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Case Study Report: Bhutan

Royal Academy of Performing Arts

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan or boo-tan (in Sanskrit: highlands) is also known as Druk-Yul, the land of the thunder dragon. Located in the ridges of the Eastern Himalayan ranges, the country measures about 46,500 square kilometers in area. To the north lies China (Tibet) and India to the south. The country equivalent to the size of Switzerland is populated with 600,000 inhabitants comprising multi-lingual and multi-ethnic groups. Broadly the people of Bhutan is categorized as *Ngalops* occupying the western Bhutan, *Sharchops* occupying eastern Bhutan and *Lhotshampas* occupying the southern foot hills. The rugged mountains and the torrential rivers have put up barriers to mixing of the different ethnic groups leading to cultural and ethnic diversity in the past.

Bhutan, a small landlocked country, is a sovereign nation and is blessed with a rich assortment of varied culture, traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs which all are finely based on Buddhist principles. Diverse as it may seem, the Bhutanese socio-cultural fabric is well interlaced and harmonised mainly due to the common threads of simple social, communal and spiritual values that the people share.

For a small country like Bhutan, the preservation and promotion of its unique culture and tradition play an important role in laying the base upon which the identity of Bhutanese people and the Kingdom of Bhutan as a sovereign nation is built.

The country in the past has been visited by many Buddhist scholars from Tibet and India since Buddhism flourished in Tibet from the 7th century. As Buddhist thinking influences the people of Bhutan their way of life is guided by Buddhist principles, starting from the dress they wear, the way they communicate, the way they eat and even the day-to-day activities. Today Buddhism is the state religion, though other faiths like Hinduism and Christianity exist. *Gho* for men and *Kira* for women is the national dress. *Dozngkha* is the National Language. However; English has been the medium of instruction in schools along with the *Dzongkha* since 1961.

Being isolated for centuries and only recently opened to the outside world, most of its traditions and cultures are intact both in tangible and intangible forms. The dresses are unique from rest of the world, *tshechu* festivals are special, folk songs and dances narrate great histories of Bhutan. However the infiltration of foreign culture has posed a threat to our culture. To counter the intruding foreign cultures Bhutan follows a unique development policy which is guided by the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Broadly Intangible Cultures in Bhutan are;

1. Values:

Lay Jumdray Thadamtsig (understanding the cause and effect of our good and bad action, intentions and sacred commitment to others in society). There are three types of *Thadamtsig* (*committment*) in

short (1. Love and respect for own parents because they gave everything starting from our flesh and blood, 2-Commitment to our spouse where husband and wife remain faithful to each other as they are going to live together throughout their life and, 3-Respect for elders by the young, and kindness and generosity from the elders to the young, obedience to a superiors and compassion). This very Bhutanese icon of pursuing a harmonious society is now slowly disappearing from the Bhutanese field. Preservation and promotion of these good customs lies in the way people think and act according to Buddhist principles as most of the customs are derived from the Buddhist ethics.

- *Driglam Namzha* (righteous behaviour aligning with the society towards harmonious living)
- *Spirituality* (Buddhism in Bhutan plays a crucial role in the daily life of the people)
- *Compassion*
- *Freedom*
- *Friendship*
- *Peace and happiness*

2. Social Gatherings

- *Festivals.*

The festivals are held once or twice a year and it is the only social gathering for a particular area and has great impact on their lives. For example the people of *Haa* district celebrate a festival known as *LOMBA* during which all the families gather together. The family stored food for the occasion and during the event they stop all their work to be with their relatives. These kind of social gatherings strengthen the family ties and keep the families together.

- *Tshechus, celebrations, national events and local festivals*
- *New year celebrations*

3. Indigenous arts and craft

There are numerous rich art and crafts of Bhutan of which some are lost and some are on the verge of disappearance. However, the establishment of the institute for Thirteen Arts and Crafts (in Bhutan our forefathers have categorised into thirteen major arts and crafts) is keeping our living crafts alive to some extent.

In *Lhuntse* district in the eastern Bhutan, in a village called *Gangzur*, there are only two potters who have revived the art of pottery in the village. The village in the past was so famous for the traditional earthen pots that were widely used in Bhutan before aluminum pots, rice cookers etc. The beautiful earthen pot, along with the skill, is now vanishing from Bhutanese villages.

2- Oral Traditions

- a- *Folk Songs from different corners of the country*
- b- *Folk Tales laden with values passed to new generation in the form of stories and tales*
- c- *Folk Dances*
- d- *Folk Life*
- e- *Languages and Dialect of different group of society:*

The dialects are numerous and more than 40 dialects have been identified so far, which is enormous for a population of just over 600,000. However, at present many of the Bhutanese can never speak their own dialect properly without mixing with either other dialects or foreign languages. This is due to the trans-cultural and modern educational programmes where the younger generations are educated in foreign languages as well as in the national language ignoring their native dialect.

f- Games and sports:

Traditional games like archery, darts, short put, *Doegor* etc were played as it was the only source of entertainment as no other entertainment were available. People would enjoy games during special festivals and celebrations and other social occasions.

