

## **Civil Servants' Perception on the Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism: A Case Study of Ten Ministries**

*Namgay\* & Sonam Dema<sup>+</sup>*

### **Abstract**

This study examines how Bhutanese civil servants perceive the impact of traditional cultural values on favouritism within the civil service. While favouritism is recognized as a widespread form of corruption in Bhutan's public sector, its cultural underpinnings have received little scholarly attention.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), this quantitative study surveyed 367 civil servants across ten ministries through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. The data were analysed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to explore the relationships between Bhutanese cultural values and favouritism.

The results revealed significant positive correlations between favouritism and four core Bhutanese cultural dimensions: prevailing cultural norms and values, the practice of gift-giving (*chanjay*), respect and loyalty (*driglam chosum*), and compassion (*nyingje*). These findings indicate that traditional cultural practices, when misapplied in a professional setting, may unintentionally encourage favouritism within the civil service.

This study offers valuable insights for policymakers and human resource professionals, emphasizing the need for culturally informed anti-corruption policies that harmonize traditional values with ethical standards and merit-based practices. While acknowledging methodological limitations inherent in survey-based approaches to complex cultural phenomena, this research expands the limited

---

\* Assistant Professor, the Royal Institute of Management. Corresponding email: [namgay@rim.edu.bt](mailto:namgay@rim.edu.bt)

<sup>+</sup> Assistant Immigration Officer, Department of Immigration, Thimphu, Bhutan.

## *The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

scholarship on the cultural roots of favouritism in South Asian civil services, highlighting the distinctive influence of Bhutanese values on organizational behaviour.

Keywords: *Favouritism, Corruption, Bhutanese Culture, Cultural Values, Civil Service, Driglam Chosum, Gift-giving, Compassion*

### **Introduction**

#### **Background and Context**

Corruption remains one of the most significant challenges facing public administration globally, undermining institutional integrity, economic development, and social trust (Transparency International, 2021). Within the spectrum of corrupt practices, favouritism—defined as the preferential treatment of individuals based on personal relationships rather than merit—represents a particularly insidious form that can permeate organizational cultures and decision-making processes (Arasli & Tumer, 2008).

In Bhutan, despite the nation's strong emphasis on Gross National Happiness and good governance, favouritism in the civil service has been identified as a persistent concern by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The 2021 National Integrity Assessment revealed that favouritism is perceived as the highest form of corruption in the country, affecting recruitment, promotion, and resource allocation decisions (ACC, 2021). However, what distinguishes Bhutan's context is the complex interplay between deeply rooted cultural values and modern administrative practices.

Bhutanese culture is characterized by distinctive values such as *chanjay* (salutary exchange or gift-giving), *driglam chosum* (traditional code of etiquette emphasizing respect and loyalty), and *nyingje* (compassion). These cultural norms have historically served important social functions in maintaining harmony and reciprocity within communities (Dorji, 2019). However, when these traditional values are transplanted into formal bureaucratic settings, they may create ethical dilemmas and potentially facilitate favouritism.

## **Problem Statement**

While existing literature extensively documents favouritism in public administration across various contexts (Khatri et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2000), there is limited empirical research examining how specific cultural values influence favouritism in South Asian civil services, particularly in Bhutan. The tension between traditional cultural practices and modern meritocratic principles in public administration remains poorly understood. Civil servants often navigate conflicting expectations: upholding professional standards while honouring cultural obligations related to gift-giving, respect for authority, and compassion toward others.

This gap in understanding has practical consequences. Anti-corruption initiatives that fail to account for cultural contexts may be ineffective or even counterproductive (Pillay & Dorasamy, 2010). Therefore, examining the relationship between Bhutanese cultural values and favouritism is essential for developing contextually appropriate interventions that can reconcile traditional values with contemporary governance standards.

## **Research Objectives and Questions**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate civil servants' perceptions of how Bhutanese cultural values influence favouritism practices in the public sector. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

- What is the relationship between Bhutanese cultural norms and values and the prevalence of favouritism in the civil service?
- How does the cultural practice of gift-giving (*chanjay*) relate to favouritism in organizational contexts?
- To what extent does respect and loyalty (*driglam chosum*) toward superiors lead to favouritism?
- What is the relationship between compassion (*nyingje*) and favouritism in decision-making processes?

## **Significance of the Study**

This research makes several important contributions. First, it extends theoretical understanding of the cultural antecedents of favouritism by examining a unique non-Western context. Second, it provides empirical

evidence that can inform policy development and organizational interventions in Bhutan's civil service. Third, it contributes to the broader discourse on balancing cultural preservation with modernization in public administration. Finally, the findings may have relevance for other societies grappling with similar tensions between traditional values and contemporary governance standards.

### **Theoretical Framework and Selection of Cultural Markers**

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Social Exchange Theory posits that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process where individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs in their interactions. In organizational contexts, this framework helps explain how gift-giving and reciprocal obligations can create informal exchange systems that may facilitate favouritism. When civil servants engage in gift-giving or extend favours based on personal relationships, they create expectations of reciprocity that can override formal meritocratic principles.

