used to say her favourite phrase: "I worry about your future." But after thinking about it I started believing that there is no point in worry about the future when you don't know what it will be.'

Conclusion

This essay attempted to provide an insight in what preoccupies College going students in Bhutan as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. We engaged the broad analytics of 'expectations', 'aspirations', and 'anxieties' to capture the diverse range of experiences and perspectives students accrue and express. Specific themes that figures centrally in our interview conversations with students ranged from freedom and personal growth, to substance (ab)use and suicide, to intrinsic motivation and parental pressure, to anxieties and fears. The findings outlined and discussed above, to be sure, should be taken as illustrative of the contemporary historical moment in Bhutan, not necessarily as definite and country-wide structures of experiences, and of feelings and sentiments. There is also a lot more to explore and research. What the above sections do offer, though, are glimpses and vignettes into the ways in which college students in Bhutan experience college life, perceive of the social and economic world around them, and imagine the future that lies ahead.

Acknowledgements

This research was enabled by a Research Development Grant of Royal Thimphu College, for which we express our gratitude. We also thank Vebaka Chhetri for her role in carrying out the interviews, and to an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments.

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