

Bhutanese Culture A Short Study

Colonel T. S. Chadha

Bhutan is the largest kingdom in the Himalaya with approximately 46620 Square Kilometres area - almost equal to the Indian State of Haryana and approximately six and a half times of the area of Sikkim.

Geopolitical
importance

Geopolitically, the location of Bhutan between the Tibetan Plateau and the Assam - Bengal plains of India, gives the Kingdom considerable strategic importance. The economic core of the nation lies in the fertile Inner Himalayan valleys, which are separated from one another by a series of high and complex inter connecting ridges extending across the country from north to south. The political nucleus is located in the Paro Valley, in the inner Himalaya.

Throughout their history, the Bhutanese have been fiercely protective of their independence and few outsiders were permitted access to Bhutan. Being land-locked and influenced by its topography of crisis-cross valleys and hilly terrains, Bhutan remained essentially isolated from the outside world due to lack of modern means of transportation and communication systems.

Isolation from
outside world

With the revolutionary changes taking place in countries encircling its northern and southern borders during the 60's, Bhutan could no longer remain unaffected. In this regard, the happenings in China had a tremendous effect on this Kingdom and this situation has been aptly described by the National Geographic Magazine—"The world's last Shangrila, darkened by China's shadow...". However, the late King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk who had the vision of a truly great builder of a nation, launched innumerable positive pioneering steps to bring his

Evolution of
modern Bhutan

country out of the complacent secluded slumber of centuries. Many development programmes by way of Five Year plans were instituted to restructure the entire political and administrative system to suit Bhutan's changing needs.

Bhutanese Culture and Tibetan Influence

Now, let us analyse the Bhutanese Culture. Bhutan does not have any ethnic group which could be considered the original inhabitants of the country, as the Bhutanese are descendants of people who migrated from neighbouring areas many centuries ago. The ethnic influence of all the bordering areas of Tibet, Burma, Nepal and India can be easily seen in different parts of the country. Broadly speaking, there are three separate ethnic groups in Bhutan. The most predominant group economically is of Mongolian origin who are settled mostly in northern Bhutan and bear the same physical characteristics as eastern Tibetans—broad cheek bones and elongated eyes. In eastern Bhutan, in the Tashigang district, the inhabitants greatly resemble those of Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA) in India and are presumably of Eastern Himalayan stock. The southern belt running parallel to the Dooars is inhabited mostly by people of Nepalese origin who came to the country from about the nineteenth century onwards. The word "Bhutaness" in political parlance includes all groups who have settled in Bhutan and are its citizens, but from the cultural point of view it refers primarily to people who follow the Drukpa sect of Buddhism and are popularly known as 'Drukpas'.

Learned scholars assert one of the opinions that an organic social structure in Bhutan developed only after the Tibetan influence in the country had become stabilised. It is therefore logical that the Bhutanese society should closely resemble to the one in Tibet. There are points of close similarity, both being strongholds of Mahayana Buddhism, which is popularly said to have been introduced in the two countries by the same Indian saint. In both countries, it was the religious hierarchy which had the predominant say in national affairs, though in Bhutan

Predominance of
Tibetan
influence

secular authority predominated with the establishment of a hereditary monarchy. In Tibet, the Dalai Lama continued to be the spiritual and temporal ruler of the country till the Chinese take over. In their religious attitudes, both people are equally devout; though it is generally felt that the Tibetans have a slightly deeper and more sophisticated knowledge of their religion.

Both the societies have progressed on democratic principles but the Bhutanese have, over the ages, been more democratic than the Tibetans. Aristocracy or nobility, as a distinct stratum of society, was not so marked in Bhutan as it has been in Tibet, possibly because Bhutan is much younger than Tibet. In Tibet, the hereditary class of nobles usually held important Government positions, and was a mainstay of Tibetan administration. In Bhutan, the aristocrats who live primarily in eastern and western Bhutan, had nothing to do with the administration. They enjoyed the status of "spiritual" aristocracy. Considering the broader pattern of society there is much wider economic disparity between the rich and the poor in Tibet than has ever been in Bhutan.

