

Roar of the Thunder Dragon: The Bhutanese Audio-visual Industry and the Shaping and Representation of Contemporary Culture

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A Bhutanese journalist recently remarked that these days, the phones don't ring, they sing. And when the phones do start singing, don't be surprised if it is a Bhutanese song coming out from the latest Motorola or Nokia phone tucked in the inner folds of the gho or a Gucci bag slung over a Hong Kong brocade *tego*.

Walk along Thimphu's Norzin Lam and try not to notice the huge posters announcing the screening of the latest film. Stroll further and the bustle of the street is laced with the sound of Bhutanese songs coming from the stereos and radios of shops and restaurants. So you might try to extricate yourself from this bazaar of sounds and symphonies and you hop into a taxi only to be greeted by the popular call in music request show of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation coming from the Maruti's stereo.

Whether travelling to Phuntsholing in a comfortable Japanese Coaster bus or watching TV at home, one cannot escape the presence of modern Bhutan's audiovisual industry. The songs being played, the films being screened, the albums being sold may not be, to the discerning critic, works of art worthy of appreciation or a review in the papers. However my argument is that they are being consumed by the masses and therefore the industry deserves a closer scrutiny as it both shapes and represents contemporary culture.

In the Draft Constitution, Culture is covered under Article 4.

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The Article is reproduced here in entirety.¹

Article 4

The State shall endeavour to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country, including monument, places and objects of artistic or historic interest, Dzongs, Lhakhangs, Goendeys, Ten-Sum, Nyes, language, literature, music and religion to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens.

The State shall recognize culture as an evolving dynamic force and shall endeavour to strengthen and facilitate the continued evolution of traditional values and institutions that are sustainable as a progressive society.

The State shall conserve and encourage research on local arts, custom, knowledge and culture.

Parliament may enact such legislation as may be necessary to advance the cause of cultural enrichment of Bhutanese society.

The Bhutanese audio-visual industry plays a critical and important role in the creation of cultural products, which are consumed by the masses. The industry's significant role in the preservation and promotion of culture is worthy of state support. Although comprehensive data is not available on the industry, available data and anecdotal evidence prove that the industry is growing and playing its own role in shaping and representing contemporary culture in Bhutan

I shall now give a brief outline of some of the media in Bhutan linked to the audiovisual industry.

Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation

A prominent player in this field is the national radio and TV station, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation.

¹ The Draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

BBS Radio

The BBS Radio broadcasts in four languages from 7 in the morning to 6 in the evening. With its nationwide FM network² and a 50 kilowatt short-wave transmitter, the BBS radio's reach is unrivalled.

One of the major components of the BBS Radio content is music. All the four language services (Dzongkha, Sharchhopikha, Lhotshamkha and English) have dedicated music request shows, which cater not only to the nation but also have a listener base in the neighbouring countries.

From the volume of mail received by the different language services from their listeners, it would be safe to surmise that music shows could very well be in the upper ranks of the ratings.³ As the national radio station, BBS Radio plays an integral part in the broadcast of music, taking works of Bhutanese singers and musicians right into the homes of thousands of Bhutanese households.

BBS TV

The BBS TV also has dedicated programs on entertainment. The Trowa⁴ program features interviews with singers, musicians, actors, composers, directors and other performing artists. The Trowa Unit is also responsible for the production

² The BBS Radio's FM network reaches all the twenty dzongkhags in the kingdom. BBS has a network of 5 FM transmitters and 19 FM transposers stationed in strategic passes across the kingdom enabling the station to relay its broadcasts to the 20 dzongkhags. BBS Radio's FM signal can be received in all the 20 dzongkhag headquarters. BBS Radio's FM signal reach on the national highway is estimated at 75%.

³ The latest audience survey carried out by the BBSC is not yet made public.

