

The way we think matters more

Needrup Zangpo

Sixty-five-year-old Lupon Kunzang Thinley has been a researcher and writer for 31 years. He is the author of four dictionaries, including Bhutan's first Dzongkha dictionary, and some 20 notable books. After passing out of the erstwhile Rigzhung Lobdra in Semtokha, he became a teacher. While teaching in remote Pemagatshel, he did not get his salary for three months in a row, which prompted him to write a three-page complaint letter in verse to the education department. Formidable Lam Nado, who headed a team of writers at the department, saw the writer in Lupon Kunzang through that letter. He was summoned to Thimphu to write for the education department where his writing career started. Needrup Zangpo tries to get a glimpse of the changing Bhutan through Lupon Kunzang Thinley.

Q. What makes the Bhutanese truly Bhutanese?

Our unique culture makes a Bhutanese truly Bhutanese. Our languages and dress come to my mind first. If our languages, the soul of our culture, disappear, every aspect of our culture, including our music tradition, will disappear. We must preserve our dress and music even as we encourage their evolution.



Lupon Kunzang Thinley

The Bhutanese have cared for their country and they are prepared to lay down their life for it. However, I think we are beginning to lose these traits for our lives have been made easier by scientific development, and hard times are behind us.

We must preserve our tangible culture with pride. But more importantly, we must preserve the culture that is within us.

Q. The way we think as a nation?

Yes. How we think and what we think about influence our behaviour. The mindset of today's generation is gnawing away at the Bhutanese national consciousness. Today's children and youth are not sensitive to Bhutan's difficult past. They think that the country has always enjoyed today's peace and stability. I must be honest here. Today's youth think like those of other countries'. Now with the coming of democracy, they think that they have every right to speak and do whatever they wish. And how about the way they speak? They are not able to express themselves in our own language without relying on English for some 60 percent of words and expressions. Our changing lifestyle is also making us less unique. Our food habit has undergone a sea change. In the past, food was limited but everything was our own. Today, we eat too much and most of it is junk. As a result, we suffer from lifestyle diseases like blood pressure. Today's excessive consumption also leads to waste and harms the environment that sustains our livelihood.

Q. So, how does this relentless change affect you?

What worries me is that our material success might one day rob us of our identity. I pray that the Bhutanese never lose Bhutanese-ness just as sandalwood never loses its scent.

Now how do I fare in a changing city? I think I do not belong to Thimphu anymore because I lack English education. I find it hard to keep myself abreast of changing technologies. I realise that English education is important to keep pace with the country's development and to understand the world. Sometimes I feel that my life would make better sense in the countryside.

The modern Bhutanese society has become less friendly. Today, we are all too busy to find time for social interaction. Sometimes, I do not see my neighbours for months. We are becoming increasingly alienated from one another.

Q. Do you feel alienated?

Where does a scholar stand in the changing Bhutanese society? Generally, a scholar is not held in high esteem in Bhutan. Except for a few people who know what a scholar does, most Bhutanese look at a scholar as someone

with little social importance. They think that a scholar does not serve the country as much as a public servant does. There is little support for what we do and propose to do. It is not proper for scholars to demand recognition and importance. That should come from society, mainly the government. We need to provide knowledge creation platforms for scholars and writers. A foundation for them is a good idea. Otherwise, as a country, we will soon face a big deficiency in traditional knowledge. Scholars come and go. When they go, with them goes a wealth of knowledge forever. Therefore, I likened the death of Lam Pemala to the burning down of a national library.

Q. And where do you fit as a Dzongkha scholar?

My lack of English knowledge is a big disadvantage. English will enable us to exchange our knowledge with foreigners. What we express in our language is often lost in translation. I believe that more Bhutanese, not foreigners, should write about Bhutan because people know more about their own countries. Foreigners write about Bhutan by listening to the Bhutanese, but the Bhutanese write about what they experience, feel and practise.

I have not been able to walk alongside foreign scholars as an equal because I did not learn the English language. Sometimes I joke that I want to be reborn as someone who has a brilliant command of about 14 countries' languages so that I can make my mark in the world.

I have received from the Dzongkha Development Commission the award for the best Dzongkha writer of the year thrice. But Dzongkha has no readership beyond Phuntsholing. Chokey would find a bigger readership. However, international readership is not my primary concern. My primary concern is that I should be of benefit to my country, that I should prove myself a Bhutanese, and that I serve my society all by writing whatever I am capable of. I am encouraged that some people, including the members of the Central Monastic Body, appreciate my work and consult me.

Q. On this note, how often do the policymakers and leaders seek your views and advice?

Generally they do not. But my views are sought in the areas of culture, language, and traditions. I was of some use during the Constitution

drafting process. If not asked, I usually do not offer my views, even those on the areas I know. I am a private citizen who holds little sway over what the leaders do. Sometimes, though, I tell the Bhutan Broadcasting Service what goes wrong in their programmes because our children pick up what they write and say. I am always frustrated by language errors on signboards. I tell people to take my help for free before they write anything down.

Q. How do you see the shifting political landscape in Bhutan? How is politics affecting Bhutan's national life?

Democracy spawns the notion that the individual is more important than the law and encourages a sense of gratitude towards the leaders. Democracy has given birth to political parties and the resulting conflict in society. Party politics has created rifts between even parents and children. Democracy that came from the throne is not meant to be handled at our will and convenience. I think it is meant to be put to the service of our nation, together as a people. But we the people, who received it, took it differently. When democracy was introduced in Bhutan, I remarked that it had come about 20 years too early because its success would depend on education among the masses that would be critical to bringing a capable government to power. Otherwise, people could be led astray. But democracy came by the will of the King. I asked myself: Could this mean that the Bhutanese people have run out of good fortune to continue to enjoy peace and happiness?. Sometime back, I told a group of local leaders to advise the villagers to get over party politics right after an election. Divided communities will lead to a divided nation. Water may be murky from the source, but we don't necessarily have to drink it in that state. We could filter it for consumption, for example.

Q. You follow political news and issues, right?

Yes, I do. Our political leaders should prefer consensus and discussion to allegations and accusations. Unless a certain action is likely to prove nationally disastrous, the governing and opposition parties should desist from squabbling publicly. There is no need to bring an issue for discussion in the media if they can resolve it in a climate of cooperation. They need to talk with each other more, not to the media. But we may be too short-tempered for our traditional decency. The spirit of deliberation in Parliament, for example, fuels conflicting sentiments among the people. Probably this is

what the Bhutanese are made of. I might behave in the same way if I were elected to Parliament. It pains me to see the national peace jeopardised, but I am not in a position to say anything consequential. Here, there is a place where one can say something, and you need to be there to say that. What we say in other places a thousand times may not even be heard or acknowledged. In this context, there is a resounding prophecy for Bhutan, which goes as follows:

The leader and the trader will cause the demise of Bhutan (འབྲུག་པའི་བསྟན་པ་ལྔ་ཚོར་གཉིས་
གྱིས་བསྐྱབ་པ།). ལྔ་ here does not refer to the lama, but the leader from parents at the family level to dzongda at the dzongkhag level and beyond. What does the ཚོར་ refer to here? Of course, those who barter the soul of our country for money, including those who vandalise our choeten.

Q. How do you picture yourself and our country, say, 10 years from now?

I am a reluctant layman. In the twilight of my life, I will seek peace at a retreat centre. As for the country, we the people need to continue to accumulate spiritual merit. Otherwise, the rate at which we change may put our very sovereignty at risk. In my prayers, I will wish everything good for the country, the people and the Kings.