

The Status of Bhutan's Knowledge Repository: An Introduction¹

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Bhutan has a rich literary heritage that tells the story of the country's evolution over a millennium, from naturalist primitive communities through the process of Buddhist socio-cultural refinement until modern times. Today, Bhutan is the most resolute custodian of the northern Buddhist civilization, which was initiated over a millennium ago by travelling spiritual figures such as Guru Rinpoche, and developed through conflicts and contestations of numerous persons and traditions in the following centuries. This task of carrying forward the legacy of Bhutan's past and the prowess of knowledge—which manifests in the numerous collections of timeless texts on the whole landscape of Bhutanese religion, philosophy, politics, history, arts and culture—today rests with the National Library and Archives of Bhutan (NLAB), which holds the mandate and charge of preserving, promoting and propagating Bhutan's written heritage.

However, the task of promoting the literary culture in a society that was largely oral in the past, and rapidly turning to audio-visual media now, is not an easy matter. Only about 20 percent of the Bhutanese population probably knew how to read about half a century ago. This has certainly changed with functional literacy reaching nearly 70 percent of the population. Yet, Bhutan is not a total newcomer to the science of library and archival works and national narratives. In its period of distributed polities, Bhutanese communities had recourse to numerous temple libraries and regional narratives to support their spiritual or secular identities.

Following Bhutan's unification into a single state by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century, the new country gradually developed a national discourse of sovereignty, identity, and state institutions centred on the religious tradition of the Drukpa school. The publication of the writings of Pema Karpa, one of the most celebrated hierarchs of the school, was one of earliest works of promoting a state intellectual work and intelligentsia. In later times, Punakha library and printery, which was tragically lost in major fires, one could say, was the prototype of a state academic institution dedicated to archival and publishing activities.

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The need for such a state institution has only increased in recent times as Bhutan's culture and identity, both on the level of state and its individual citizens, have become more malleable and fluid than ever before and there is a constant need to find a common national trajectory and direction. Today, if Bhutan as a state is to firmly secure its national ethos of life and discourse of development, what it requires, like any advanced nation state, is a solid academic institution, which shall serve as the storehouse of its knowledge and history. The NLAB, for all intents and purposes, was founded to perform this role of being the institutional brain that can host and trigger the impulses of Bhutan's national consciousness, memory, and intelligence.

Established in 1967 under the patronage of Her Majesty Ashi Phuntsho Choden (1911-2003) with few valuable collections, it was initially housed in some rooms of the *Utse* (central tower) of Tashi Chodzhong, the capital monastery-fortress of Bhutan. Later, with growth in the number of collections, it was moved to a traditional Bhutanese building in the Changangkha area of Thimphu. In 1984, a new four-storeyed eight-cornered traditional building was built under the initiation of the then Home Minister Lyonpo Tamzhing Jagar, to oversee the collection and safe keeping of the religious works. Lopen Geshe Tshewang, a highly regarded scholar-monk, was appointed as the library's founding director under the auspices of the then Special Commission for Cultural Affairs.

The NLAB now functions as a Division under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. It is divided into three divisions of research, archives and library. Each division has different roles and responsibilities but ultimately the goal is to ensure that all Bhutanese, wherever they are, will have access to both Bhutan's documentary heritage and to the data resources of the world.

Among other things, the library is aimed at provision of facilities for research and other academic pursuits, preservation of old and rare books and manuscripts, preservation of traditional xylographic blocks, research and documentation of literary works and stories inherited through traditional and oral communication methods, and promotion and publishing of literary works on traditional and contemporary themes.

Apart from the daily library activities of cataloging and classifying the holdings and providing library service to users, the library division has an objective of surveying and documenting the religious texts in Bhutan. The survey kick started in 1997 from Thimphu. Up to now, a group comprising librarians and researchers has completed surveying around 17 dzongkhags. The old and rare documents are

manually photographed and the history of origin is written down against each holding. The library division also regularly publishes books which are either out of print or which have hitherto remained unavailable to readers.