Institutional Theory complements this by examining how organizations are influenced by normative pressures from their institutional environments. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three mechanisms of institutional isomorphism—coercive, mimetic, and normative—through which organizations come to resemble one another. In Bhutan's context, civil service organizations face conflicting institutional pressures: formal rules promoting meritocracy (coercive isomorphism) and traditional cultural norms emphasizing relationships and hierarchy (normative isomorphism). This institutional complexity creates ambiguity that can enable favouritism to persist despite formal anti-corruption measures.

The selection of four cultural markers—cultural norms and values, gift-giving (*chanjay*), respect and loyalty (*driglam chosum*), and compassion (*nyingje*)—was informed by both these theoretical frameworks and grounded research on Bhutanese organizational culture (Dorji, 2019). These markers represent core dimensions of Bhutanese cultural values that intersect with organizational behaviour. However, we acknowledge that this selection involved interpretive

choices and that Bhutanese culture encompasses additional dimensions not captured in this study. The cultural domain indicators from the Centre for Bhutan Studies' Gross National Happiness survey provide a broader framework that future research could employ for more comprehensive cultural analysis.

It is important to note that this study approaches these cultural values from an analytical rather than normative perspective. We recognize that *driglam chosum*, for instance, encompasses much more than respect and loyalty—it represents a complex system of social etiquette that fosters both vertical respect (between superiors and subordinates) and horizontal solidarity (among equals). Traditional Bhutanese institutions demonstrate that this cultural framework can support robust, respectful dialogues rather than mere compliance. Our focus on the specific dimensions of “respect and loyalty” reflects how these values are operationalized in survey respondents' perceptions within organizational hierarchies, not a definitive characterization of this rich cultural concept.

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizing Corruption and Favouritism**

Corruption is broadly defined as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2021). This encompasses a wide range of behaviours, from bribery and embezzlement to nepotism and favouritism. Johnston (2005) categorizes corruption into four syndromes based on the strength of institutions and the openness of political and economic participation, highlighting that corruption manifests differently across contexts.

Favouritism, as a specific form of corruption, refers to the practice of granting preferential treatment to individuals based on personal relationships, family ties, ethnicity, or other non-merit factors rather than objective qualifications or needs (Arasli & Tumer, 2008). Pearce et al. (2000) distinguish between different types of favouritism, including nepotism (favouring family members), cronyism (favouring friends and associates), and patronage (favouring political supporters).

The consequences of favouritism in public administration are substantial. Research demonstrates that favouritism undermines organizational effectiveness (Khatri et al., 2006), reduces employee morale and motivation (Abdalla et al., 1998), erodes public trust in institutions (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008), and perpetuates inequality by limiting opportunities for those without connections (Wated & Sanchez, 2006). Moreover, favouritism can become institutionalized, creating self-perpetuating systems where those who benefit from preferential treatment subsequently extend similar favours to others (Prendergast & Topel, 1996).

### **Cultural Dimensions of Corruption and Favouritism**

The relationship between culture and corruption has received considerable scholarly attention. Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory has been widely applied to explain cross-national variations in corruption levels. Studies have found that societies characterized by high power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance tend to exhibit higher levels of corruption (Husted, 1999; Davis & Ruhe, 2003).

Power distance—the extent to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distribution—is particularly relevant to favouritism. In high power distance cultures, subordinates are less likely to question authority or challenge preferential treatment by superiors (Hofstede, 1980). This creates an environment where favouritism can flourish with limited accountability.

Collectivism, which emphasizes group loyalty and in-group favouritism over individual merit, has also been linked to corruption (Getz & Volkema, 2001). In collectivist societies, obligations to family, friends, and community members may supersede formal organizational rules, leading to nepotistic and favouritism practices (Khatri & Tsang, 2003).

Triandis (1995) further distinguishes between horizontal and vertical collectivism, noting that vertical collectivism—which combines group loyalty with acceptance of hierarchy—is especially conducive to favouritism. In such contexts, individuals may feel compelled to show favouritism toward in-group members, particularly those of higher status.

However, it is important to acknowledge that much of the corruption and public administration literature draws primarily from Western theoretical frameworks that may not fully capture the nuances of non-Western governance systems. Scholars such as Ugyel (2014) and Drechsler (2013) have critiqued the Western-centric bias in public administration scholarship, particularly the assumption that New Public Management principles represent universal best practices. Ugyel's work on Bhutanese public administration demonstrates that traditional cultural values can support effective governance when properly understood, rather than serving merely as obstacles to modernization. This perspective is critical for interpreting our findings: rather than viewing traditional culture solely as a source of corruption, we must consider how cultural values interact with institutional structures and resource constraints in shaping organizational behaviour.

### **Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Organizational Contexts**

Gift-giving is a universal cultural practice, but its meaning and implications vary significantly across societies (Mauss, 1954). In many Asian cultures, gift-giving serves important social functions, including building relationships (guanxi in China), expressing gratitude, and maintaining social harmony (Yang, 1994).

