

Skepseis

The Political Science and Sociology Programme Newsletter



INSIDE THE ISSUE

Editorial	2
From the desk of the Programme Leader	2
Skepseis Events	3
Department Activities	4-5
Exchange Students Reminisce	6
Students Testimonials	7
Book Reviews	8



"Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again and you will be filled with joy."
~ Lord Buddha

Editorial

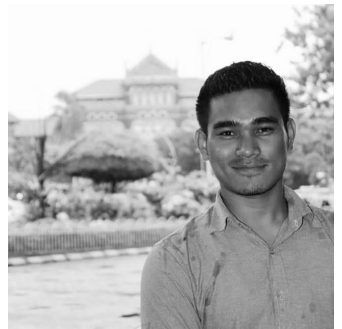
Another semester just ended, and very soon the semester results will be declared. It is one thing to have had a good semester, it is another to reap good results. As we walk past the semester, in retrospect, some will be happy, some not very much, some perhaps would have wished to have done better. Such regret is not only true for students, but for teachers as well. How might we have approached the semester better? All of us have our own 'mantras,' or formulas. As for me, there are three 'A's that comes to mind.

The first A is *action*. An ancient proverb goes: you reap according to how you sow. Sow sparingly you reap sparingly, sow generously you reap generously. What you *do* affects outcomes. Not what you *mean* to do, but what you actually *do*! That's like the old saying: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." In other words, it is not enough to *mean* to do something, you must actually *do* it. A farmer needs more than good intentions to get a great harvest; he has to sow well. The generosity of his sowing will determine the abundance of his harvest. It is *action* that matter. Action, wholehearted action! One cannot get stuck at the stage of wishful thinking. In whatever you do, do not be a minimalist. Be generous. Put your heart into it. Pour yourself into it. Give your best. With everything you have – time, resource, energy, whichever need be – you must give it all, wholeheartedly. Be generous. Action *matters*!

The second A is *attitude*. Actions without the right *attitude* can be empty. Imagine this scenario. It's the night Penjore has planned to propose to Gaki. All is set. The flowers are on the table, candles burn quietly, music plays softly. It is the perfect moment. And Penjore goes, "Well Gaki, we've been together for years, and I don't really think we're good for each other, and I am not really in love with you, but after all this time I suppose I should propose to you." What will Gaki say to Penjore after a proposal like that? You can be sure it will *not* be an enthusiastic 'yes!' The action was unacceptable because of the attitude. If we give to our work grudgingly, sparingly, or lazily, whether or not we give our time; if we give only for 'giving sake,' or do only for 'doing sake,' one can least hope to expect good results.

Lastly, the third A, and that is *abundance*. When someone does the right *action* with the right *attitude*, it is only possible, or at least more possible, that the person reaps abundantly. I will not call this a formula, however. It is not something rigid or mechanical. But I would like to think, it surely is the right way to go about. Not just in one's academic semester, but in everything, *action*, *attitude* and *abundance* come together. For the last time, sow *generously*. It is the most important action you will take every day.

— Roderick Wijunamai, Editor



From the Desk of the Programme Leader

The opening of the fall 2020 semester coincided with the onset of a national lockdown, thus making in-person classes impossible. Fortunately, for our new cohort of students, they had just completed a three-day orientation course to online learning, which was conducted in anticipation of such a possible lockdown. The 2019 and 2018 cohorts of students were already familiar with the requirements of online learning considering the mostly online spring 2020 semester. For the first month or so all classes were conducted online, after which the lockdown eased and classes could resume in person, albeit only partially at first to ensure physical distancing. Through it all the Skepseis Team, however, has shown remarkable resilience. An online writing workshop was conducted, for which invitations were extended to students of Mass Communication and Anthropology. After the return to more-or-less normal classes, Skepseis also organized a freshers' meet, in the form of an evening filled with activities and games.