There are also important differences between the Tibetans and the Bhutanese in their habits. Bhutanese are primarily rice-eaters whereas Tibetans take barley flour (tsampa) and rely more heavily on meat.

The major entertainment for guests in Tibet was formerly confined to the New Year (Lösar), whereas in Bhutan every household has a Puja once every year when guests and monks are lavishly entertained. The common amusements in Bhutan are archery and dancing, even among the upper and richer strata of society. Among higher ranking Tibetan families mahjong and dice, horse racing and picnics are the more popular amusements, and even women participate in mahjong and dice. Though archery is practised in Tibet, the method is different from that in Bhutan. Unlike the Bhutanese arrow which has a steel tip, Tibetan arrow has a large and hollow wooden point, and makes a hissing sound on its way to the target. In Tibet the use of chhang (local beer) even among common women is quite frequent; in Bhutan it is

more occasional, though women in eastern Bhutan drink more heavily. Mutual help at the time of cultivation is practised in both societies, and villagers take turns in helping each other. An average Tibetan has more leisure than an average Bhutanese. This is also due to the geographical conditions, the Tibetans growing one crop and the Bhutanese two crops in a year.

All Tibetan families celebrate marriage with a ceremony, but in Bhutan this is done only by the rich. More significantly, in Tibet it is the wife who generally comes to live with the husband's family as in India, whereas in Bhutan the matter is decided by personal preferences and economic considerations. Divorce, on the other hand, is more common among the Bhutanese than the Tibetans.

The Bhutanese preserve a form of indigenous medicine based on the traditional Indian Ayurvedic system combined with Tibetan herblore and some basic principles of Chinese medicine like cauterisation.

Most important being the study of herbal science, which has acquired considerable sophistication in Bhutan over the centuries—the country is sometimes known as the "land of medicinal herbs". It is from Bhutan that these herbs were exported to Tibet. Traditional doctors used to study at Chakpori Medicine College in Lhasa, but today these studies are sponsored by the Government of Bhutan at an important institute set up for this purpose at Dechencholing at Thimphu.

The impact of modern medicine and scientific principles of hygiene, introduced into Bhutan during the past decade, has been tremendous on the traditional attitudes to sickness and its cure.

More people have begun to use modern hospitals and dispensaries established by the Government instead of consulting local astrologers and oracles only, as before. There is a perceptible trend to develop the traditional medical practices to supplement the knowledge of modern medicine and surgery.

Philosophy of Reincarnation

Both Tibetan and Bhutanese believe in the same religious philosophy. They are the staunch followers of the Mahayana Buddhism. Their attitude to death is best revealed in the Book of the Dead (Bardo Thodrol) literally meaning "deliverance by hearing in the intermediate state". This book, which is read in front of the dead person, claims to guide the departed consciousness through the intermediate state between death and re-birth (the Bardo).

Religious
philosophy

From the strictly Buddhist point of view, therefore, death is simply the shedding of a garment or the "reincarnation of the soul". It also provides a singular opportunity to gain final salvation. Conversely, it can lead to an existence in the worst hell, all of this depending on the karmic potential of the deceased.

The Bhutanese usually cremate their dead, except in the case of violent death, including suicide and death in an epidemic, when the bodies are buried. Even in such cases, the family may cremate the skeleton after a few months when the flesh has disintegrated. Cremation is practised by the richer sections and the lamas. However, there is no cremation in summer, unless for a high lama, because of the superstitious belief that it will result in hailstorm causing damage to crops.

Cremation of the
dead

The funeral ceremonies performed on and after the occasion of death are not limited to those prescribed in the Book of the Dead but include special ceremonies performed at fixed weekly intervals during the forty-nine days in which the consciousness is believed to be roaming the intermediate state. During these forty-nine days, or until the cremation, the corpse is treated as if it were living, food and company being provided as usual. During this period prayers are recited for the deceased to be reborn in the Western Paradise of Bliss, presided over by 'Amitabha'.