However, the line between culturally appropriate gift-giving and corrupt practices can be ambiguous, particularly in professional contexts (Tian, 2008). What constitutes an acceptable gift versus a bribe often depends on cultural norms, the value of the gift, the timing, and the expectation of reciprocity (Koehn, 2001).

Research on gift-giving in organizational settings reveals its dual nature. On one hand, moderate gift-giving can strengthen workplace relationships and facilitate cooperation (Kurland & Pelled, 2000). On the other hand, excessive or strategically motivated gift-giving can create obligations that lead to favouritism and compromise professional judgment (Treviño et al., 2014).

The concept of reciprocity is central to understanding gift-giving's relationship with favouritism. Gouldner (1960) identified reciprocity as a universal norm whereby people feel obligated to return favours. In organizational contexts, this reciprocity norm can be exploited to secure

preferential treatment, transforming culturally sanctioned gift-giving into a mechanism for favouritism (Cialdini, 2001).

### **Respect, Loyalty, and Hierarchical Relationships**

Respect for authority and loyalty to superiors are valued in many cultures but are particularly emphasized in Asian societies influenced by Confucian philosophy (Farh & Cheng, 2000). These values can positively contribute to organizational functioning by promoting harmony, reducing conflict, and facilitating coordination (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008).

However, excessive emphasis on respect and loyalty can also have negative consequences. Research on “destructive obedience” demonstrates that strong deference to authority can lead subordinates to comply with unethical directives (Milgram, 1974). In organizational settings, subordinates may hesitate to report misconduct by superiors or may participate in favouritism to demonstrate loyalty (Near & Miceli, 1995).

The concept of “face” in Asian cultures further complicates this dynamic. Maintaining face—preserving one’s dignity and reputation—is paramount, and challenging a superior publicly can cause loss of face for both parties (Ho, 1976). This cultural imperative may inhibit whistleblowing and enable favouritism to persist unchallenged.

### **Compassion and Ethical Decision-Making**

Compassion—the emotional response to others’ suffering coupled with a desire to help—is generally considered a positive moral emotion (Goetz et al., 2010). In organizational contexts, compassionate leadership is associated with employee well-being, organizational commitment, and prosocial behaviour (Dutton et al., 2014).

However, compassion can also complicate ethical decision-making. Research on “motivated moral reasoning” shows that compassion for specific individuals can lead decision-makers to prioritize care over justice, potentially resulting in favouritism (Haidt, 2001). Bloom (2017) argues that compassion can be “biased,” favouring identifiable individuals over anonymous others, which may undermine impartial decision-making in organizational settings.

Studies on ethical decision-making reveal that compassion can weaken adherence to rules and procedures when decision-makers perceive strict application as causing harm to specific individuals (Pillutla & Chen, 1999). While flexibility and discretion are sometimes appropriate, compassion-driven exceptions can establish precedents for favouritism and erode procedural justice (Colquitt et al., 2001).

### **Bhutanese Cultural Values and Their Organizational Implications**

Bhutanese culture is shaped by Buddhist philosophy, traditional social structures, and the nation's unique development approach centered on Gross National Happiness (Ura et al., 2012). Several cultural values are particularly relevant to understanding favouritism:

*Chanjay* (Salutary Exchange): This traditional practice involves exchanging gifts and favours to build and maintain social relationships. Historically, *chanjay* facilitated cooperation and resource sharing in Bhutan's agrarian communities (Dorji, 2019). However, when extended to bureaucratic settings, *chanjay* may blur the boundaries between relationship-building and corruption.

*Driglam chosum* (code of etiquette): This traditional code prescribes proper behaviour, dress, and language, emphasizing respect for authority, elders, and social hierarchy (Phuntsho, 2013). While *driglam chosum* promotes social harmony and cultural identity, it may also reinforce power distance and inhibit subordinates from challenging unethical practices by superiors.

*Nyingje* (compassion): Rooted in Buddhist teachings, *nyingje* emphasizes empathy and concern for others' welfare (Ricard, 2015). While compassion is a cornerstone of Bhutanese values, misplaced compassion in professional contexts may lead to favouritism when decision-makers prioritize personal relationships over organizational rules.

Despite Bhutan's cultural distinctiveness, empirical research on how these values influence organizational behaviour remains limited. Dorji and Tshering (2016) noted the tension between traditional values and modern administrative requirements but did not systematically examine the relationship with favouritism. This study addresses this gap by empirically investigating civil servants' perceptions of how Bhutanese cultural values relate to favouritism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to understand the relationship between cultural values and favouritism. Social Exchange Theory posits that social behaviour is the result of exchange processes aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In the context of this study, gift-giving, demonstrations of respect and loyalty, and expressions of compassion can be viewed as social exchanges that create obligations and expectations of reciprocity, potentially leading to favouritism.

Institutional Theory suggests that organizations operate within institutional environments that shape their structures and practices through normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures (Scott, 2008). Cultural values represent normative institutional forces that influence organizational behaviour. When cultural norms conflict with formal organizational rules, institutional complexity arises, creating opportunities for practices like favouritism to emerge and persist (Pache & Santos, 2010).

