

Preface

Bhutan's Digital Future: On Our Own Terms

Bhutan is grappling with the intricacies of becoming a digital society. The question is how will the leadership manage the governance of digitalisation and what kind of role will citizens have in this process?

Bhutan adopted pragmatic wisdom to cope with the pace of progress, balancing traditional values with global trends and forces. This caution, stemming from the need for a small country to survive in a large world, has served well on the path to development and change.

This meant that Bhutan sometimes appeared to lag behind, especially in technology, as the world moved rapidly through successive digital phases. But it demonstrated that a thoughtful approach to progress is advantageous in the broader and longer-term perspective. In a world that prioritised economic values over socio-cultural and environmental wellbeing, Bhutan preserved what mattered most – its values.

Being the last country to introduce internet and television helped society avoid some of the damaging side effects of these powerful forces. Now the same pragmatic wisdom requires that Bhutan needs to move with the times.

When technology is more sophisticated than a person using it, people do the wrong things more efficiently. In this context, analysts speculate that AI even threatens human wellbeing. Bhutan needs to grasp 21st-century technology that offers new and more efficient ways to preserve its national priorities.

Current technological trends must be manoeuvred as a tool to serve a country that aspires to become a developed/ first world nation. How can generative AI enable Bhutan to improve its governance system and ease daily life, while safeguarding the culture and community bonds that have long defined the national identity. How can the “intelligence” of artificial intelligence be tapped to realise the vision of a developed nation? How can Bhutan adapt technology and AI on its own terms?

As generative AI reshapes economies, cultures, societies, and governments worldwide, the 20 articles in this edition offer ideas for policymakers, scholars, and thinkers ideas to help shape Bhutan's approach to technology and AI for nation building.

This issue of The Druk Journal shares essential insights into AI use and its possibilities, while being mindful of the many facets of Bhutanese culture.

This issue is presented in four sections:

AI and Society

This section asks what AI means for a society that has always measured progress on its own cultural terms. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche - dharma teacher, filmmaker, and writer – sets the context by reminding us that humans have always invented technology that enable us to grow. We do so by overcoming the inevitable risks that they present and use them as tools.

The seven articles in this section reflect on AI and Bhutan. How does AI help human judgement and creativity, and how can it help preserve the arts? They analyse society's diverse needs like the challenges faced by people with disabilities and the need to improve livelihoods through farming and dairy production. AI is not an apparatus for experts but a utility for the average citizen.

AI and Governance

As technology is vital for governance, five articles convey views of civil servants, a lawyer, technologists, and corporate officers to understand what AI means for the administration of the State. Is Bhutan's civil service prepared for the age of AI? What is the progress, gaps, and the way ahead in the e-government transition? How does digital transformation affect the legal system? Is AI helping achieve the country's 10X goals? In other words, what is Bhutan's digital future in the age of artificial intelligence? Will Bhutan be able to adopt AI on its own terms?

AI and Education

Four articles from educators and scholars trace how AI is reshaping Bhutanese classrooms and campuses. One article calls for a “proactive, human-centred and GNH-informed GenAI strategy” to help institutions such as the Royal University of Bhutan move beyond a reactive stance, while another argues that the best preparation for an AI-saturated academic world is “the old way” - reading deeply, thinking critically, and cultivating a voice that is genuinely one’s own. AI discourse is more active in the higher education system and, therefore, it is important that teacher trainees understand and help students understand the trend.

International Perspectives

With globalisation, Bhutan draws on its experience from beyond its borders, even adapting AI trends to the country’s Gross National Happiness framework. International views are not just global generalisations, but made relevant to specific, observable Bhutanese realities. These contributions range across law, technology, education, and development, offering relevant and insightful views on Bhutan’s approach to AI. Looking at what AI is doing for the world, what can it do for Bhutan?

Conclusion

With wide-ranging and analytical discourse, The Druk Journal hopes to help identify strategic ways to be resilient and innovative as Bhutan adopts and adapts AI in an era of transformation.