Funeral
ceremonies

Bhutanese are respectful towards religion. Those who can afford, go on pilgrimage even to the holy places in India connected with the life

of the Buddha. Almost every house has an altar with statues of the Buddha, and the great gurus. Every village has a temple in which ceremonies are performed from time to time. A long strip of cloth material inscribed with prayers or hymns attached to a wooden pole invariably flutters on top of every house; the idea being that the wind will carry the prayers far and wide for the welfare of the individual, community and the world. On every solemn occasion the people plant these prayer flags all over the countryside.

Pilgrimage,
prayers and
ceremonies

The 'Gelong' or monks are held in great esteem and wield considerable influence over the life of the community, though inevitably, the awareness of prosperity and contact with the world is eroding their influence. The presence of monks, like the Brahmin i.e. priests in India, is necessary on all occasions, whether happy or otherwise.

Practical application of the theory of 'Karma' has made Bhutanese society one of the most emancipated and liberal. If a man commits a crime and undergoes punishment, no stigma attaches to him. He has already paid for his bad Karma and, therefore, is not to be ostracised. This is quite unique compared to the attitude in other societies where the crimes of people are visited upon their children and even subsequent generations. Another interesting fact is that a person undergoing a jail sentence can leave jail by putting a proxy in his place. He can even ask his family to come to live with him for a while.

Theory of Karma

Bhutanese New Year and basis of its calendar

The Bhutanese New Year, called 'Losar', usually falls in February, when Lord Buddha is believed to have overcome the forces of evil. As with Tibetan, the 'Losar' is considered very auspicious. It is believed that if there is a snow-fall during 'Losar', the entire year will be good for the country.

New Year—
'Losar'

The Bhutanese Calendar is generally based on that of Tibet. It is composed of sixty-year cycles, each year named after a set combination of five elements and twelve animals. For example, 1967 was the fire Sheep Year, 1968 the Earth Bird Year, and so on. The element which forms the first part of the name of year is considered male for the first and female for the second ; thus 1968 was the male Earth Monkey Year and 1969 was the female Earth Bird Year. This system is of Chinese origin and is used widely in Asia. Further, the Bhutanese Calendar, like the Tibetan, is based on the lunar month. As in the case of all lunar calendars, discrepancies arise in the length of some months. To adjust this discrepancy extra days or months are intercalculated in the calendar.

The auspicious days of the Bhutanese Calendar fall on the eighteenth (or full moon) and the thirtieth (last day) of every month. These lucky days are the common heritage of all Buddhist countries and are said to originate from the time of the Lord Buddha himself.

People in Bhutan are quite superstitious and believe in good or bad omens. The superstitions prevalent here are an important part of the country's subculture. They do not seem to have any relation to the Buddhist faith and probably originated long before its introduction. For example, if one goes on a journey or if arriving at one's destination, one meets a young girl carrying a vessel of water, this is considered very lucky. Conversely, if the vessel is empty it is considered a bad omen. This superstition is presumably of Indian origin where even today it is prevalent.

Festivities & Classical Dances

Large scale festivities are organised on special occasions like the National Day of Bhutan which falls on 17 December. It was on this day in 1907 that the hereditary monarchy was established.

The Bhutanese are very fond of dancing and except for masked dance, the dances are generally slow, and the colourful dresses make them remarkably graceful. The music, except in masked dances, is usually slow, and expressive gestures are made with the hands. Both men and women join in these dances and some of them are performed in pairs. Most of the dances depict episodes from Buddhist history and mythology.

Dancing, types
of dances

The Nepalese living in southern Bhutan are also very fond of dancing. Their dances are brisker and expressive gestures are made with the hands and eyes as in some schools of Indian dancing. The masked dances, however, are performed only by the monks. With the influx of Tibetan refugees in 1959, some Tibetan dances have become quite popular. The yak dance with dancers wearing the hides of yaks is particularly popular in Bhutan, though performed by the Tibetans. In any important festivity, all three types of dances—Bhutanese, Nepalese and Tibetan - are performed.