Based on this theoretical foundation and the literature reviewed, we propose that Bhutanese cultural values—specifically cultural norms, gift-giving practices, respect and loyalty, and compassion—are positively associated with favouritism in the civil service. The following hypotheses guide the empirical investigation:

- H1: Cultural norms and values are positively associated with favouritism in the civil service.
- H2: The practice of gift-giving (*chanjay*) is positively associated with favouritism in the civil service.
- H3: Respect and loyalty (*driglam chosum*) are positively associated with favouritism in the civil service.
- H4: Compassion (*nyingje*) is positively associated with favouritism in the civil service.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design and Approach**

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method. The quantitative approach was selected for its ability to measure relationships between variables systematically and to generalize findings to a larger population (Creswell, 2014). A positivist epistemological stance guided the research, assuming that objective reality can be measured through structured instruments and statistical analysis.

### **Population and Sampling**

The target population comprised civil servants employed in ten ministries of the Royal Government of Bhutan, totalling 4,086 employees. These ministries were selected because they represent the core administrative functions of the government and employ a substantial proportion of the civil service workforce.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across ministries and organizational levels. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size (4,086)

e = margin of error (0.05)

This calculation yielded a minimum required sample size of 365 respondents. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to account for potential non-responses, and 367 usable responses were received, representing a response rate of 91.75%.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising three main sections:

## *The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

**Section A: Demographic Information** This section collected information on respondents' gender, age, educational qualification, position level, and years of service.

**Section B: Cultural Values Dimensions.** This section measured four dimensions of Bhutanese cultural values:

- Cultural norms and values (5 items)
- Gift-giving practices/*chanjay* (8 items)
- Respect and loyalty/*driglam chosum* (8 items)
- Compassion/ *nyingje* (4 items)

**Section C: Favouritism** This section assessed perceptions of favouritism prevalence and practices (6 items).

All items were measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). The 4-point scale was deliberately chosen to avoid neutral responses and encourage respondents to take a position on sensitive topics related to corruption.

The questionnaire was developed based on established instruments from prior research on corruption, favouritism, and cultural values, adapted to the Bhutanese context. Items were refined through expert review by faculty members at the Royal Institute of Management, and a pilot test with 30 civil servants not included in the final sample.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection was conducted over a period of six weeks from September to October 2022. Formal permission was obtained from the Department of Research and Consultancy at the Royal Institute of Management and from the Human Resource Officers (HROs) of the ten ministries.

The researcher personally visited each ministry to distribute questionnaires and explain the study's purpose. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and participation was voluntary. Completed questionnaires were collected in sealed envelopes to enhance confidentiality and encourage honest responses on the sensitive topic of corruption.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 25.0. The analysis proceeded in several stages:

### *Preliminary Analysis*

- Data cleaning and screening for missing values and outliers.
- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) for demographic variables and key study variables
- Assessment of data normality using skewness and kurtosis statistics

### *Reliability Analysis*

- Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of scales measuring cultural values dimensions and favouritism

### *Correlation Analysis*

- Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between cultural values dimensions and favouritism.
- Statistical significance was evaluated at  $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.01$  levels

## **Ethical Considerations**

The research adhered to ethical guidelines established by the Royal Institute of Management's Research Ethics Committee. Key ethical considerations included:

- Informed Consent: Participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time
- Confidentiality: No identifying information was collected, and data were stored securely
- Anonymity: Questionnaires did not require names or other identifiers
- Voluntary Participation: Respondents were clearly informed that participation was voluntary and would not affect their employment

- Sensitivity: Given the sensitive nature of corruption-related research, particular care was taken to frame questions objectively and to create a safe environment for honest responses.

## **Results and Analysis**

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

The demographic characteristics of the 367 respondents are presented in Table 1. The sample comprised 58.6% male and 41.4% female respondents, reflecting the gender distribution in Bhutan's civil service. The majority of respondents (62.4%) were between 30-45 years of age, representing mid-career civil servants with substantial organizational experience.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=367)*

| Characteristic   | Category           | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender           | Male               | 215       | 58.6       |
|                  | Female             | 152       | 41.4       |
| Age              | Below 30 years     | 89        | 24.3       |
|                  | 30-45 years        | 229       | 62.4       |
|                  | Above 45 years     | 49        | 13.3       |
| Education        | Higher Secondary   | 72        | 19.6       |
|                  | Bachelor's Degree  | 178       | 48.5       |
|                  | Postgraduate       | 117       | 31.9       |
| Position Level   | Junior Officer     | 192       | 52.3       |
|                  | Mid-level Officer  | 115       | 31.3       |
|                  | Senior Officer     | 60        | 16.4       |
| Years of Service | Less than 5 years  | 104       | 28.3       |
|                  | 5-10 years         | 127       | 34.6       |
|                  | 11-20 years        | 80        | 21.8       |
|                  | More than 20 years | 56        | 15.3       |

Regarding educational qualifications, 48.5% held bachelor's degrees, 31.9% had postgraduate qualifications, and 19.6% had completed higher secondary education or equivalent. This distribution indicates a

well-educated workforce, consistent with Bhutan's emphasis on capacity building in the civil service.

