

Echoes of Folksongs in Bhutanese Literature in English

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Abstract

Folksongs are a part of Bhutanese culture, performed during festivals, celebrations and regular chores. Folksongs and dances are media of communication. To realize the role, place and importance of folksongs in Bhutanese life one's involvement with Bhutanese people is important. This paper attempts to analyze the Bhutanese folksongs and their echoes in Bhutanese literature in English. The first part is a brief analysis of Bhutanese folksongs, and in the second part echoes of folksongs in popular Bhutanese non-fiction and prose fiction in English are analysed.

I

Bhutan is a small country sandwiched between India and China, but it is rich in folk traditions. It has a variety of humoristic folktales, numerous folksongs and dappled collection of dances. Songs, dances and archery live in the veins of Bhutanese people and society, and they together weave a unique cultural pattern. Folksongs and dances are not merely modes of entertainment, but have a message to instruct the common people. Some folksongs are purely vocal while others are accompanied by choreography. Some dances are social whereas others are religious, performed by lamas or monks in *dzongs* and monasteries especially during religious and auspicious occasions like *tshechu*. Religious and mask dances performed at dzongs and monasteries have fascinated foreigners, especially tourists, more than any other folk entertainment and genre. They are found quoted in various books in English by foreign authors.

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Modernization and urbanization are two key factors that are adversely affecting the performance of folksongs. There are three types of songs that are popular throughout Bhutan: *zhugdra*, *boedra* and *rigsar*. Rigsar is a modern genre that is fast becoming very popular, especially among young people, while the performance of *zhungdra* and *boedra* is becoming fewer year after year.

Zhungdra, *boedra* and *rigsar* have been classified based on the tune, style, content and form. Rigsar is mostly about contemporary Bhutanese society. They have blended western, modern Tibetan and Indian music. It is only about two decades old.

By the end of the 1980s, *rigsar* was no longer so popular, until the founding of the Norling Drayang recording label. Since Norling came into limelight, popular Bhutanese music has primarily been the *rigsar* genre, a fusion of elements...¹

Rigsar music grew after introduction of commercial music industry that brought a change in lyrics, instruments, tunes and tastes of music lovers.

Apart from *zhungdra*, *boedra* and *rigsar* there are other folksongs that have more social references. They are notably picturesque and have capacity to imbibe deep feelings. But very few people of the new generation know them. Their classification is difficult because of diverse contents and purposes.

Basically folksongs of a society can be classified into two categories: social and religious. But when it comes to studying folksongs of a country or a diverse society, the classification is difficult and complicated. In such cases, various factors such as region, culture, tune, and purpose must be considered.

Folksongs can be bifurcated into vocal- and dance-oriented

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Bhutan

songs. Subject matters and themes of folksongs help in the classification. On this basis they can be divided into institutional, seasonal and sports-related folksongs. Some folksongs are related to a special class of people. Hence, they have to be classified accordingly. Another way is to study them according to their length. Keeping into account the diversity of folksongs and places they are sung, the classification based on regions best suit the Bhutanese folksongs.

Among folksongs of northern Bhutan, *boedra*, *cha*, *yuedra*, *zhey*, and *zheyim* are dance-oriented while *alo*, *ausa*, *gurma*, *khorey*, *tangmo*, and *tshoglu* are purely vocal. Out of these *gurma* and *tshoglu* are very spiritual and hymn-like. The subjects of *lozey* are epic by nature. They sing of a hero or heroic qualities at length. Sonam Kinga classifies Bhutanese folksongs on the basis of the locality they exist.

They are very regional in character. Alo is ascribed to that region (Kurtoe). Zhetro Yarchoed... is common to Trongsa Valley. Khorey is a type of song unique to Dungsaam, Ausa to Haa, Aulay to Laya, Achay Lhamo to Ura and Omo Omo pad lung to Kheng.²

Goen Zhey is performed at Gasa...³

Cha is performed in the village of Ney, Luntse...⁴

The classification becomes easy if the songs have a common nomenclature for their group. If they are without nomenclature, like those of Lhop community, the classification becomes difficult since each song is a genre by itself.

The northern Bhutanese are followers of Mahayana Buddhism. Most residents of the Southern belt known as

² Kinga, Sonam (2001) "Attributes and values of Folk and Popular Songs.", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 138.

³ Ibid., p.139.

⁴ Ibid., p.140.