The highlight of the semester was the visit by Lopen Karma Phuntsho who delivered the fourth distinguished Skepseis lecture. In what was a highly engaging talk; he spoke about the Bhutanese experience and responses to Covid, and so in a wider historical and contemporary frame of Buddhist philosophy. I think all of us would agree that this wasn't the easiest of semesters, but we managed to soldier through, and, as this newsletter shows and against various odds, there were plenty of ups, successes, and achievements. In closing I would like to thank the Skepseis team for their organizing skills, dedication, and creativity, as well as wish everyone in the Department a well-deserved winter holiday.

— Dr. Jelle JP Wouters, PL



Skepseis Evening

On October 17th, the Skepseis club hosted *Skepseis Evening* for the Political Science and Sociology programme outside the faculty block, at RTC. Skepseis takes huge pride that as a team, we always try to take learning and engagement outside the boundaries of the classroom while also holding events such as the *Skepseis Evening* to provide alternative avenues where students are given the chance to showcase their talents, besides academic excellence.

The event that was kept open for both students and teachers of the Pol-Soc Programme had approximately 85 people in attendance, who were all pleasantly surprised by a huge group of fellow Pol-Soc alumni who attended the event with a large cake, to not only showcase their support for the club and its activities, but also to give the new cohort their well-wishes for the future. If anything, the heart-warming visit highlights how important interpersonal relationships are. It also shows the impact our teachers had on the group – we see that in their effort to show up for an event as small as this one.



This particular event was organized as a recreational outlet for students across the cohorts to not only get to know each other but also to reenergize the spirits after a prolonged lockdown. The event that featured include open-mic sessions, games, and performances by both teachers and students – dances, singing, poetry slams, and of course with some hearty snacks. The event served to provide a well-deserved break for both teachers and students, especially the first years who are going through one of the most important phases of their life- the process of transitioning and navigating their way around virtual independent learning and most importantly their journey to adulthood.

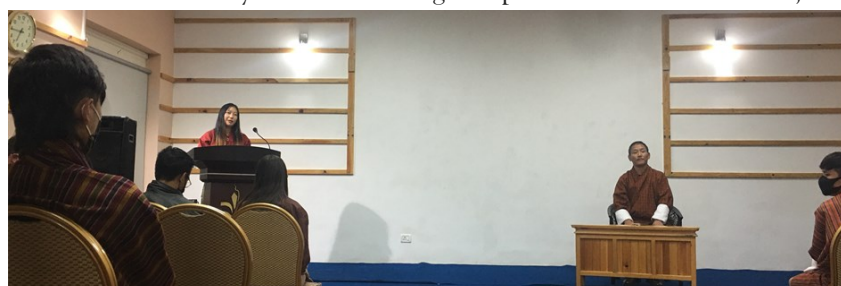
— Karma Pem Dema, Year III

Lopen Dr Karma Phuntsho delivers Skepseis' Fourth Distinguished Lecture

Titled 'After Pandemic: Bhutan Society and Resilience,' on the 12th of November 2020, Lopen Dr Karma Phuntsho delivered *Skepseis' Fourth Distinguished Lecture*. Dr Phuntsho's talk can be broadly summarized in three parts. At the outset, he commended Bhutan's pandemic management. The country managed to walk through and is still walking through without a casualty. According to him, this was possible owing to geographical location that physically isolates Bhutan from the rest of the world, and for the same reason the spread of the disease to the kingdom was much limited. He, however, also credited this to the responsible leadership and the strong sense of community that helped put the common good above individual interests. All these reasons brought about responsive action, needed frontline volunteers, and cooperation from the general public. This also reminded us how human society is intricately connected and interdependent.

Secondly, in retrospect, Dr Phuntsho remarked there were better alternatives that could have taken place. He cited examples of knee jerk reaction in some communities whereby some tourists were driven away from villages. Also, the overnight lockdown and movement control was overwhelming to all. Experience now tells us, that the lockdown could have been case based. Furthermore, the Kidu relief fund was perceived to have come rather prematurely; Dr Phuntsho argued, it should have been gradual intervention. People are reportedly more in need of relief funds aftermath pandemic than during the initial phase.