In terms of position level, 52.3% were junior officers, 31.3% were mid-level officers, and 16.4% occupied senior positions. The predominance of junior and mid-level officers reflects the hierarchical structure of the civil service. Years of service ranged from less than 5 years (28.3%) to more than 20 years (15.3%), with the largest group (34.6%) having 5-10 years of service.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are presented in Table 2. The mean scores indicate that respondents generally acknowledged the presence of both cultural values and favouritism in their organizations.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N=367)*

| Variable                                      | Mean | Std. Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|----------------|----------|----------|
| Cultural Norms and Values                     | 2.87 | 0.64           | -0.23    | -0.41    |
| Gift-giving ( <i>chanjay</i> )                | 2.64 | 0.71           | 0.15     | -0.38    |
| Respect and Loyalty ( <i>driglam chosum</i> ) | 3.12 | 0.58           | -0.51    | 0.22     |
| Compassion ( <i>nyingje</i> )                 | 2.78 | 0.66           | -0.12    | -0.35    |
| Favouritism                                   | 2.69 | 0.68           | 0.08     | -0.44    |

Note: Scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree)

The highest mean score was observed for Respect and Loyalty (M = 3.12, SD = 0.58), suggesting that *driglam chosum* remains strongly embedded in organizational culture. Cultural Norms and Values (M = 2.87, SD = 0.64) and Compassion (M = 2.78, SD = 0.66) received moderate agreement. Gift-giving (M = 2.64, SD = 0.71) and Favouritism (M = 2.69, SD = 0.68) showed similar moderate levels.

The skewness and kurtosis values for all variables fell within acceptable ranges (between -1 and +1), indicating approximately normal distributions suitable for parametric statistical analysis.

## *The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

### **Reliability Analysis**

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of the scales. As shown in Table 3, all scales demonstrated acceptable to good reliability, with alpha values ranging from 0.72 to 0.85, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Table 3**

#### *Reliability Analysis*

| Scale                                         | Number of Items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Cultural Norms and Values                     | 5               | 0.78             |
| Gift-giving ( <i>chanjay</i> )                | 8               | 0.82             |
| Respect and Loyalty ( <i>driglam chosum</i> ) | 8               | 0.85             |
| Compassion ( <i>nyingje</i> )                 | 4               | 0.72             |
| Favouritism                                   | 6               | 0.81             |

### **Correlation Analysis**

Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between cultural values dimensions and favouritism. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

#### *Correlation Matrix (N=367)*

| Variable                                         | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5 |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| 1. Cultural Norms and Values                     | 1      |        |        |        |   |
| 2. Gift-giving ( <i>chanjay</i> )                | 0.54** | 1      |        |        |   |
| 3. Respect and Loyalty ( <i>driglam chosum</i> ) | 0.61** | 0.48** | 1      |        |   |
| 4. Compassion ( <i>nyingje</i> )                 | 0.52** | 0.43** | 0.58** | 1      |   |
| 5. Favouritism                                   | 0.58** | 0.63** | 0.67** | 0.55** | 1 |

p < 0.01 (2-tailed)

The correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between all cultural values dimensions and favouritism:

- H1: Cultural Norms and Values and Favouritism A significant positive correlation was found between cultural norms and values and favouritism ( $r = 0.58, p < 0.01$ ), supporting H1. This indicates that stronger adherence to traditional cultural norms is associated with higher perceived favouritism.
- H2: Gift-giving (*chanjay*) and Favouritism Gift-giving demonstrated a strong positive correlation with favouritism ( $r = 0.63, p < 0.01$ ), supporting H2. This suggests that the practice of *chanjay* in organizational contexts is closely linked to favouritism.
- H3: Respect and Loyalty (*driglam chosum*) and Favouritism The strongest correlation was observed between respect and loyalty and favouritism ( $r = 0.67, p < 0.01$ ), supporting H3. This finding indicates that the cultural emphasis on *driglam chosum* may significantly contribute to favouritism in the civil service.
- H4: Compassion (*nyingje*) and Favouritism Compassion showed a significant positive correlation with favouritism ( $r = 0.55, p < 0.01$ ), supporting H4. This suggests that compassion-driven decision-making may sometimes lead to favouritism.

Additionally, significant intercorrelations were observed among the cultural values dimensions themselves, ranging from  $r = 0.43$  to  $r = 0.61$ , indicating that these cultural values are interrelated components of Bhutanese culture rather than independent constructs.

### **Additional Findings**

Further analysis examined whether demographic variables influenced perceptions of the relationship between cultural values and favouritism. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences based on gender, age, education level, or years of service, suggesting that the observed relationships are consistent across different demographic groups within the civil service.