⁴ Trowa programs have featured interviews with musicians, singers, actors, producers and comedians. Trowa is broadcast on Wednesdays and Saturdays at 7.30 PM and Thursdays and Sundays at 8.30 AM.

of music videos, which are popular with the viewers. BBS TV also buys music videos, films, serials and other products from private audio-visual firms. BBS TV broadcasts for ten hours a day and since the 20th of February 2006, has gone satellite. This would mean that at least 44⁵ towns in Bhutan can now watch BBS TV directly. Through its broadcast of programs and content related to music, films and drama, BBS TV has become a key player in the audio-visual industry of Bhutan.

Tshechus

The annual *tshechus* held in different districts, towns and villages are also live venues of performing arts. Besides the religious ceremonies and dances, *tshechus* also feature the best of the community's performing artists. With thousands of tourists visiting the country each year, the *tshechus* are an effective platform to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the country. In fact, Bhutan's "unique culture" is the lead factor in attracting tourists. A study conducted by the Department of Tourism in 2004 found out that 34.4 percent of visitors were attracted to Bhutan because of its "unique culture".⁶

Cable Operators

There are 44 cable operators in Bhutan. Out of these, 36 are registered with the Association of Private Cable Operators. While the cable operators have to feature BBS TV on their menu, some operators also have their own channel where Bhutanese content is featured. From older Bhutanese movies to latest music videos, these channels have also emerged as an outlet for Bhutanese music and films. Cable operators in Thimphu, Phuntsholing, Paro, Tsimasham, Wangdue, Punakha, Mongar, Samdrupjonkhar and Gelephu have their own channel. In Phuntsholing, Tshela Cable also has video on

⁵ There are 44 cable operators in Bhutan according to the Association of Private Cable Operators. All cable operators in Bhutan are required to carry the BBS TV channel on their menu.

⁶ International Tourism Monitor. Published by the Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

demand facility for customers.

Recording Studios

While the BBS has a state of the art music recording studio, many private firms have set up their own business in Thimphu and other parts of Bhutan. It is estimated by industry professionals that nine of these studios are well equipped and active in the business. Currently there is no record of the number of albums that have been released in the Bhutanese market.⁷

Film Production Companies

The first Bhutanese movie, “Gasa Lamai Singye” was produced by Ugen Wangdi of Ugetsu Communications in 1989.⁸ From 1989 to the end of 2005, a total of 60 movies have been produced.⁹ The Motion Picture Association of Bhutan, established in 1998 boasts a membership of 36 film production houses.

Shaping and Representing

A gentleman from India walked up to the stage in one of the bars in Thimphu. The musicians were ready to switch from Bhutanese *rigsar* to the presumed Indian taste of the customer. The musicians and the clients were treated to the Indian gentleman’s rendition of popular Bhutanese *rigsar* songs.

In Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh in India, promotional posters of Bhutanese albums and films adorn the walls of shops. Also available are pirated copies of Bhutanese music tapes.

⁷ There is an acute absence of data on Bhutanese music industry. The author is in the process of compiling a list of albums produced by the different audio-visual production companies.

⁸ As accepted by the Motion Picture Association of Bhutan.

⁹ Data provided by the Motion Picture Association of Bhutan. Please see Annex 1.

These anecdotes show that the reach and the popularity of the offerings of the Bhutanese audio-visual industry is not only confined to Bhutan.

In Bhutan, Bhutanese songs dominate the repertoire of our school children. With the majority of the albums and films produced in Dzongkha, the role of the Bhutanese audio-visual industry in the promotion and preservation of the national language Dzongkha has been widely acknowledged.

The growth of the audiovisual industry according to Kinley Dorji,¹⁰ the general secretary of the MPAB, has been very rapid. Of the 60 films that have been produced and the unrecorded numbers of albums released in the market, from the conceptual stage to the final production and even distribution, it is very much the work and the creation of the Bhutanese.