Policy and laws safeguarding the ICH of Bhutan:

- ① All the developmental policies of Bhutan are governed by the principles of GNH (Gross National Happiness) and conservation of cultural heritage is recognised as one of the important pillars of GNH.
- ② The Section 1 Article 4 (Culture) of the Constitution of Bhutan states that “The state shall endeavour to preserve, protect and promote the cultural heritage of the country, including monuments, places and objects of artistic or historic interest, *Dzongs* (fortresses), *Lhakhangs* (temples), *Goendeys* (, Ten-sum, Nyes (sacred places), language, literature, music, visual arts and religion to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens.” There are four sections under Article 4 and all the sections protect the culture of Bhutan. It includes the skills of craft, knowledge and ideas about the arts and craft which, if not protected and promoted, will disappear.
- ③ Bhutan National Commission for UNESCO works according to the norms of UNESCO for promotion and conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Policies safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bhutan

- ① Department of Culture (DoC) under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs is created as a separate body to enhance the cultural practices of Bhutan.
- ② The GNH policy encompasses all other developmental policies in the country and any policy that contradicts the GNH Principle is not considered a development policy. Any developmental planning for any part of Bhutan is first assessed as to whether the plans and programmes would affect the cultural life of the people in that vicinity.
- ③ Approval for constructing houses and buildings is given by DCAH (Division for Conservation of Architectural Heritage) after assessing its design, so as to assure that the buildings are constructed according to Bhutanese architectural design.
- ④ Bhutan government and Bhutanese are pragmatic, observant people who take from the outside world what will benefit their people, and leave the rest by assessing the impact on culture and tradition as well as economic benefit. Western culture can be especially influential to Bhutanese youth thereby causing them to neglect what is Bhutanese and take

up anything western. Due to rapid growth the tradition and culture, especially the intangible cultural heritage, can be lost in one generation or even in few years.

- ⑤ There is also a policy of promoting eco-tourism in the rural villages so that the rural folks benefit from the tourist industry. If the benefits are immense the rural people will automatically start to develop new ideas to promote their indigenous knowledge of the arts and crafts.
- ⑥ The Bhutan government is encouraging the rural folks to retain their way of living and the dress they wear. For example the Nomads from eastern Bhutan known as the *Brokpas* are encouraged to wear their own dress everywhere in Bhutan which is different from the national dress i: e *Gho* for man and *Kira* for woman, to keep their identity. Even the *Lhops* or the *Doya* people (believed to be the original inhabitants of Bhutan) from southern Bhutan are encouraged to wear their own dress and not the national dress.
- ⑦ The Government has started Non-Formal Education in villages to educate people deprived of education in their youth and training on local arts and crafts is being given by the artisans and craftsman who are professionals in this field.

Policy Implementing Agency:

- ① The Government of Bhutan understanding the importance of culture towards achieving the objectives of GNH has established the Department of Culture which now, under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, looks into the preservation and promotion of tradition and culture of Bhutan and covers both tangible and intangible heritage. DoC is now the sole organisation looking after preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of Bhutan.
- ② There are 10 divisions under the Department of Culture and almost all the divisions are involved in conservation and promotion of ICH of Bhutan.
- ③ Folk Heritage Museum (FHM) under DoC is working to preserve the food ways and folk cultures of Bhutanese people and the rural life. The FHM is working to document every folk culture and promote it. For example the practise of *Lomba* a festival during the winter solstice (considered the New Year) was practiced with the initiation by Folk Heritage Museum. The very culture of small children going around singing good wishes songs for the New Year in the house of neighbours and villages was completely lost and FHM is now encouraging the small children to practice every year. The division is also working to document all the simple agricultural tools and utensils as to how they are made and used.
- ④ Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA) is making its best efforts to document and perform life dances of different region of country and folk songs. In Bhutan there are three types of songs namely *Zhungdra* (traditional songs and dances performed in slow motion with very long tune), *Boedra* (traditional songs with short tunes) and *Rigsar* (newly composed songs of present era) and special types of dance composed by *Zhabdrung* known as *Zhay* (special unique songs from some region of the country related to spiritualism). RAPA has published a collection of folk songs and dance titled *Drukgi Zheyraab*.

- ⑤ Institute of Language and Cultural Studies, a degree college, caters to bridge Bhutanese youths to the national language and the culture of Bhutan. Also the language is taught in all other schools and colleges at all levels as one of the main subjects in the school curriculum. Students are also taught about the Bhutanese cultures especially Driglam Namzha, a harmonious pursuit of living.
- ⑥ To conserve, protect and promote local festivals as well as retain their local festivals each region, district or villages have their own festivals and Tshechus, where the people of that particular region come together once or twice in a year to enjoy and be merry
- ⑦ The Ministry of Education is Incorporating the cultural values of Bhutan into the curriculum and even has subjects on Value Education

Scopes for preservation and promotion of cultural heritage in future

- ① Most of the Bhutanese Intangible Culture has remain untouched by foreign culture
- ② Bhutanese are very keen on promoting culture and developmental policies are guided by the Principles of Gross National Happiness in which the Culture is recognised as one among main four pillars
- ③ Bhutan Government always supports cultural preservation and promotion programmes.