

Bhutan's Rich Literary Heritage

Bhutanese today are frequently told that our society is jumping from a simple oral past to a high tech audio-visual future bypassing the literary phase. While this is largely true in the case of the general populace, it cannot be further away from the truth if we look at the literary collections tucked away in our temple archives. The story of Bhutan's literary heritage remains largely an untold history and our numerous monastic libraries are still hidden treasure troves. Unravelling these sequestered and ancient libraries can reveal a very special and otherwise unseen face of Bhutan.

It was some eight years ago that I picked up a curiosity to study the traditional Himalayan book while looking at old books in the British libraries, which the Younghusband Expedition brought out of Tibet in 1905. My main focus until then was the philosophical content of the book. The direct encounter with the old manuscripts and xylographic prints swerved my interest from the content of the book to the physical object of the book itself. As expected, there was a great deal to discover in the book, from its diverse contents to its material composition, its religious symbolism to its ritual roles, ancient productions to modern modifications. The book, as it were, epitomized the width and depth of Himalayan Buddhist civilisation. The Tibetan Buddhist culture is undeniably a culture of texts, as David Professor Germano of University of Virginia put it.

Contrary to our belief that Bhutan is skipping the literary phase, the bulk of written literature in classical Tibetan is staggering. The collections in the temple libraries are proofs that literary culture was vibrant in the past with most of the books written in Bhutan. In a recent survey, the librarians at the British Library are said to have claimed the Himalayan Buddhist world to be the highest per capita producer of books in the pre-modern world. Such a claim is not unfounded. The *Kanjur* and *Tenjur* scriptures are by far the largest corpus of religious canons and the Gesar epic is still the world's longest epic. The Himalayan literary heritage comprises tens of thousands of volumes including translations and compositions produced since the 7th century.

Although literacy was low in the old Bhutanese society, reading and writing were taken up with a strong zest. Reading was a common practice, carried out either as part of education or a ritual to accrue merit, overcome misfortunes, cure illnesses, guide the dead, etc. Those who could not read would often sit around and listen to the reader, especially when a spiritual biography is read out. Writing, as one of the three scholarly activities beside lecturing and debate, was taken up by scholars with great enthusiasm. For a relatively small population and even smaller number of literate people, Bhutan has produced an astounding collection of written literature in pre-modern times, now preserved in old manuscripts or xylographic prints. "These manuscripts and texts", says Kunzang Choden, talking about her family library in Ogyencholing, "are a significant part of our religious heritage, which had to be protected and revered."

However, not all traditional books are on religion although religion forms the topic of the major bulk of Bhutanese literature. One can commonly find books on secular subjects such as poetry, language, medicine, astrology, art, history, logic, philosophy and occasionally on even more profane topics such as politics and pornography. Irrespective of their content, the books are generally respected as sacred objects. The books have a textual as well as a transcendental value. They are not only read and studied but are held as objects of worship. They are elegantly wrapped in special 'clothes' and stored in the inner sanctums of a temple on par with the Buddha. People prostrate, bow and place various offerings before them. Blessings radiate from them and even make the premises holy. They

are a tool for accruing merit and removing obstacles. During difficult times, the books are paraded through villages and fields to avert natural calamities and appease local deities.

If the use of the books is an intriguing set of cultural practices, the production of the book and its ingredients are even more fascinating. The artistry and technologies for making of paper, ink, pen and woodblock for printing were advanced in traditional Bhutan. Bhutan is said to have produced paper as early as the 8th century and supplied it for the massive literary production which took place in Tibet then. Perhaps, the Bhutanese excelled in this given the abundance of the plants *daphne* or *deshing nap* and *Egdeworthia* or *deshing kap* in the country (Thanks to Kunzang Choden for this information). Production of books in Bhutan must have begun around the same time. Printing from woodblocks appears to have started in Bhutan before the first Bible was printed in Gutenberg in 1455 although it never took off in the scale it did in Tibet. Bhutanese in the past also wrote in more scripts than today. Bhutan, thus, has a vibrant and long literary past and a richer written heritage than many people may assume.

Moreover, unlike in other parts of the Tibetan Buddhist world, the book culture in Bhutan has been passed down largely intact. Tibet, for instance, faced a widespread destruction and dispersal of its literary culture during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent days. Similarly, Mongolia saw the decline of its Buddhist heritage with the spread of Communism. Buddhist culture has also diminished in other places such as Ladakh, Mustang and Sikkim due to other reasons. Thus, Bhutan has come to be seen as the last bastion of Himalayan Buddhist culture. Bhutan's long history of isolation and independence and its conservative cultural and political policies have made it a unique repository of the cultural and religious wealth of the Buddhist Himalaya. Its secluded monasteries and temples today represent a literary treasure trove that is virtually unharmed and largely unexplored.

The Bhutanese book culture is, however, seeing unprecedented changes today. The traditional *poti* loose-leaf book format is being quickly replaced by the modern bound book format. With this change in the appearance, there is also a shift in the perception and role of the book. Not all books inspire a sense of sanctity anymore. They also do not perform the same role in rituals and ceremonies. Modern books have on the whole retained only the textual value and lost their transcendental role. Furthermore, the advancement in the digital technology is transforming our very concept of the book. In the eight years of my effort to preserve Bhutanese monastic archives in digital copies, I have copied some 15 libraries; most of them fit in a pocket-size external hard drive. Ancient scriptures being available on a shimmering screen at the click of the mouse instil altogether a very different perception of and approach to the books. Digitisation has its advantages. For instance, digitisation allows us unprecedented access to collections even in the remotest corners of the country. However, as we make this transition from *poti* to pixels, its full ramifications are yet to be seen. It may not be too farfetched to think that DVDs may indeed soon replace the scrolls which fill the prayer wheels.

Karma Phuntsho

The author is in the process of preparing a book on the book culture and its transformations in the Tibetan Buddhist world.