Bhutan's first film "Gasa Lamai Singye" is based on a traditional homegrown theme, a ballad. Bhutanese films that immediately followed, mirrored Bollywood and Hollywood films. But Ugyen Wangdi, of "Gasa Lamai Singye", himself, as the pioneer, would not condemn or criticize the quality of some of the films that came after. Filmmakers have to cater to the taste of the masses to survive in the business, he says but there is also room to evolve and inject originality and creativity from the vast pool of Bhutan's rich culture and tradition.¹¹

The popularity of Bhutanese movies should not have taken us by surprise. After all, ours is a society and culture where the visual and performing arts is a key ingredient in our day-to-day life.

Khyentse Norbu who wrote and directed "Travellers and Magicians" has said that for "centuries Buddhism has

¹⁰ Personal Communication.

¹¹ Personal Communication.

adopted the method of statues and artistic representation in order to express messages of compassion, love, wisdom. Film could be seen as a modern day *thangka*, a traditional Buddhist painting. Film is one of the most powerful mediums that we have today.”¹²

The Bhutanese film industry has pumped some 60 films into the market. And over the years, the avid moviegoer in Bhutan can notice a definite shift in the content and style of Bhutanese movies towards more Bhutanese themes and approaches rather a mere reflection of Bollywood and Hollywood. Many of the films released in the recent years are based on local folklore, legends and history.

For example, “Dangphu”, with its story based on Bhutanese history, intended to be shot over 36 days, but required 30 more days of shooting because the producer Tobgay wanted to maintain the authenticity of his locale. The film, a historical testimonial of the difficulties faced by people from the burden of different taxes, impressed viewers with its setting, costume, music and authentic dialogue.

One of the most visual and active components of Bhutanese culture being regularly represented in film is textiles, described by many as a living culture.

From “Chorten Kora” to “Muti Thrishing”, the costumes in contemporary Bhutanese films showcase the finest of Bhutan’s traditional and modern textiles. The father of the lead actress wears his *lungserm* and the actress herself dons a *seshoo kira* with the latest *pesar* design, rendering the screen into a ramp to display the rich tapestry of Bhutan’s textiles and culture.

It would be important to note here that weavers continue to weave and thus keep a tradition alive not because there is a surge in demand from the increasing arrivals in tourism but

¹² www.travellersandmagicians.com

because there is a demand from the Bhutanese people themselves. Watching a Bhutanese movie where the colors of the frame are enriched by the rich costume of the cast only enforces the living and evolving nature of our culture. This crucial component of our culture does not become a frozen anthropological entity but a living organism.

And it is not only textiles that get represented in the screen. This year's box office hit was "Druk Gee Goem", "Guest of Bhutan". The film, set in the alpine region of northern Bhutan is a romantic comedy. The lead actor, a tourist on a trek, loses his way and injures himself. A yak herder rescues him. The yak herder lives alone in the wind swept pastures. The tourist is lifted by the yak herder and carried to the tent for care and nursing. The yak herder is a woman. The woman yak herder is also the producer of the film. "Druk Gee Goem" was a hit at the box office in Thimphu and ran from the 24th of March to 3rd May.¹³ "Druk Gee Goem" is therefore important in its portrayal of women in Bhutanese society; independent, resourceful and strong enough to carry a New Zealander on her back.

In 2005, a group of young Bhutanese embarked on a month long tour of eight *dzongkhags*.¹⁴ Under the auspices of the Youth Development Fund, this group called "Young People on Wheels" entertained people from Gasa to Dagana. Their activity was a noble one; to inform and educate the people on HIV/AIDS. Through songs and dances, skits and plays, they took the messages to a cross-section of Bhutanese society. They were accompanied by two leading Bhutanese singers, Nguldrup Dorji and Rinchen Namgyel. Everywhere the troupe went, they were welcomed by the people who came in droves to see them perform. This innovative approach to advocacy

¹³ Dates courtesy of Mr. Karma, Manager, Luger Theater.