Lhotshampas practice Hinduism. The belt is settled by Bahun, Chettri Limbu, Rai and other Nepali ethnic groups. Though they have their own folksongs they are rarely seen performing. Among others, there are Tamangs inhabitants who have different folksongs. Lepchas too have their own folksongs called *muten chi*, *dambrajo*, *phenlyok*, *pyasu loma lolima* etc.

Sharchops who live in the Eastern Bhutan share same folksongs as those of the Western Bhutanese. Different ethnic groups have their different folksongs related to religion, deity or usual chores but these songs are on the verge of becoming rare.

Folksongs have accompanied every walk of Bhutanese life. One can find them sung during festivals and religious activities, games and sports like archery, regular chores, social activities and farming. They are deeply rooted in rural life. Novels and non-fiction in English are the best means for non-Dzongkha speakers to understand the folksongs and their position.

II

In *History of Bhutan* Bikram Jit Hasrat touches on historical social and cultural aspects of the country but misses folksongs. Though he writes on *chams*, a religious mask dances performed by monks, but folksong is not even mentioned. *Bhutan: Kingdom of the Dragon* by Robert Dompinier contains just one photograph of women performing *zhungdra*, but there is no caption even about the name of performance. In her famous travelogue, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, Jamie Zeppa shares her experiences in Bhutan – cultural patterns of rural Bhutan and intrusion of modernization in Bhutan. There's a picturesque presentation of people and society but nothing on folksongs and dances.

Dieter Zurcher and Kuenzang Choden focus on water in their book, *Bhutan: Land of Spirituality and Modernization Role of Water in Daily Life*. They analyze the presence of water in the

Bhutanese life. Amidst colourful photographs they mention “Singing in the rain”.⁵ There is rain, there is water but there is no song sung by the natives during the rains.

Dr. Jagar Dorji’s ethnography on Lhop, a tribe living in hills of South-west Bhutan, gives a little room to folksongs. The songs mentioned by Dr. Jagar Dorji reject above-mentioned classification. The songs of the Lhops differ not only in terms of nomenclature but also in terms of tune and purpose. In some cases there are diverse contents. Songs like “Sele la wo chey; Mainaguri ya chey” and “Tangphu-tangphu la rang ka pon-min-yan” are the songs of surrendering the country to the supreme power and begging for its protection.

Lhops too have sports related folksongs. *Ker* (archery) and *dogu* (discus throw) are their traditional sports. While playing these sports, they enjoy folksongs.

Dasa dogu tsisa ley
Aulu tsemo tsisa ley
Bhoto mahri, butsu mahri,
Gengey nyma tsosa ley...⁶

Dr. Jagar tells us of another ballad-like song about a hero sung during archery matches. The song praises a local hero who devoted himself towards a social cause. The folksong below indicates that the Lhopu’s involvement in building the Dalim Dzong.

Oi pu-chia tang manda wai
Ley yenchey ngari kuzho yen wai...⁷

We get another reference to Labey in the book. Lhops sing Labey during the archery match unlike at the end or

⁵ Zurcher, Dieter, and Kuenzang Choden (2003) *Bhutan: Land of Spirituality and Modernization Role of Water in Daily Life*. Chicago: New Dawn Press, p.27.

⁶ Dorji, Jagar (2003), *Lhop - A Tribal Community in South Western Bhutan, and its Survival through Time*, Paro: Jagar Dorji, p.30

⁷ Ibid., p.57.

beginning of ceremonies.

Ah Labey Labey wai Labey sa
Ah Labey labey lay sho chi
Wangchen poengi wai chandha dhi
Ah Laybi tendi wait se go bay...⁸

The footnote tells that for inhabitant, expression and feelings matter as much as the language. He writes,

Although the words are undoubtedly Dzongkha, their pronunciations have altered so much that that if one does not listen carefully, they sound more like a foreign dialect. Lately, a number of Nepali words have entered the Lhop dialect with such dexterity that it is hard to make out the differences.⁹

To be precise the Lhop community is rich in folksongs and verses that are sung invoke their local deity, Geynen,¹⁰ to revere the local deity during the celebration of Lo,¹¹ their annual festival, to appease the local deity at local festivals,¹² to celebrate the harvest¹³ and to enjoy sports.