Finally, turning to being resilient and rising to occasion, he noted, the pandemic has also helped identify multiple key issues that arise, which we must rethink, and now (re-)work towards sustaining in our way forward. The key issues include: food security, local economy, foreign investment, job creation, boosting private sectors, all of which became a key concern during the pandemic. Dr Phuntsho, in conclusion, called for concerted effort from



NGOs, business houses, and entrepreneurs to play their role in shaping a better economic landscape. In the end, he reminded us that it is crucial to have the enthusiasm and zeal to do something productive for our community and rise to occasions that comes our way.

— Tshedrup Dorji, Year II

Skepsis conducts its first-ever cross-disciplinary virtual workshop

On the 13th and 20th of September 2020, Skepsis conducted its first-ever cross-disciplinary virtual workshop with the theme ‘Social Change and Media.’ The key objective of the workshop was to provide training to the students on storytelling using media. Tenzin Om, a third year student, opened the workshop with a brief note of welcome and an introduction to Skepsis. In the first session Dr Jelle JP Wouters, while speaking on ‘ethnographing stories’ shared his two years ethnographic study carried out in Northeast India. Dr Wouters highlighted that participant observation is the hallmark of carrying out ethnography. It is only through both participation and observation that one can fully experience and understand another culture as it is, from the perspective of a particular community.

In the second session, after a short lunch break, Dr Shawn Christopher Rowlands spoke on ‘reading to write.’ His talk can be summed up through the example he gave on building a log cabin. He explained, an individual who wants to build a log cabin but cannot stand chopping wood will never be able to build a log cabin. Likewise, a person who does not enjoy reading (or writing) will never be able to write. The bright side to this is that the simple act of doing something instills a drive within us to continue on, and by doing something enough times a habit will be formed. He thus concluded that it is through habits that people find a sense of comfort in doing something.

Dr Dolma Choden Roder and Ms Sonam Wangmo Drukpa-Jalani, were the resource persons for the third session. They educated participants on ‘the art of storytelling,’ and its importance focusing mainly on fictional writing. Dr Dolma Roder presented on what storytelling is, why we tell stories, especially in the context of the programmes participants were enrolled in. She gave highlights on how some works of fiction have impacts on

socio-political views of people. The session concluded with Ms Sonam Wangmo’s reading of a beautiful extract from “A Temporary Matter.”

The fourth and fifth sessions, which were conducted a Sunday after the first three, were a culmination of all the content based trainings. In this second leg, Mr. Nithil Dennis, a media expert and a faculty member at the Mass Communication Programme, taught the participants how to effectively use media.



— Syelzom Sonam Dolma, Year I

Pol-Soc student speaks at Bhutan Dialogues

According to its website, “*Bhutan Dialogues* is a space for critical and civil conversations with thought leaders and change makers drawing upon their expertise, achievements and inspiration. It aims to invigorate development thinking and refine our ideas and the pursuit of human progress. It is a forum that focuses on the right speech and mindful listening.” The Loden Foundation and the United Nations in Bhutan lead *Bhutan Dialogues*. Recently, a special edition of *Bhutan Dialogues* titled ‘Youth Dialogues’ was hosted at RTC. Lopen Dr Karma Phuntsho hosted the dialogue in discussion with three young panellists, including myself. We discussed a range of issues concerning the future of Bhutanese youth; from unemployment to cultural and generational gap to mental health. The platform was an opportunity to present the voice of the youth to a larger audience.

The main focus was discussing ways that the existing system (including the education system, the employment scene and the socio-cultural setting that the youth live in) could create a more conducive environment for the youth to thrive in. We also discussed the status of youth and their attitudes, and how the youth can formulate innovative solutions to address the current issues that they face. The session also took a look into the state of the current Bhutanese context, which the youth will inherit from the previous generation. It discussed the worries and fears of the youth and how with proper communication and platforms of discussions these issues can be addressed one at a time.