¹⁴ "Young People on Wheels" was filmed and made into a documentary by Dechen Wangmo Roder, an independent filmmaker. The documentary, in Dzongkha and English, was broadcast on BBS TV.

used popular Bhutanese songs and “pop singers” to catch the audience. The young people danced to Bhutanese songs set to funky modern rhythms. They wore their *ghos* and *kiras* and entertained the crowds with moves that were a fusion of the old and the new. Their act is a modern day manifestation of the young people of Bhutan trying to carve a distinct identity, an identity containing the essence of our tradition and the offerings of modernity. Significantly, the songs, skits and dances offered by the “Young People on Wheels” were a creation of this group of Bhutanese youth.

Opportunities and Challenges

Bhutanese films have been shown from theatres and festivals in North America to plastic tents pitched in the paddy fields of Gom Kora in the eastern district of Tashiyangtse. *Rigsar* songs can now be downloaded from the web. You can walk into restaurants and bars in Thimphu and sing the songs of your choice with musicians in their *ghos* and *tshoglhams*. The film industry has also helped in spurring the sales and growth of the music industry. The sale of the soundtrack of “Muti Thrishing” has crossed the 12,000 mark.¹⁵ Sales of the soundtrack of last year’s box office hit “Chorten Kora” are also estimated at 11,000 plus.¹⁶

From a total of 113 licenses issued by the ministry of trade and industries, 96 audio-visual production houses are still operational.¹⁷ In 2005, at the Luger theatre in Thimphu, Bhutanese movies maintained around 80 percent domination over foreign language films.¹⁸ The shelves of the music shops in Thimphu are filled with tapes and CDs of Bhutanese artists. Even in the bucolic setting of Tangmachu in Lhuntse district, Bhutanese audiotapes sit comfortably alongside dried fish and cooking oil bottles in the shops.

¹⁵ Information provided by TG Media and Infotainment.

¹⁶ Information provided by Bhutan Multimedia

¹⁷ Data provided by Ministry of Trade and Industries.

¹⁸ Please see Annex 2.

But the industry is grappling with a set of problems as unique as its content.

State Support

The film festivals in the initial years were sponsored by the Dzongkha Development Authority primarily because the DDA recognized the role of the industry in the preservation and promotion of the national language, Dzongkha. This year for the first time, a private firm sponsored the festival and awards. Residents of the capital were treated to an open-air bonanza at the clock tower with the event featuring presentation of awards and multiple performances by leading Bhutanese artists.

Today licensed audio-visual houses can claim exemptions from customs duties and sales tax when importing audio-visual equipment. While the government charges a 30 percent sales tax on ticket sales of foreign language films at the Luger Theatre, Bhutanese movies are exempted from this tax.

The Motion Picture Association of Bhutan is working towards gaining industry status. One of the immediate gains after obtaining industry status would be the easier availability of financing and loans for productions. In the past, Bhutanese producers have sold their businesses and mortgaged their land and property to avail loans for the production of their films.

The MPAB hopes that gaining industry status will also enable producers to insure their equipment. Some production houses have cameras worth Nu. 450,000.00

In May 2006, Bhutan hosted the first ever BIMSTEC ministerial meeting on Culture. The BIMSTEC group consists of Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The ministerial meeting agreed to set up a Cultural Industries Commission and an observatory to promote cultural industries among member states.

Bhutan's Home and Cultural Affairs Minister Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley said the Cultural Industries Commission would help the Bhutanese film industry get a boost with the setting up of the commission as the films would get wider recognition and support from the region. The industry could also benefit from training opportunities in audio-visual industry in other BIMSTEC countries where they are already ahead in the field. The Commission, amongst others, is expected to frame supportive legislation and regulations and provide access to financing and loans for the industry.¹⁹

Screening Halls

Bhutan has seven cinema halls; two in Phuntsholing, one each in Samtse, Gomtu, Samdrupjongkhar, Gelephu and Thimphu.²⁰ At the time of writing, there are five movies ready for release and awaiting screening. Thimphu has emerged as the preferred choice for premieres of Bhutanese movies. The performance of the films at the Luger Theatre as a central screening hall for Bhutanese films is a litmus test of how the film will fare nationally. With no other theatres in the capital city, the simultaneous release of these films for an eagerly waiting audience is not a possibility.