These songs are on the verge of becoming a history of the past due to lack of exposure and intrusion of modernization. Jagar Dorji is credited for bringing to light an account of the tribe which before 2003 is hardly known. The same is the case with their folksongs. Though the book has a little room for folksongs, it unveils the vanishing oral tradition of Lhops. There are only few Lhops who know the songs.

Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, the Queen of Bhutan, has emerged as a powerful writer in recent years. Her memoir *Treasures of Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan* "is a captivating blend of personal memoir, history, folk lore and

⁸ Ibid., p.59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.56.

¹¹ Ibid., p.55.

¹² Ibid., p.35.

¹³ Ibid., p.54.

travelogue.”¹⁴ The book interestingly reveals dappled aspects of Bhutanese rural society. But while writing these aspects, Ashi Dorji provides a little room for folksongs. In this book we come across a very emotional melancholic folksong that the author heard one morning while camping in the northern region, the cold region of yaks and yak-herders.

As we rode uphill, the song of a yak herder floated in the clear, still air. There is something haunting about yak herder's songs, whether in Laya or Lunana, and the song I heard this morning was...

How beautiful is yak Legpai Lhadar's face
Yak Legpai Lhadar the god-sent calf
Shall I describe my home and paths?¹⁵

The song translated by Dorji Penjore portrays not only the poetic art or approach but also his or her ability to perceive a yak's feelings and melancholy, and the spontaneity in versifying them.

Though the folksongs are seldom mentioned in the works of foreigners the indigenous writers could not resist themselves from writing something about them. Prose-fiction or novel in English is recent introduction.

Karma Ura in his novel, *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* describes the developmental stages of society, monarchy and administration through eyes of a courtier who saw the reign of two successive kings. His book is helpful in positioning the existence of folksongs and dances in the society as he gives us a brief, but valuable picture of folksongs. In his preface he mentions that Late Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck “found a great solace and self impression in folk dance, songs, poems, mask dances, architecture, folklores and painters.”¹⁶ A clearer

¹⁴ Wangchuck, Dorji Wangmo (2006) *Treasures of Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan*, Delhi: Penguin,

¹⁵ Ibid., p.156.

¹⁶ Ura, Karma (1996) *The Ballad of Pema Tshewang Tashi*, Thimphu: Karma Ura, p.xvii.

portrait of the society and songs during the Second King, Jigme Wangchuck comes with the protagonist's narrative in the second chapter where he describes his departure from the village to serve as a retainer by saying that "after meals, my friends, including girls, sang song with brisk dance into grey hours."¹⁷

He mentions that the song, apart from theme of Buddhist self-contentment, reveals the psychological traits, culture, "love and constancy" and feminism in Bhutan during those times. It should be recalled that at that point, the protagonist's age was just nine years, and that was the age when his friends, children, sang a song of departure. This shows that the society's indulgence in folksongs was so intense that even children knew how to sing.

Here is the song:

You are the high sky, I am the radiant sun.
The sky and the sun,
I wonder whether the twain shall meet
Or whether the twain shall come across each other.
We found each other, Tshering, once again today,
Ah, destined by the force of our previous lives.
No! We are not meeting to make good
The remains of deeds from our previous lives,
But because we have been comrades in Dharma from
immemorial times.¹⁸

The backdrop of the song, which is described intricately in the text, helps the reader understand the social scenario, the Buddhist philosophy and gender roles in the society. But for us at this moment, the piece of narration signifies that the songs were even present in the society long before the time of the Second King. Ura himself says that "it was composed in medieval times in searing circumstance by a woman of western Bhutan..."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., p.20.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.22.

Another picturesque narrative regarding the usage of songs in the happy and leisure times stimulates reader to cast upon content, context, the unbounded expression, romanticism and spontaneity of composers.

The excitement of archery game was also augmented by a bevy of songstresses serenading their own team and distracting the opposite team. These women dancers heckle and harass the opposite team by occasionally levelling personal criticism in the form of songs. One team's dancers sing:

Your head resembles that of an ape.
And from the back-side you appear like a bear.
The monkey headed bear will not find the target.
The arrow will hit away from the target.
It must be deflected! It must be deflected
Let it overshoot and fly up to the sky
Let it fall short and drop on earth.²⁰

Such impromptu songs are a kind of provocation or a jest or trick meant for enjoyment. Women are the first to break the ice in such condition. How do men respond to the temptation provoked by women? They too respond in the same manner. Karma Ura continues, "the archery players who were butt of provocation responded in the form of song. These lines were full of sexual innuendos and hinted at liberal virtues of some dancers..."²¹ He states the way in which the players responded:

One who is maid of the lady adorned with coral necklace
Your eyes look only to the bright and colourful chambers
Your bed room, at the end, is stable
Though you vocalize as much as a parrot
My arrow cannot be swayed from the bull's eye.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p.64.