Users of the library can today view the entire holdings from Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). It is an online database of material currently hosted by the Royal Library of Denmark under the Library Twinning Project. Users can search a library catalogue online to locate books/material available in the library. OPAC gives a variety of search options like basic search, advanced search, and search by author name and subject of the material in the library. However, there is no online access to other resources such as digital images at present. The NLAB must have its own independent library management system and server to host all its collections.

The research division conducts research, documentation, and translation on a wide range of topics relating to the Bhutanese historical, cultural, and religious fields. The research division under the NLAB, in collaboration with the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region, under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP): Republic of Korea, has recently published a book on *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bhutan*. The three-year project resulted in a comprehensive and timely book, which can serve as a guide to researchers on Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage.

The Archives Division acts as a professional archiving expert in the country. It archives documents of national importance, and sensitises stakeholders on the need to preserve and conserve archival documents. The Archives Division aims to provide basic preservation and conservation training at local levels in all the *dzongkhags* so that the holders can preserve and conserve documents in their collections.

A group comprising archivists, conservators, and fumigators started a nationwide survey to determine where records of national importance are located; and in what form, shape, and condition they are being maintained. If such records are not being taken care of properly, the NLAB recognises the need to assist the owners and custodians of these records to ensure their proper preservation. Very rare and important documents that need immediate rehabilitation are brought to the archive centre and treated. The Archives Division also procures documents of national importance following the standard quotation norms. The documents with the NLAB are treated, conserved if necessary, and stacked in the repository under controlled temperature and humidity.

As a legal state entity it also acts as a professional authority on archival matters, drafting and enforcing the Archive Act besides conducting archival survey and creating legal deposit requirements of all literary and scholarly materials created and known in the country. The Legal Deposit Act (LDA), which was passed during the 77th session of the National Assembly in 1999, allows the National Library to collect copies of material deposited under the provisions of the Act.

Under the LDA, all publishers and authors are required to deliver, free of cost, four copies of the material, if printed, and two copies of the material if non-printed to the NLAB within three months of its publication or production. Under the same Act, any material published by government or government-owned organisations, ten copies of printed material and five copies of non-printed material are required to be deposited. In addition to the collection received through legal arrangement, the NLAB also maintains its collections through purchase, gifts, and donations.

The National Library is making an effort to reorient its collection management and also looking forward to automation so that the library can relate more closely to the present-day environment, while keeping in mind the primary objectives of a library. At present the NLAB has limited space in its buildings. All resources available in the NLAB, other libraries, archives, and monasteries need to be networked and all the library material made accessible to users in and outside Bhutan through the Web. Therefore, there is a genuine need for expansion of library space to accommodate various new activities and necessary facilities, particularly to render much-needed library services to society as a functional organization.

Further, the wide use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Bhutan generates a new challenge particularly for the librarians. Easy access of resources from the internet has heightened user expectations and changed the information-seeking behavior of the users, while librarians are technically challenged to make their resources accessible online. Therefore, NLAB must adopt the latest ICT for expanding information, research, reference, and reading requirements of the country.

In general, many feel that the library is just a storehouse of books, and the lack of knowledge of the services the library provides is becoming a growing concern especially for those working in the library. At present, the types of users using the NLAB are researchers/scholars, government guests/tourists, and students. The number of readers has been depressingly small, with one reader for every nine persons who visit the premises as tourists. This is because the reading culture in

Bhutan is limited and this in turn affects the patronage of libraries. This could partly be due to the poor communication and inadequate interaction between the library and its users. The NLAB must start demonstrating its value by raising awareness of its services and activities in society.

The challenges to the effective service delivery and realisation of the NLAB's key aims are twofold. There is a lack of reading culture among the general public, which means that Bhutanese people and the government are at best indifferent to the existence of a good library. The number of users remains low even after decades of its existence.

The other challenge is the lack of institutional capacity of the NLAB. Bureaucratic constraints limit both the quantity and quality of staff, with limited opportunity for specialised career development in research and library science. Addressing these critical areas of concern will help the NLAB fulfill its mandate of creating a knowledge society with deep appreciation of its own great historical origin, while moving towards the future with dynamism and a sense of optimism.