¹⁹ Press Conference with BBSC and Kuensel Corporation, May, 2006.

²⁰ The Luger Theatre was built in 1969. Plans are afoot to dismantle the theatre and build a multiplex. The Luger Theatre has 354 seats in the second class and 268 in the first class. The balcony seats 275. For the screening of Bhutanese movies, Luger Theatre charges Nu.5,000 per screening(evening shows) in the first week. The rate drops to Nu.4,000 for the weeks after. Matinee shows are charged a flat rate of Nu.2,000. Ticket prices for the balcony seats for Bhutanese movies range from Nu.80 to Nu. 100. First class tickets range from Nu.60 to 50 while second class tickets have been priced at Nu.50 to 40. In contrast, the ticket prices for foreign language films at Luger are Nu.20 for balcony, Nu.15 for first class and Nu.10 for second class.

In the Bhutanese movie industry, the producer also becomes the distributor. The screening at Luger and other venues is an operation in itself. For the movie to hit the screen, the producer has to ensure that tickets and posters are printed, posters designed and staff hired to sell tickets among a host of other activities. Bhutanese movies are shot on digital video. The master tape is closely guarded. At the Luger Theatre's balcony seating, a Digital Videocassette deck connected to a projector and sound system takes up seats in the front row with the producer or director or sometime even the cast seated near the projection equipment.

At the Luger Theatre, "Chorten Kora" ran from 16th September to 23rd October.²¹ The movie traveled to theatres in Phuntsholing and Gelephu. In Gomkora, Tashiyangtse, "Chorten Kora" was screened in a makeshift tent pitched in the paddy fields.

Residents of Paro will soon get a private theatre where they can watch films and other performances. The MPAB, through the support of the BCCI has approached the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement for the allocation of theatre space in the urban areas. The MPAB has already received applications from Bumthang and Chukha.

Piracy

Tobgye of Mila Communications once sent 12 DVDs of his film, Kangyel through a friend who was traveling to India. The friend was told to sell the DVDs in Dharamshala and Dehradun in India where there is a sizeable Tibetan population at the wholesale rate of Rs.250. The DVD retails in Thimphu at Nu.300 per copy. The friend came back with all the 12 DVDs. Pirated copies of the DVD were available for Rs. 150.²²

²¹ Dates courtesy of Mr. Karma, manager, Luger Theatre

²² Personal Communication with Mr. Tobgye of Mila Communications.

This spurt in the piracy of Bhutanese movies has deterred Bhutanese producers from releasing their films in DVD and VCD and other formats. Video rental shops in Thimphu do not stock a single Bhutanese feature film.

For the music producers, the lack of an institutionalized distribution system also contributes to piracy of their albums and hence the resulting delay in the distribution is a perfect scenario for pirates to penetrate the market.

The MPAB has been discussing the issue of piracy with the Intellectual Property Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industries. The first copyright law of Bhutan was brought into force on the 17th of July 2001 but the industry is still looking at ways, including collaboration and partnership the IP Division, to fight the scourge of piracy.

Conclusion

Worldwide, films and music are powerful tools that shape and represent cultures. After the arrival of TV in 1999 there has been a significant growth in the Bhutanese audio-visual industry. A look at the audio-video and film production licenses issued by the Ministry of Trade and Industry shows that a majority of the production houses and studios came up after 1999. With technology becoming more affordable and better by the days, the industry can only grow further.

The National Assembly of Bhutan's 85th session is presently underway. One of the bills to be tabled at the parliament is the Media Bill.²³ Bhutan already has two private newspapers. Once the media bill is passed, it will pave the way and give the green light to private radio and TV stations.