It was, for me, a wonderful opportunity to visualize the future and voice what I believe to be the concerns of the youth. While doing my research and preparation for this dialogue, I realized that the Bhutanese context was much better in shape in comparison to many other countries. It gave me hope knowing that there are only a few issues to address, and that Bhutanese youth and older generation together can address these issues easily.

— Jurmey Choden Rinzin, Year III

On the role of media in civil society: A talk by Kuzoo FM

As a part of our 'Civil Society Organization' course, three individuals from Kuzoo FM were invited to give a talk: Dechen Yangzom, Tshering Namgay, and RJ Jampel. On the air for about 14 years, Kuzoo is a youth-based radio station. The first project was implemented under the People's Project of His Majesty's Secretariat. The inaugural broadcast was aired on 26th September 2006. The station maintains coverage of all 20 Dzongkhags.

The radio station although currently is a Royal Project, has full autonomy over the content coverage. The coverage is youth-oriented and their vision is to have more youth audience to whom they can provide news and ideas on current issues and to help develop themselves through the content they create. "Girl Talk" is an example of such session Kuzoo created in collaboration with the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC). It is an intimate program that guides young girls through adolescence. They have more sessions similar to this; Space Break, Laya Diaries, Stimulate, Yellow Bhutan, and more.

One of the speakers, Dechen Yangzom spoke about media censorship in Bhutan. She explained how certain music content could not be played on the radio due to certain religious beliefs that do not seem appropriate. A case in point being an artist like Kanye and Chance The Rapper. Along with entertainment, they also carry out activities like Donation Drives and invite counselors from the NCWC and hospitals to talk about mental health and its importance. The speakers explained the importance of being able to work in areas other than our respective courses. Because sometimes one do not get employment in the area you study in and have to learn from scratch. In order for that to not occur, interning in media houses, they noted, is a good start since they cover every type of news, this could give students the ability to identify what they are interested in, and in turn enable them to garner their skills.

— Tenzin Om, Year III

An evening with Green Weaving Centre

Tshering Choden, the project coordinator of Green Weaving Centre (GWC), delivered a talk on Civil Society Organization (CSO) to the final year students of Pol-Soc. Working at Bhutan Youth Development Fund, a CSO in Bhutan, the speaker defined CSO as "people with similar pain coming together to provide a solution to it." Government and private sectors, she remarked, tries to solve the issues in the society, but there are some issues which are unseen by them. So, those with pain, identify the pain (issue), form an organization, and work towards treating the pain.

CSOs, she says, need funds to give solution to the pains they identified in the society. 'Selling ideas' is the answer to it aside from getting funds from the government. The speaker highlighted the project she is working with, Green weaving Centre (GWC) which tries to (a) teach and preserve the methods and materials used in traditional Bhutanese weaving, as well as its history and (b) provide early childhood education for the children of weavers and staff. A short video about GWC was screened for the students and it featured a boy weaving for brief seconds breaking the stereotypes around it.

— Sonam Choden, Year - III



'Institutions: How do they matter?'

On October 23, 2020, Pol-Soc students attended a talk hosted by *Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy*. The theme of the talk was "Institutions: How do they matter?." The speakers were Dasho Sangay Khandu (Former MP) and Dr Sonam Chuki. In their talks, they enlightened us on the origins of institutions, and how they matter alongside the development processes of Bhutan. The speakers discussed the processes within institutions that made it important for organizing human behavior and society.

The discussion was further expanded to informal associations and traditional set-ups. Dasho Sangay Khandu talked about how the political aspect as the most important institution in the society has a huge role to be played for the development of the youth. He further explained how the various need and voices of the youth are processed in a decision-making forum.