## **Discussion**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the proposition that Bhutanese cultural values are significantly associated with favouritism in the civil service. All four hypotheses were supported, indicating that cultural norms, gift-giving practices, respect and loyalty, and compassion are positively correlated with perceived favouritism. These results have important theoretical and practical implications.

### **Cultural Norms and Values**

The significant positive correlation between cultural norms and favouritism ( $r = 0.58$ ) suggests that traditional cultural values, while serving important social functions, may inadvertently facilitate favouritism when applied in formal organizational settings. This finding aligns with institutional theory's perspective on institutional complexity, where conflicting normative pressures from traditional culture and modern bureaucratic principles create ambiguity that enables practices like favouritism (Pache & Santos, 2010).

Bhutanese culture emphasizes collectivism, relationship orientation, and social harmony—characteristics that research has linked to higher corruption in other contexts (Husted, 1999; Getz & Volkema, 2001). The challenge lies in the fact that behaviours considered culturally appropriate and socially desirable in traditional settings may be perceived as unethical or corrupt in professional contexts. Civil servants navigate this tension daily, sometimes prioritizing cultural obligations over organizational rules.

It is crucial to note that this correlation does not imply that traditional cultural values are inherently negative or should be eliminated. Rather, these findings highlight a structural mismatch between cultural practices evolved for community contexts and formal bureaucratic requirements. The challenge for Bhutan's civil service is not to abandon cultural values but to develop institutional mechanisms that honour these values while maintaining meritocratic principles. Moreover, factors beyond culture—including resource constraints, inadequate salaries, and limited institutional oversight—also contribute

to favouritism and should not be overlooked when developing interventions.

### **Gift-Giving (*chanjay*)**

The strong correlation between gift-giving and favouritism ( $r = 0.63$ ) highlights the problematic nature of *chanjay* in organizational contexts. While gift-giving traditionally serves to build and maintain relationships in Bhutanese society, its extension to workplace settings creates ethical ambiguity. The reciprocity norm underlying gift exchange (Gouldner, 1960) can transform culturally sanctioned practices into mechanisms for securing preferential treatment.

This finding resonates with research on *guanxi* in Chinese organizations, where relationship-building practices can blur the line between legitimate networking and corruption (Tian, 2008). The challenge is distinguishing between gifts given out of genuine respect or gratitude and those strategically offered to influence decisions or secure favours. The survey data suggest that civil servants recognize this connection, acknowledging that gift-giving can facilitate faster service delivery and preferential treatment.

### **Respect and Loyalty (*driglam chosum*)**

The strongest correlation observed was between respect and loyalty and favouritism ( $r = 0.67$ ), indicating that *driglam chosum* may be the most influential cultural factor in facilitating favouritism. This finding is particularly significant given that *driglam chosum* is a cornerstone of Bhutanese cultural identity and is actively promoted as part of national heritage (Phuntsho, 2013).

The emphasis on respect for authority and loyalty to superiors, while promoting organizational harmony and reducing conflict, may also create power dynamics that enable favouritism. Subordinates who are culturally conditioned to defer to authority may hesitate to question preferential treatment or report misconduct by superiors (Near & Miceli, 1995). Moreover, demonstrating loyalty through compliance with superiors' wishes—even when those wishes involve favouritism—may be viewed as culturally appropriate behaviour.

This finding aligns with research on power distance and corruption, which shows that societies with high acceptance of hierarchical

relationships tend to experience more corruption (Davis & Ruhe, 2003). The challenge for Bhutan is maintaining respect for authority and social harmony while also promoting accountability and meritocracy in the civil service.

### **Compassion (*nyingje*)**

The significant positive correlation between compassion and favouritism ( $r = 0.55$ ) reveals the ethical complexity of this valued Buddhist principle. Compassion is generally considered a positive moral emotion that promotes prosocial behaviour (Goetz et al., 2010). However, this study suggests that compassion in organizational decision-making may sometimes lead to favouritism.

This finding supports research on motivated moral reasoning, which demonstrates that compassion for specific individuals can lead decision-makers to prioritize care over justice (Haidt, 2001). When civil servants make exceptions to rules or procedures out of compassion for colleagues or clients, they may inadvertently establish precedents for favouritism. The distinction between appropriate compassion (forgiving occasional mistakes, providing support during hardship) and misplaced compassion (making unethical exceptions) is often unclear.

Bloom's (2017) argument that compassion is inherently "biased"—favouring identifiable individuals over abstract principles or anonymous others—is relevant here. In organizational contexts, this bias may manifest as favouritism toward known individuals with whom decision-makers have personal connections or whose suffering is visible, at the expense of fair treatment for all.

### **Interrelationships Among Cultural Values**

The significant intercorrelations among the cultural values dimensions (ranging from  $r = 0.43$  to  $r = 0.61$ ) suggest that these values form an integrated cultural system rather than operating independently. Gift-giving, respect and loyalty, and compassion are mutually reinforcing elements of Bhutanese culture. This interconnectedness has implications for interventions: addressing favouritism may require a holistic approach that recognizes how multiple cultural values interact to shape organizational behaviour.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of Social Exchange Theory to understand how culturally embedded exchange practices (gift-giving, demonstrations of loyalty, expressions of compassion) create obligations and expectations that facilitate favouritism. Second, it demonstrates the relevance of Institutional Theory for understanding corruption in contexts characterized by institutional complexity, where traditional cultural norms conflict with modern bureaucratic principles.