Art and Architecture

The Bhutanese tradition maintains that making images of deities is a pious act leading to salvation. In its evolution and development, therefore, Bhutanese art, like early Indian and Tibetan art, is in the nature of 'Sadhana'.

A work of art, whether two or three dimensional, is judged primarily by how far it accords with traditional iconographic prescriptions. Style, conception and skill are all certainly to be praised but are secondary to the fundamental preoccupation with form. The main impulse is spiritual. The depiction of divine figures is considered a support to meditation and devotion. Buddhist art had already reached a high degree of excellence in India, the country of its origin, and when Buddhism came to Bhutan and Tibet it came as a doctrine, belief and philosophy accompanied with highly developed art forms as visual aids in its comprehension.

Work of art—
spiritual in
character

The art of Bhutan synthesises many strains—Indian, Nepalese, Chinese and Central Asian—peculiar to the genius of the country. Stylistically, perhaps one of the most dominant influences is the Nepalese, not only in Bhutan but over a large part of Asia. Newari artists from the city of Patna in the Kathmandu valley found religious patrons in Tibet and elsewhere who sponsored their work, especially in metal casting. These Newari Craftsmen and artists became famous for a number of skills like wood-carving, sculpture, metal work and religious paintings. The Bhutanese, like the Tibetans, owe a great deal of their artistic heritage to this community. There are two villages today which specialise in silver and gold work—Dranang near the confluence of the Thinchu and Pachu and Belnang in the Thimphu valley. The latter, as its name suggests (Balpo - Nepal), was definitely founded by Nepalese.

Synthesis of
Bhutanese art

The aim of Bhutanese art is primarily to serve as a visual aid for understanding the abstruse tenets of Buddhist philosophy and religion. One of its main subjects has been the 'mandala' or 'Kyilkhor'. Common to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the mandala is basically a mystic pattern used for purposes of initiation and meditation. It was introduced in Bhutan together with all the teachings and methods of the Northern Buddhist tradition, and its complex geometrical patterns are to be seen all over the country in a multiplicity of arrangements.

Depiction of
Buddhist
philosophy

Painted on cloth in the form of 'thangkas' and on the walls of temples as frescoes, the mandala is also preserved in a more permanent form. After the consecration rites have been completed, these permanent depictions of the mandala are believed to confer blessings on the faithful. The mandala is also painted on the ceiling of many temples.

Mandala'

The eight auspicious signs, 'Tashi Tagye', are another popular

theme of Bhutanese art, whether it be in painting, carving or sculpture. These auspicious and sacred signs are intimately associated with the life and teaching of the Buddha. The Banner of Victory symbolises the victory of Enlightenment. The parasol of authority symbolises the authority of the Buddha's teachings. The Conch Shell symbolises the reverberating sound of Dharma. The two Golden Fishes symbolise resurrection, eternal life, rebirth, etc. They may also be taken to symbolise the eye of perception, as fishes can see through muddy water. The Lucky Net symbolises Brahmajala representing all the theories and philosophies about the universe. It also symbolises the faculty to extract from the ocean of existence pearls of wisdom or jewels of enlightenment by following the net of the Buddha-dharma. The wheel of Law or Dharmachakra symbolises the propagation of the Buddha's teachings. The Vase of Immortality symbolises 'Amrita' or nectar and thus the immortality of the soul. The Lotus Flower symbolises the ultimate goal, namely Enlightenment.

'Tashi Tagye'—
eight auspicious
signs

The acme of Bhutanese art are the religious paintings or scrolls known as 'thangkas'. These art treasures because of their great beauty, divine themes and portable size are already known all over the world.

The thangka is not merely the product of creative self-expression or the desire to depict beauty, it is primarily an object of worship, and in the centre of the painting a deity resides. One of the most popular subjects of delineation, however, is Guru Padmasambhava, his two consorts, and his various emanations. The colour scheme of most of these paintings, especially of the older thangkas, is breath-takingly beautiful.

Thangkas

Sculpture is another field in which the Bhutanese artists have, over the ages, acquired unique skill. The statues are made of clay with a hollow interior and are painted in variegated colours. Every temple has large statues of divinities placed in small niches carved near the ceilings.

