

Media, Youth, and Culture

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What we see and hear plays a huge role in what we become. An average person, on a daily basis, spends more than two hours on social media and more than two hours watching television. The myriad of contents, such as movies, videos and music through social media, television, and other media, forms a major part of our environment. These contents have the power to influence our mindset and shape our personalities and our approach to life and culture.

Early 1990s – Bollywood

I grew up listening to Bollywood songs and watching Bollywood movies in my hometown of Dewathang in Eastern Bhutan. I was six years old (1995) when I saw a television set for the first time. It was on my first day in Dewathang. Our family had moved there from our village, Wooling, a few hours' walk to the north.

Back in the village, annual *tsechus* and festivals such as *losar* were the only entertainment in the past. I enjoyed all aspects of those occasions. Watching mask dances during the annual *tshechu* was quite a sight. The thud of the feet of the mask dancers in sync with the beat of the drums and the cymbals is etched in my memory. I remember sinking harder in my mother's lap when I saw the frightening Dre Nakchung.

I have a faint memory of some children talking highly about mask dancers who performed difficult moves so easily. One such move was the *durdag* dancer's crown touching the ground, by arching his back with his hands on his waist. Many village kids, including myself, tried to do this after seeing the dancers. I fantasised about being a mask dancer, and if I had stayed in the village longer, I could have become one.

Unlike my village, Dewathang did not have a temple owned by the community. So, there was no annual *tshechu* which also meant there was no traditional entertainment like mask dances. However, with television, there was entertainment every day.

TV was not legal in Bhutan back then, but many people openly watched it. The TV sets were mostly black and white, operated with the help of an antenna that had to be adjusted every now and then to catch the signals. There were only two TV channels - both Indian - DD National and DD Metro.

DD National screened movies on the nights of Friday and Saturday and Sunday afternoon. On weekdays, there were cartoons in the evening and serials at night on DD Metro.

In 1997, Shaktimaan, an Indian superhero show which would go on till 2005, became an instant hit, particularly among kids. Shaktimaan was initially screened on Saturday noon. Therefore, students in my hometown skipped classes on Saturdays to watch the show. This craze was happening in India as well. Seeing this as a problem, the stations shifted the show to Sunday.

The series included a lot of action sequences with unrealistic stunts. Many children in India lost lives copying the stunts. There were two specific stories of children who burnt themselves, believing that the Shaktimaan would come to rescue them.

Although there are no records of such instances in Bhutan, its influence could not be ignored. Children used to draw pictures of the Superhero on roads, walls, and books. I still have a Shaktimaan sticker on the wall of my home which I had stuck on when I was in Class 2.

Interestingly, three of my friends got their nicknames from characters in the series. One was given the name Kilvish, the main villain, as his nose was pointed like the villain. The other was called Kapala, one of the villains, possibly for having dark eyebrows like the character. We also had a friend we called Shaktimaan to encourage him to do courageous stunts.

Back then, only a few houses had TV sets. People would gather in houses with TVs to watch the programmes. Some who were not allowed inside peeped through the windows. This way, I somehow never missed any of my favourite programmes although my family could not afford a TV set.

A shop in Dewathang made a room into a movie hall where they screened movies through a Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) player. Some others who had VCR players also rented cassettes of Hindi and Chinese Kung Fu movies from VCR rental shops.

Hindi songs were played in shops, houses, buses, and trucks. In schools, students also sang and danced to Hindi songs. Bollywood was everywhere. So, youth like me easily picked up Hindi.

Late 1990s and Early 2000s – Hollywood

In June, 1999, television was formally introduced in Bhutan and with it came as many as 40 TV different channels in the categories of movies, music, kids, news and sports, in Hindi and English languages. Bhutan came into contact with outside culture beyond India.

Shaktimaan lovers transitioned to John Cena and Undertaker. Girls who had fallen for Salman Khan and Shahrukh Khan also fell for Hollywood hunks like Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt.

Seeing bikini dressed females and watching bold scenes on TV became normal, with channels showing movies like Basic Instinct and James Bond series, and television series like Sex and the City. Many Hollywood franchises such as Harry Potter, Spider-Man, and Lord of the Rings found a place in the hearts of the Bhutanese.

With a wide range of music channels, such as MTV, Channel V, and VH1 playing the Backstreet Boys, Shakira, Enrique and Eminem, youths started listening to English songs.

I was in Class 9 (2005) when I started listening to English songs. I developed a liking for rap, after hearing Eminem's songs and after hearing his inspiring story. One of the reasons for listening to English songs was because it was thought to be cool if you listened to English songs back then.

As cable TV exposed Bhutan to western and pop culture, some expressed their concerns about its negative impact on our society.

The BBC News in 2004 did a story on Bhutan considering banning some channels such as the World Wrestling Entertainment which were believed to encourage violence while some other shows were thought to instigate crime. It reported that “there was a wave of children performing wrestling moves. The older boys are trying to imitate the wrestling styles on the younger ones, so that is creating a lot of problems in schools.”

I was also a huge follower of wrestling, so much so that I reported about a match between John Cena and Batista in my morning assembly news report. My friends from school still jokingly remind me about it. I did not know that wrestling was scripted until I was in college.