²¹ Ibid., p.64.

²² Ibid., p.65.

Not only the laymen or the players were the targets of such women but the then His Majesty also could not escape from such notions as “when the turn came for His majesty to shoot his arrow the women dancers picked on him too...They taunted him equally.²³ But the manner and the matter of taunting changed a little. The vocal would become soft and gentle. Ura says that “one usual singing refrain, welcoming royal seduction, when his turn came was:

You will not propel your arrow on the target
If you must shoot you must launch it below my navel!²⁴

Labe is one common song sung at the end of every occasion. Ura describes its presence in grandeur and comfort. The excerpt below is a chronicle to the change that has taken place in due course of development. “On the last day of the fair, people marched from the fair ground to the palace singing laybey. The first song was always laybey, in contrast to the present practice of singing it at the end.”²⁵ It’s a very gesture in Bhutanese society to be hospitable towards a guest and to entertain the guest by doing the best for him. The tradition of dancing and singing at night as a gesture of hospitality and entertainment towards a guest is positioned in true manner in the chapter “A New Era Begins”:

...the highly relaxed atmosphere it created helped the ladies enjoy themselves and give us great pleasure by serenading throughout the night. The number of songs they knew would have enabled them to sing incessantly for a week, it was only a question of the capacity to on the part of guests.²⁶

This flow of emotions through songs was very vast and intricate and so interwoven with the society that it would go on for successive nights even. This becomes clear through the following narration: “On the second night, we pleaded our hostess to wind up the dancing and singing around

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p.66.

²⁶ Ibid., p.182.

midnight...” But, “My hostess insisted that I also sing. I sang a song that I penned with a friend of mine some years ago.”²⁷

By analyzing such instances of singing and dancing appearing in the novel it becomes comprehensible that:

songs were present with the folk in the times of departure (melancholy), happiness, entertaining a guest, conclusion of a ceremony and childhood, youth and old age; the content of the songs has a wide range of emotions tainted with similes and metaphors consisting of the flora and fauna of the country, and there were numerous such songs.²⁸

Ura’s main purpose in the novel is to deal with a courtier’s life. He can be revered high for portraying a true picture of society and cultural traits of the past. But he does not go deep into analyzing the genres of folksongs. Never do we read him writing about the type of the song. Rather, he leaves this opportunity to others to analyzing the genres. He uses them not merely as a reference but as a tool to tell the moods of society.

A little is written about folksongs in Kunzang Choden’s novel, *The Circle of Karma*. However, her canvas is bigger and places more local colour, tradition, beliefs and rituals. Unlike Ura she mentions the impromptu songs just once in her novel. She gives transliteration and translation of the ‘four verse songs’ that are sung to pinch a girl, Chhime.

Suddenly one or two of the younger people started to sing the four verse songs. These playful songs sung in jest sometimes had subtle meanings. Men and women often express their feelings through them.²⁹

And a boy, Sangay, sings to attract Chhime:

Daughter of noble birth

²⁷ Ibid., p.182.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Choden, Kunzang (2005) *The Circle of Karma*, Delhi: Penguin Books, p.33.

Seeing your beauteous worth;
On a high bough beyond reach
Desirable as ripened peach.³⁰

Chimme responds in verse to this provocation in an absurd manner. Thus the novel attests to the presence of songs aimed to entertaining, expressing feelings or provoking the opposite sex.

While Ura has used folksongs as a ethical tool to provide a cultural identity, Choden has used it just for their referential value or to portray their presence in society.

Some Bhutanese nationals have tried to translate valuable Bhutanese works available in Dzongkha into English. To add to the literature Sonam Kinga and Karma Ura contributed translations of two popular lozeys that have allowed non-Dzongkha speakers to access the style, content and context of lozey.

Foreign authors have frequently written about the mask dances, unlike folksong that have been neglected or avoided. Only indigenous writers have given place to folksongs in their works. This may be because the foreigners who came here on a short duration could see only mask dances for they have more visual appeal. Since folksongs require in-depth understanding, it befits the national authors to write about folksongs.

³⁰ Ibid.

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