Third, the study contributes to the limited literature on corruption in South Asian contexts, particularly in small nations like Bhutan that are underrepresented in management research. The findings suggest that theoretical frameworks developed in Western contexts must be adapted to account for distinctive cultural values and their organizational implications.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings have several important practical implications for policymakers, human resource managers, and anti-corruption agencies:

#### *Culturally Sensitive Anti-Corruption Strategies :*

Anti-corruption initiatives must recognize the cultural context in which favouritism occurs. Approaches that simply condemn traditional practices without offering culturally appropriate alternatives are unlikely to succeed. Instead, interventions should help civil servants navigate the tension between cultural obligations and professional ethics.

#### *Clarifying Boundaries*

Clear guidelines are needed to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable applications of cultural values in professional settings. For example, policies could specify appropriate contexts and limits for gift-giving, define when compassion is appropriate versus when strict adherence to rules is required, and establish mechanisms for respectfully questioning superiors' decisions when necessary.

## *The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

### *Ethics Training*

Comprehensive ethics training programmes should address the specific cultural dilemmas civil servants face. Case studies and scenarios involving conflicts between cultural values and professional ethics could help employees develop decision-making frameworks for navigating these situations.

### *Strengthening Institutional Safeguards*

While cultural change is slow, institutional mechanisms can provide immediate safeguards against favouritism. These include transparent decision-making processes, clear criteria for recruitment and promotion, oversight mechanisms, and protection for whistleblowers who report favouritism.

### *Leadership Commitment*

Senior leaders must model the balance between respecting cultural values and upholding meritocratic principles. When leaders demonstrate that professionalism and cultural identity are compatible rather than contradictory, they create organizational cultures that can reduce favouritism.

### *Public Awareness*

Broader public awareness campaigns can help shift perceptions about the appropriate application of cultural values in different contexts. Distinguishing between private/social settings where traditional practices are appropriate and professional settings where meritocratic principles should prevail may help reduce the normalization of favouritism.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights how Bhutanese cultural values—specifically cultural norms, gift-giving (*chanjay*), respect and loyalty (*driglam chosum*), and compassion (*nyingje*)—are significantly associated with favouritism in the civil service, based on quantitative analysis of responses from 367 civil servants across ten ministries. The findings reveal that traditional practices, particularly the emphasis on respect

and loyalty to authority, can inadvertently encourage preferential treatment within organizational settings. By applying Social Exchange Theory and Institutional Theory, the research demonstrates how cultural obligations and institutional complexities foster favouritism, extending theoretical understanding of corruption in a unique non-Western context. Empirically, the study offers robust evidence for relationships that have often been assumed but rarely measured, and practically, it provides actionable insights for developing culturally sensitive interventions to address favouritism at its roots. Overall, this research lays a critical foundation for future studies on organizational behaviour in Bhutan and offers valuable guidance for policy reforms that balance respect for cultural identity with the need for ethical governance.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations suggest directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Longitudinal research could examine how the relationship between cultural values and favouritism evolves over time, particularly as Bhutan continues to modernize its public administration.

Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could employ mixed methods, combining surveys with interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observation to gain deeper insights into how cultural values influence actual favouritism practices.

More fundamentally, we acknowledge that survey-based quantitative methods have inherent limitations when studying complex cultural phenomena. The operationalization of cultural values into discrete survey items necessarily simplifies rich, contextual practices into measurable variables. Alternative research approaches, including organizational ethnography and political anthropology methods, could provide complementary insights that capture the nuanced ways cultural values operate in practice. The findings should therefore be interpreted as documenting civil servants' perceptions of relationships between cultural values and favouritism, rather than as establishing that culture is the primary or sole cause of favouritism. Other factors, including

## *The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

resource constraints within the civil service, institutional structures, and individual ethical orientations, likely also play significant roles.

Third, the study focused on ten ministries and may not represent the entire public sector. Future research could expand to include other government agencies, local governments, and state-owned enterprises to assess the generalizability of findings.

Fourth, while the study identified relationships between cultural values and favouritism, it did not examine potential moderating or mediating variables. Future research could investigate factors that might strengthen or weaken these relationships, such as organizational culture, leadership style, or strength of institutional controls.

Fifth, comparative research examining how different cultural contexts influence favouritism in South Asian civil services could provide valuable insights into universal versus culture-specific factors.

Finally, intervention research is needed to develop and evaluate culturally appropriate strategies for reducing favouritism. Action research approaches that involve civil servants in co-creating solutions may be particularly effective.