Dr Sonam Chuki illustrated how Bhutan's institutional framework thus far has served its objective of improving social outcomes and preserving social cohesiveness while also delivering growth, thereby laying the foundations of a vibrant economy. She also spoke on how traditional practices are being washed out alongside with the development of the society.

— Sonam Dawa Tshering, Year - III

My Japan Hangover

Japan! What's the first thing that comes to mind?

For me it was anime. Anime is what pushed me to choose Japan over all others countries for my student-exchange programme – that was in March 2019. I was always so curious, always fascinated by the culture, the country...so much that there was no way I could choose any other above it.

Fast forward to September, I find myself on a flight to Japan. As soon as I landed there, I found myself swept over by the beauty of the place, by the language spoken...

This all vanished when I stepped outside to find myself under the scorching sun in 32 degrees weather. Really, this is way beyond what I was used to. I am a mountain girl. I do not go beyond 28 degrees to say the least.

Anyways, so there I was, in Japan – the country of weird fetishes?? Oh damn right I am. My whole time there felt so surreal, as if I was in a dream from which I could wake up any moment.

Whenever I walked in the streets, I was blown away by how beautifully everything was put together – the traditional with the modern. The streets were filled with stores that looked very old and true to Japan, and the lanterns and *Norens* hanging by the door... (*Norens* are fabric dividers hung in doorways, across windows, or on walls and between rooms by the way). The old sushi place man would greet you with a wide smile in his *haori* (And *haori* is a traditional Japanese hip or thigh-length kimono-style jacket).

Everywhere you go, people were always kind – they would always help you out even if most couldn't speak English. This was the thing about Japan, they were always ready to help you – they never hesitate!

Fast fast forward to November 2020. Do I miss Japan? Oh sure I do, Will I ever go there again? Any chance I get.

Thank you RTC for the wonderful opportunity, and thank you Japan, for being the Japan I have come to love!
<3

— **Tashi Paldon, Year III**



Below: Vebaka Bhandari

On the Left: Tashi Paldon



Still Wild West

Before you leave for a place you always dreamt of going to, you paint a picture in your head, picture of the lifestyle you are going to live, of the food you are going to taste and the bonds you are going to create. You start building scenarios of how you are going to interact and experience it in real; all of which was very surreal. I whave always wanted to go to the US since I was a teenager. I would listen to Hollywood songs, and watch Hollywood movies, trying to learn the lifestyle through what was portrayed. With the opportunity given by RTC and Centre College, the dream that a little girl had 'with twinkling eyes' came true. As a sociology student, I came to learn about how adapting to a new culture gives you 'cultural shock,' so I was all prepared for what fall of 2019 and spring 2020 had to offer.

Centre College is a liberal arts college in Kentucky, located far away from the expected sky scrapers of America. Centre had more to offer than I could take in. For the first few weeks I felt like a country bumpkin, not familiar with the names of the coffee that Starbucks had on the list, surprised and quite disappointed with the amount of paper people used for every other purpose from packing fast food to cleaning up after a dump. Thereafter, came the biggest shock of greeting people with, "Hi! What's up!" and not expecting an answer. Culture is intriguing, and scary, but comforting at the same time. Feelings of true independence and individualism swept my feet with the decisions I could make about what trips I wanted to go to, with the internships I could take and make spending by the end of the month as I wanted.

America is a land of opportunities; as cliché as it sounds, it was real with every experience I had. Interning at a legal firm, working as a figure (nude) model, and as an usher, developed my personality over the course of 10 months like I had never grown before. I crossed paths with beautiful souls who taught me to explore my thoughts and take pride in it. Academics were heavy for a person like me who was used to having answers on a platter. I had to strip down layers of my brain that accepted information and never blinked with a question. It was of course liberalizing.

As brisk as the beginning of this journey was, the end was hasty. With a year of memories and knowledge packed in the bags I returned as the same individual that left from Bhutan yet with a wider lens of perspective on life.