The 2010s - Korean Culture and the Internet

The 2010s was an era of Bhutan’s total amalgamation into the global culture, with faster Internet and smart gadgets being launched. With the introduction of mobile technologies such as 3G and 4G, coupled with technologically advanced smart phones and computers, one had access to literally anything through the Internet.

A salient feature of this era was the rise of K-Pop around the globe. Korean bands and artists like the Wonder Girls, BigBang and Psy, along with Korean dramas and movies were gaining popularity. Its waves arrived in Bhutan as well. This was evident from boys copying Korean hairstyles, which led to the coining of the local term JJK (Jabar Jasti Korean) which means a forced Korean look in Lhotshamkha, a southern Bhutanese language. Also, many kids learnt the Korean language by watching Korean movies.

In 2017, Bhutan also hosted a K-Pop concert at the Changlimithang stadium, to celebrate the 30 years of friendship between Bhutan and Korea. K-pop continues to make a mark in global pop culture, with K-Pop bands like Black Pink and BTS accomplishing greater global success than any other groups.

Evolution of the Creative Industry

The 2010s also saw the evolution of Bhutan’s entertainment industry, particularly music. *Rigsar* was already established as the new genre, in

addition to traditional *zhungdra* and *boedra*, since it first appeared in the 1980s. It was the mainstream music of Bhutan which was furthered by Bhutan's growing movie industry.

Bhutan had its own household local singing sensations in the early 2000s, such as Rinchen Namgay, Nidup Dorji, Jigme Nidup and Dechen Pem. The latter part of the 2000s saw the rise of Namgay Jigs and Minzung Lhamo. The 2010s period was mostly dominated by Ugyen Panday.

This was *rigsar* but there also was a new wave of music brewing in Bhutan. It was the section of music which was not in the movies. For this report, we will call it the independent music of Bhutan.

M-Studio, a music label which started in 2012, popularised a new type of music called the B-Pop, which stands for Bhutanese popular music. B-Pop songs are sung in western style, occasionally featuring rap, and sometimes being full rap songs. The studio was the first non-film industry affiliated music studio to produce hit songs and give opportunities to many new talents.

Following M-Studio, many music studios opened in the capital and other parts of the country. This led to the explosion of Bhutan's present music scene, with rappers, singers, and bands like the Misty Terrace, Sonam Wangchen, etc. Yeshe Lhendup Films, a silver plaque certified Bhutanese YouTube music channel videos now draw more than a hundred thousand views a day. It has several videos with more than a million views.

Today, we are in a situation where we have a booming entertainment industry spiced with western culture. However, along the way we have diluted our own culture.

The Present Situation

Some of our youths may not know our national anthem, but they know songs of BTS or their favorite singers and rappers. Youth are accused of not being interested in the traditional performing arts. They prefer modern pop songs, in both local and foreign languages, over our traditional *zhungdra* and *boedra*. We have youth going for street dancing, not our traditional mask dances.

And performing arts is not all that we are losing. Many do not understand cultural traditions such as *rimdros*, *tshechus*, and the significance of offerings and prayers. We do not even know the meanings of the morning prayers. At least I was never told by anyone during the years in school.

It is no surprise if we meet a well-educated Bhutanese who does not speak Dzongkha. There are families who now converse only in English. With children left to the mercy of YouTube, English is now becoming the first language they learn while the national language is picked up later.

Our Cultural Identity?

We are exposed to global culture like never before, through media and the Internet. In addition, thousands of Bhutanese experience foreign culture in person. The UN estimates that there are more than 24,000 Bhutanese working or studying overseas. Therefore, the rate and pattern of change in our culture is also unprecedented. So, what does this mean for our country?

Experiencing and having knowledge about traditional culture give a strong sense of identity. How we ensure this in these changing times will be instrumental in preserving our traditional and cultural identity.

Recommendations

The following are some suggestions that would help in the preservation and promotion of traditional culture:

- Teach culture as a subject in schools and colleges;
- Employ performing artists in every gewog. Currently, local performing artists are given daily allowances only during festivals and programmes. If local performing artists are kept on a pay roll, youth will be encouraged to take it up as a profession. This way, age-old performing arts will be preserved;
- Use social media, print, radio and television to promote culture. A lot of media programmes can be made on cultural legends and historical figures like Guru Rinpoche, Zhabdrung, Pema Lingpa, Buddha, etc;
- Annual festivals such as *tshechus* will have to be formalised and coordinated by the government with finance and resource support;

- Cultural museums can be built in every gewog to preserve local history and culture;
- Expand the scope of cultural clubs in schools and institutions. Currently, cultural clubs are mostly a group for performing arts. Clubs can research local cultures and be the experts on local arts/history;
- Include Dzongkha tests for promotions and recruitment examinations.
- The government should fund some of the reality cultural competitions. The shows can be specifically for the cultural music like *zhungdra* and *boedra*. This idea is borrowed from South Korea's support for K-Pop. The Korean government sponsors singing competitions to find talent in their country. We could use the same approach to promote the traditional performing arts of Bhutan.
- Develop and implement a national strategy for the preservation and promotion of culture.

The evolution of culture is inevitable, but we can manage the transition in our favour by taking initiatives to capitalise on media and technology, and by using our educational institutions and local communities. With the right approach, age-old ways can not only coexist but also flourish with the modern ways. Our national effort to promote tradition and culture so far has not been effective, although there has always been a strong emphasis on it. We can still save our culture, but we must act now.