Sculpture

Wood carving to enhance architectural beauty is traditional in the

country. Carved panels are also used on Bhutanese tables and other items of furniture such as cabinets, low divans, partition screens, mirror-frames and jewellery boxes. The traditional form of interior decoration consists of having carvings on pillars, walls, and ceilings. The common motifs are the druk (dragon) dorji, Tashi-Tagye and various legendary animals. Another traditional art practised by the Bhutanese is the making of masks in wood, papiermache or clay. These masks are invariably used in the religious masked dances in which large numbers of mythological figures are depicted with the help of masks.

Wood carving
and masks

As stated earlier, gold and silver work has also been flourishing in Bhutan ever since the Newari artists from Nepal had first introduced it. Intricate chasing is done on jewellery cases especially on 'doma' and lime cases, known as 'chakar' and 'timmi', which men invariably carry. It is also done on sword handles which are generally made of silver and plated with gold.

Gold and
silver work

In the past, calligraphy has been practised as a fine art in Bhutan. Beautifully written manuscripts on separate sheets of centuries-old hand made paper are still extant in a surprisingly well preserved state.

Calligraphy

Bhutanese architecture is best reflected in its 'dzongs', 'lhakhangs' and 'chortens'. Even the system of administration by castles, or dzongs, was introduced into Bhutan from Tibet, it is interesting to note that the amalgamation of the castle and the monastery came about earlier in Bhutan than in Tibet. The Potala palace in Lhasa, the most famous Tibetan building, is known for its beauty, grandeur and size all over the world. The most common architectural feature of Bhutan's countryside is the 'chorten' or 'stupa'. A chorten literally means a receptacle of worship or offering. The stupa which was architecturally simple in the infancy, developed into a complex architectural structure with the passage of time. Building a stupa came to be considered an act of great piety, earning merit for the actual builders as well as for those who paid for them. These structures adorn the landscapes of all

Architecture-
dzongs, lhakhangs
and chortens

countries where Buddhism spread—Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Japan and Korea. Though known by different names and representing different architectural styles, they originated with the Indian stupa and their basic function is the same everywhere.

Among the most sacred chortens of Bhutan are those at Jampa and Kurji lhakhangs in Bumthang and those below the dzong in Paro. The spiritual benefits that accrue to a person circumambulating and prostrating before one is equivalent to hundred thousand other chortens. However, among the best known chortens of Bhutan is the one at Paro, known as 'Dungtse lhakhang and believed to have been built by the great iron chain builder, the mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo, sometime after his arrival in Paro in 1433.

If any one were to epitomise Bhutanese art with one word, that word would be colour. The Bhutanese use colour extravagantly in their clothes, houses, decorations and above all in their thankas, murals and frescoes adorning the walls of temples. The attention to detail, the symmetry of figures, the nature of the theme and above all the bold colour treatment are perfectly combined. The Bhutanese artists have not only accomplished a difficult task but have created a lasting symbol of the triumph of their faith. This has made it possible for Bhutan to maintain its identity and not be swallowed by the culture of its big neighbours.

Art symbolises
richness and
colour

Conclusion

It will be seen that the Bhutanese culture is synthesis of the rich culture that it derived, over the centuries, from various adjoining countries like India, China, Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Japan and Korea. However, the Tibetan culture has been the most predominant in influencing Bhutan. The fact that the two societies and culture, having the same heritage, have developed on different lines, is basically on account of following the policy of seclusion by the two countries in later years and their inhospitable rugged terrain, thereby

preventing frequent intercourse between the two societies. This drawback, however, proved to be a blessing in disguise as both culture and societies have developed independently in an atmosphere of freedom, and in the bargain, both have been able to create a very rich culture worth emulating. During the first half of the century, on account of improved communication and diplomatic relations, the Tibetans and Bhutanese who have visited each other's country, have come to realise and appreciate the richness of the two cultures which are rather complementary. Also, with the arrival of Tibetan refugees in Bhutan after the Chinese domination of Tibet, respect for each others' culture has further improved due to mutual contact.