In these changing circumstances, Bhutanese artists, actors, musicians, technical professionals and the audio-visual production houses will have a bigger stage of operation.

²³ Visit <http://www.moic.gov.bt/pdf/bicmact.pdf>

Behind the BBS building, construction is underway for a multi-million Ngultrum state-of-the art TV station. By 2007, BBS Radio will start broadcasting on a digital short-wave transmitter twice as powerful as the present 50 kilowatt one. The FM network, which already reaches all the 20 districts in Bhutan, will be further strengthened.

The General Secretary of the MPAB Kinley Dorji says the most critical and important factor spurring the growth of the audio-visual industry is the support from the Bhutanese audience and consumers. The price of tickets for Bhutanese movies and audio tapes and CDs which is higher than foreign language films and albums, have not deterred the masses from soaking in the offerings of the Bhutanese audio-visual industry. The Bhutanese audio-visual industry, while it waits to gain industry status, continues to blaze forward. In the process, the industry has played its own significant role in shaping and representing contemporary Bhutanese culture, even preserving the traditional and cultural heritage of the country.

While further state support would propel the growth of the industry, the hope would be that the benefits would also trickle down to the consumers. A close collaboration between the state and the industry could lead to more Bhutanese being able to access the products of the audio-visual industry. For the masses that continue to support the industry, the state and the industry could also look at ways to reduce the prices of the tickets and albums. As a new media, the audio-visual industry is today proving to be an effective platform for Bhutanese artists to represent the country's culture in a uniquely Bhutanese way and warrants further support and encouragement from the state.



Annex One

List of Films produced till 2005 provided by Motion Picture Association of Bhutan

Films produced before 2001

Gasa Lami Singye
Miye Dungyel
Goukor
Phama
Jigdrel
Senten Zuki
Bu Tashi
Tshengoen Laythro
Atta Khawjay
Rangdroel Yangdoen
Khorwa
Rewa

2001 films

Tsewai Phama
Thruelshi
Jigten Semgi Thruelnang
Lungten
Sergi Chompai Metto
Ngendrog
Kangyel
Chepai Bu

2002 films

Tshangpa
Choe Dang Jigten
Sampau Rewa
Nganrog Tsedungchen
Lay Dang Moenlam
Dungshi Baw
Tago

2003 films

Khorwa II
Khachem
Ashi
Travellers and Magicians
Hintgam
Tsheyi Lhamo
Yue Gi Bum
6 Boys
Sherig Yenten
Khorwai Melong
Nyenda Dra
Yeshi Khandro/Yue Gi Bum II
Baap

2004 films

Hingtay Pai Bhu
Wai Charo
Lay Gi Lung
Hingi Nazu
Lhadar Gaw
Appa
Lengo
Sem Nginggi Charo

2005 films

Muen Sel
Jigthar
Kikhor
Chorten Kora
Ray Moen
Ratho Namgay
Perfect Girl/Muti Thrishing
Dangphu
Mitshe Throthue
Logyoe

Annex Two

List of Films screened at the Luger Theatre in Thimphu in 2005.

Lengo	31 December to 30 January 2005
Bu Yonten	12 to 20 February 2005
Wai Charo	3 to 13 March 2005
Hingtam	25 March to 5 April 2005
Chepai Bu	6 to 12 April 2005
Muensel	14 April to 8 May 2005
Jigthar	20 May to 12 June 2005
Kikhor	1 July to 1 August 2005
Raymoen	21 August to 15 September 2005
Chorten Kora	16 September to 23 October 2005
Lengo (re-screening)	24 October to 2 November 2005
Tarayana film medley	3 to 9 November 2005
Muti Thrishing	10 to 22 November 2005
Ratho Namgay	28 November to 11 December 2005
Dangphu	11 December to 2 January 2006

Information Courtesy of Karma, Manager, Luger Theatre