— **Vebaka Bhandari, Year III**

Interning at The Bhutanese

My internship with *The Bhutanese* has been a growing experience for me. It significantly improved my understanding of the workings of journalism and left me with skills I will use throughout my life. Not only was the internship my first experience of working in a newsroom, it was also my first internship experience. The internship required me to cover a story every week. This pushed me out of my comfort zone as every sentence I wrote had to be backed with research. The interviews required to get lead stories also helped me gain confidence in dealing with strangers.

When I started my internship at *The Bhutanese*, the first thing I was told to do was ‘call a director for a story.’ After this first test, I gained courage to talk to other individuals. This also helped me boost my self-esteem, which I consider important to succeed at work. At *The Bhutanese*, I came to understand the significance of collaboration



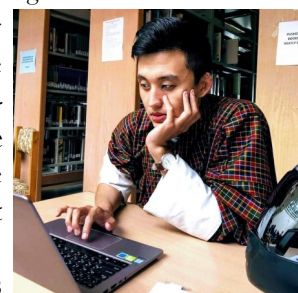
and communication. We worked in small teams, and we had to make use of our individual capabilities to achieve a common goal. I had always struggled with communication, but through teamwork at *The Bhutanese* I learnt the value of communication in synergizing as a team. I also had the privilege of getting to know the workings of a media house. I gained insight on how difficult journalism is – they worked long hours and were expected to produce large content every day.

All in all, my experience as an intern was both testing and fulfilling. The learnings I received on interviewing, discussions, and reporting in a newsroom, to name a few, has been extremely enriching. I much enjoyed my internship at *The Bhutanese*, and look forward to put what I learnt to practice.

— Kinley Wangmo, Year III

Interning for RTC Research Development Grant Project

I currently intern for a research project headed by Mr. Roderick Wijunamai (along with another faculty from Development Economics Programme), titled *Bhutan Labor Market: Emerging Trends and Dynamics*, which has been partly published. It involved tasks such as reviewing literature, collecting data, designing research instruments, interviewing subjects, transcribing interviews, report-writing, etc. I also assisted the College in transcription of interviews of another research project on disability. Needless to say, it was a valuable learning experience for which I am thankful. The internship had enormous relevance for my discipline of study, which is political science and sociology. First, it was a good preparation for my final-year research project, a requirement for the completion of my degree – the procedures were more or less similar. Second, my degree being a social science discipline, there often is a need to pinpoint many obscure data hidden under some two or three-hundred-paged publications. Thanks to the internship, I have been able to hone my data collection skills; and it has, generally speaking, made approaching lengthy reports less intimidating. Lastly, I learnt a lot about the subject matter itself – I now have a satisfactory knowledge of the general trends, issues, implications, and nuances of the Bhutanese labour market. I’ve now come to think that internship programmes are a great supplement to one’s discipline of study. Although it requires one to give up, and invest, quite a bit of one’s free time, I highly recommend my fellow-students. The payoff is without doubt rewarding.



— Kuenga Norbu, Year III

How would Buddha react to advertisements?

In general, advertisements are commercialized messages to increase consumerism that also fuels people’s desires. Hence, when people cannot fulfil their desires, they naturally suffer the effects of not being able to get what they



want. This is why even way before the creation and existence of the concept of advertisement, Buddha in his fundamental teachings said, “Desire is the root cause of all suffering.” Buddha then went on to say, that if one were to be free of all sufferings, one should get rid of one’s desires. In this way, Buddha would have tried to help people see how advertisements are only created to promote products, brands, services, etc. to attract and increase sales. Therefore, Buddha would have said that such commercialized segments are showcased to simply influence people, to buy commodities that are not a necessity. In doing so, advertisements only increases ‘desires’ of people and would have told us to be mindful about what capitalist industries and their never-ending schemes to fool unthinking people into spending money aimlessly.

