

Sanjit Das

Documentary photographer represented by Panos Pictures, who lives in Kuala Lumpur and works throughout the world for editorial, development and corporate clients.

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Generation in Transition



Generation in Transition – Bhutan

In 1979, the term ‘gross national happiness’ was coined by Bhutan’s then king Jigme Singye Wangchuck, he knew for certain that Bhutan’s unique Buddhist culture would adapt it seamlessly.

The youth certainly believed in their king’s vision of the Gross National Happiness but the peer pressure and the yearning to be part of the mainstream is reflected in a way the casual Bhutanese is looking and embracing change. Television and the internet have been accessible only since 1999 in Bhutan, and were introduced despite widespread fears that their “controversial” content such as fashion shows, western music, WWF wrestling, and pornography, could destroy the kingdom’s traditional way of life based on unique Buddhist principles. Young teenagers dressed in hip western outfit right next to a Buddhist monk juxtapose in the modern landscape of Bhutan and sometimes this idea of modernity is questioned.

Going to a club and dancing till early hours of the day is an idea that was alien to them but few clubs have opened up in downtown Thimphu and are packed on weekends. The ones who cannot

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afford the clubs, end up in small underground dance-bars where they can go and spend time with the 'geishas'. These girls sing and dance in the bar and make an average of 700 NU (18 USD) a day, but constantly have to deal with misbehaviour by the visiting teenagers and young men.

This negotiating of change is questioned in the 21st century landscape of Modern Bhutan. This idea of 'happiness' will have to accommodate the immediate change of visual icons of style, fashion and lifestyle, for better or for worse.



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