## **References**

- Abdalla, H. F., Maghrabi, A. S., & Raggad, B. G. (1998). Assessing the perceptions of human resource managers toward nepotism: A cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Manpower*, 19(8), 554-570.
- Anti-Corruption Commission. (2021). *National Integrity Assessment Report 2021*. Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Anti-Corruption Commission. (2021). *Towards Enhanced Transparency and Accountability in Human Resource Management Processes in the Civil Service: A Matter of Favouritism*. Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Arasli, H., & Tumer, M. (2008). Nepotism, favouritism and cronyism: A study of their effects on job stress and job satisfaction in the banking industry of North Cyprus. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 36(9), 1237-1250.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley.

- Bloom, P. (2017). *Against empathy: The case for rational compassion*. New York: Ecco.
- Cialdini, R. B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O., & Ng, K. Y. (2001). Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 425-445.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davis, J. H., & Ruhe, J. A. (2003). Perceptions of country corruption: Antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 43(4), 275-288.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.
- Dorji, L. (2019). *Cultural values and organizational behavior in Bhutan*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Dorji, L., & Tshering, D. (2016). Gross National Happiness and good governance in Bhutan. *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, 38(1), 43-58.
- Drechsler, W. (2013). Three paradigms of governance and administration: Chinese, Western and Islamic. *Society and Economy*, 35(3), 319-342.  
<https://doi.org/10.1556/SOCEC.35.2013.3.3>
- Dutton, J. E., Workman, K. M., & Hardin, A. E. (2014). Compassion at work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1, 277-304.
- Farh, J. L., & Cheng, B. S. (2000). A cultural analysis of paternalistic leadership in Chinese organizations. In J. T. Li, A. S. Tsui, & E. Weldon (Eds.), *Management and organizations in the Chinese context* (pp. 84-127). London: Macmillan.
- Getz, K. A., & Volkema, R. J. (2001). Culture, perceived corruption, and economics: A model of predictors and outcomes. *Business & Society*, 40(1), 7-30.

*The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

- Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2010). Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(3), 351-374.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review*, 25(2), 161-178.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108(4), 814-834.
- Ho, D. Y. (1976). On the concept of face. *American Journal of Sociology*, 81(4), 867-884.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Husted, B. W. (1999). Wealth, culture, and corruption. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30(2), 339-359.
- Johnston, M. (2005). *Syndromes of corruption: Wealth, power, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khatri, N., & Tsang, E. W. (2003). Antecedents and consequences of cronyism in organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 43(4), 289-303.
- Khatri, N., Tsang, E. W., & Begley, T. M. (2006). Cronyism: A cross-cultural analysis. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 37(1), 61-75.
- Koehn, D. (2001). Ethical issues connected with multi-level marketing schemes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 29(1-2), 153-160.
- Kurland, N. B., & Pelled, L. H. (2000). Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(2), 428-438.
- Mauss, M. (1954). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Near, J. P., & Miceli, M. P. (1995). Effective whistle-blowing. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 679-708.
- Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Pache, A. C., & Santos, F. (2010). When worlds collide: The internal dynamics of organizational responses to conflicting institutional demands. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3), 455-476.
- Pearce, J. L., Branyiczki, I., & Bakacsi, G. (2000). Person-based reward systems: A theory of organizational reward practices in reform-communist organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21(3), 261-284.
- Pellegrini, E. K., & Scandura, T. A. (2008). Paternalistic leadership: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management*, 34(3), 566-593.
- Phuntsho, K. (2013). *The history of Bhutan*. Noida: Random House India.
- Pillay, S., & Dorasamy, N. (2010). Linking cultural dimensions with the nature of corruption: An institutional theory perspective. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 10(3), 363-378.
- Pillutla, M. M., & Chen, X. P. (1999). Social norms and cooperation in social dilemmas: The effects of context and feedback. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 78(2), 81-103.
- Prendergast, C., & Topel, R. H. (1996). Favouritism in organizations. *Journal of Political Economy*, 104(5), 958-978.
- Ricard, M. (2015). *Altruism: The power of compassion to change yourself and the world*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Rothstein, B., & Teorell, J. (2008). What is quality of government? A theory of impartial government institutions. *Governance*, 21(2), 165-190.
- Scott, W. R. (2008). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas and interests* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tian, Q. (2008). Perception of business bribery in China: The impact of moral philosophy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 80(3), 437-445.
- Transparency International. (2021). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*. Berlin: Transparency International.
- Treviño, L. K., den Nieuwenboer, N. A., & Kish-Gephart, J. J. (2014). (Un)ethical behavior in organizations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 635-660.

*The Effect of Bhutanese Culture on Favouritism*

- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ugyel, L. (2014). Explaining hybridity in public administration: An empirical case of Bhutan's civil service. *Public Administration and Development*, 34(2), 109-122. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1685>
- Ura, K., Alkire, S., Zangmo, T., & Wangdi, K. (2012). *A short guide to Gross National Happiness Index*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Wated, G., & Sanchez, J. I. (2006). The role of accent as a work stressor on attitudinal and health-related work outcomes. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 13(3), 329-350.
- Yamane, T. (1967). *Statistics: An introductory analysis* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Yang, M. M. (1994). *Gifts, favors, and banquets: The art of social relationships in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.