

Bhutanese literature: Rich oral tradition, but few writers (Feature)

Bhutan's folklore, urban legends and myths have been celebrated through the country's rich oral traditions, but the abysmal absence of contemporary literary works and a limited reading culture is placing Bhutanese literature in a tricky situation in the Indian sub-continent.

Compared to Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi literature that has effectively used the written word to record issues like the turbulent past, caste discrimination, women's rights, wars and the struggle for independence, among others, Bhutan's shrouded mystery has prevented its scholars and writers from planting their own literary roots.

According to Namgay Zam, an independent journalist, there is no "reading culture" in Bhutan, and whatever little has been printed is the retelling of myths, history and chronicling the lives of Bhutanese kings.

"We don't have any contemporary writers writing short-stories or fiction. Academic books are greater. So, the need of the hour is to create contemporary literature," Zam told IANS.

"The history of Bhutanese literature goes back no more than 50 years, but it is growing at a steady pace," Dasho Sangay Wangchug, an expert on Buddhist philosophy, told IANS.

But the problem for this tiny Himalayan country, landlocked between China and India, doesn't lie in its late beginnings, but in its failure to develop its own literature in Dzongkha - its national language.

This was eroded further with the influence of English.

The struggle between the traditional and the modern has now created a giant void where Bhutanese are struggling to produce anything "creative" or "imaginative".

"Bhutanese literature, unfortunately, is starkly divided into two mediums that come with two different approaches and value systems," Karma Phuntsho, an academic and writer, told IANS.

The author of "The History of Bhutan", Phuntsho pointed out how the educational process isn't conducive and while many children attend English-medium schools, they end up learning "poor English".

"This is a tricky situation for us," admitted Phuntsho.

"The government has to decide which way it wants Bhutanese literature to go. While English literature can be the face of Bhutan, it first needs to have its own cultural identity," he added.

This indeed is true.

If India has poignant stories by Rabindranath Tagore, heart-wrenching stories of Partition were the literary oeuvre of Pakistan's Saadat Hasan Manto; Bangladeshi novelist and short-story writer Syed Waliullah was the pioneer of existential analysis of a character's psyche and Sri Lankan contemporary writers have slowly opened to the world. There's nothing like this in Bhutan.

To break this obnoxious jinx, social entrepreneur Manju Wakhley felt a strong publishing industry and an appreciative platform are required to encourage young contemporary writers.

"There is no money in this field. Arts as a subject is really looked down upon and no one wants to take it. To be a writer one needs space to think. So, only if one gets encouragement in the field of writing, youngsters will take it up," Wakhley told IANS.

At one of the bookstores in Thimphu, Bhutanese literature is neatly stacked in one small rack. Most of the books are by Kunzang Choden, the first Bhutanese woman to write in English.

Her books "Folktales of Bhutan", "Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti", "Chilli and Cheese - Food and Society in Bhutan" and "Dawa: The Story of a Stray Dog in Bhutan" dominate the pile.

Then there is Kinley Dorji's "Within the Realm of Happiness", Ugyen Gyeltshen's "Dear Seday" and Doji Dhratyul's "Escapades".

"In the absence of good Bhutanese literature, youngsters read international writers. But they mostly like to read fiction, or self-help books," Kunzum Choki, owner of the Junction Book store, told IANS.

Many feel the fight between the right to protect their national language and create contemporary English writings has given birth to two different ideological institutions.

But Phuntsho felt a strong cultural identity is necessary for a strong literary foundation.

"If you want to be confident and eloquent in a foreign language, you must first have your cultural identity. If you have an identity crisis, you can't gain," he stressed.

"Ideally, the Bhutanese should first learn to live as Bhutanese, then you can learn another language and write in that. Many young Bhutanese don't even speak Dzongkha; how can they jump to write in English?" he rued.

Wangchug concurred.

"Bhutan can survive without English. We are a small country, and our population is small. What the Bhutanese need to do is to develop their own literature in their language," Wangchug concluded.

Whatever the inference may be, Bhutanese contemporary tales need to be told - in English or in translation.

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