— Karma Pem Dema, Year III

Against the Grain by James C Scott

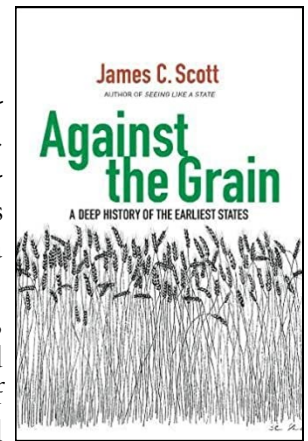
— Namgay Dorji, Year II

Against the Grain by James C. Scott goes against the widely accepted view of domestication of plants and animals, sedentary settlement, agriculture, and of the first state. Scott argues that the state emerged as a coercive institution to enslave people and heavily tax their produces so that few elites can prosper and thrive. Furthermore, he posits that agriculture has more downside than its benefits. Doing agriculture and living in a state was not something which people then desired or yearned for.

In terms of variety of foods, nutritional values per meal, recreation time, prosperity, and livelihood, Scott argues, they were somewhat equal to or perhaps the hunting and gathering ancestors had more advantages than sedentary people. With the advent of agriculture, Scott notes, people had to inhabit in one place only with a largely declined variety of food. The domestication of the animal, for another, led to the transfer of disease from animals to humans, *zoonosis*.

Scott claims “Grains make states” (p.150) meaning grains were the best way to tax people since they were more valuable, visible, divisible, assessable, storable, and transportable compared to other things. He goes on to describe how the early states were population machines, since having more population was an asset in terms of labour, and also could serve as an army during the time of conflicts. Scott remarks, early states were fragile and communities were constantly collapsing due to climate change, resource depletion, disease and warfare, and lack of strategies put in place by the state.

All in all, the main point Scott emphasizes is that state did not emerge in the way Hobbes and Locke explained – that state emerged on a basis of ‘social contract,’ owing to a ‘dire need’ – but was rather a deliberate creation of few elite to benefit from citizens’ produce.



Risk Society by Ulrich Beck

— Tshedrup Dorji, Year II

Risk Society describes the present predicament contemporary society face – the devastating effects of modern technology, science and development. According to Beck, we are currently living in post-industrial society which he calls a ‘Risk Society.’ The societal, ecological and environmental risks are humanly created risks unique to present society. The earlier form of society mostly faced risks of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. Today, however, we are facing an additional risk of nuclear plants, defence technologies and chemicals factories posing disastrous and existential threat. Humans control over nature and technology has caused disastrous accidents like the Fukushima nuclear plant explosion, the Bhopal gas tragedy in India, and BP Oil spill in Mexico, all of which has lasting adverse impact on the society.

Our society’s march towards an unsustainable end, Beck notes, is a human manufactured risk. Scientists favour using natural resources for human consumption and in turn the resources are commercialized as a commodity. People are made to believe that happiness, security and stability in life is achieved only through accumulation of wealth. People, therefore, are convinced that these ‘advancements’ are emancipator from ‘backwardness.’ Such socialisations in the ‘Risk Society’ further steers its young members towards more risks of the future.

Ulrich Beck provides an excellent analysis, through which we can understand some of the pressing issues of our time. In fact, some issues such as climate change are even more pressing today than when Beck wrote about them. However, I must mention, his book also has problems of broad generalizations and a lack a somehow clear target he wants to attack while talking about risk management. It is unclear, at least to me, whether he is addressing the shortfall of bureaucratic rationality, technologist, scientist and/or public perception of risk. His account on the mismanagement of some technology hazards comes across as very one-sided and highly selective. This can perhaps blind the reader of the benefit accrued from the same technology.

Beck indicates some degree of optimism about young members in the ‘risk society,’ however. This is because today young people are increasingly paying attention to climate crisis, and through global movement pressing the world leaders to act on mitigating climate risks. This also hopefully means that values may not remain the same across generations. The accumulation of wealth may not be a source of happiness in the time that is to come. It is important, therefore, to understand and accept the risks, and work towards its mitigation.

