Shangri-la, continued

Commentary

By Ross Adkin
24 June 2016

Thimphu bookshops, language choice and the most recent clutch of fiction from Bhutan.



Kalki Koechlin at the 2015 Mountain Echoes Literary festival. Photo Credit: Mountain Echoes Facebook page/ Phub Tshering

On a grey day last August, the sixth edition of the Mountain Echoes literary festival got underway in Thimphu, with all of the exotic promise of a tourist brochure. Dancers from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts spun and twisted through the drizzle, and the Queen Mother, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, accompanied by very little security, walked among the traditionally-attired crowd. Two masked jesters skirted the dancers and lunged comically at the audience, unsheathing formidable wooden phalluses from their pockets and thrusting them under people's noses, to confront and dispel the illusion of embarrassment.

The auditorium of the Royal University of Bhutan was packed, the adults in seated rows and the stairs filled with cross-legged teenagers, some with their notebooks out and ready for the opening lecture on Emperor Asoka. Vasundhara Raje, the Chief Minister of Rajasthan, was second on the bill, but was summoned away on urgent government business. In stepped a blonde scholar from England, clad in the traditional Bhutanese *gho*, who recited

a poem about becoming a Buddhist, and dedicated it to the Queen Mother. The rest of the morning was taken up by a photo exhibition on the journey of the 7th century Buddhist pilgrim and scholar Xuanzang and a passionate discussion on food by Rocky Singh and Mayur Sharma, hosts of the popular NDTV show *Highway on My Plate*. In the afternoon Patrick French and historian Nayanjot Lahiri bantered about the relative morality of Asoka and V. S. Naipaul. A puppet show ended the first day, and the organisers – looking relieved – set about securing more chairs. The audience ambled out into the cool evening air and back down the hill into town for cheese and chilli.

> *Even after twenty-odd years, the spirituality-versus-materialism clichés are stuck in the same rut.*

Last year's Mountain Echoes was the festival's biggest instalment yet, and coincided with Bhutan's National Reading Year. Gushing reports from the *Kuensel* newspaper tell of readathons out in the districts, and of single schools having read thousands of books. Since the 1980s, the Bhutan story has been dominated by the concept of Gross National Happiness, a term coined (so the legend goes) by the Fourth King during an interview with a *Financial Times* journalist. The idea of an indicator that measures happiness rather than economic production per capita put Bhutan in a unique place on the development map, and GNH has been consistently promoted and pedalled on the world stage by its government ever since. It now permeates – or at least prefaces – almost all literary writing from and about Bhutan, too.

The majority of this writing consists of travelogue-memoirs by world-weary foreigners, on a quest to see if Bhutan's Shangri-La idyll still remains, and whether it can offer anything for their own society's pursuit of happiness. Even after twenty-odd years, the spirituality-versus-materialism clichés are stuck in the same rut: amateur grapplings with Buddhist ideas of impermanence can still be relied upon to fill pages, and the fact that there are no traffic lights in the capital Thimphu is continually remarked upon. *Radio Shangri-La*, *Married to Bhutan, The Kingdom at the Centre of the World* and *A Field Guide to Happiness* are some recent releases guilty – to varying extents – of perpetuating this stale narrative. The genre itself is more interesting nowadays for the fact that women writers are at least as well represented as men, than for anything new it has to say. "Whether you like it or not, we are beginning to shed the last remnant of the so called Last Shangri-la," wrote filmmaker Tashi Gyeltshen in *Business Bhutan*, a few days before the festival began. "We are way out of our self-imposed 'splendid isolation'… GNH as a political philosophy is yet to intellectually mature and developmentally prove. In the meantime, a new set of population with a new set of morals is starting to replace the old."

The new set of morals comes alongside a raft of issues facing the country as it charts its carefully chosen development path. Youth unemployment, drug abuse, an economy propped up by India and a worrying suicide rate are all issues worthy of literary attention. Three recent novels, including one launched at this year's Mountain Echoes, however, show that contemporary writers remain ambivalent about delving into them.

Home is best

Lingchen Dorji's *Home Shangrila: A Memoir* (2014) is a semi-autobiographical novel rooted firmly in the doubts and desires of those who flock to Thimphu after college to compete for coveted positions in the civil service. The story is told by Rinzin Dorji, a mid-scoring Life Sciences graduate. After a temporary job as an interviewer conducting the first ever household census, and working briefly at the Department of National Properties, Rinzin fails to be selected for more permanent positions or scholarships, and joins Thimpu's growing ranks of unemployed youth. This is the demographic that has the real-life government and planners worried because of its potential for deviance and vice, but smoking cigarettes (the novel is set before the lifting of a ban on tobacco) remains the extent of Rinzin's moral and legal waywardness. His time is taken up instead by tramping around Thimphu responding to interviews and

worrying about how he will live up to the expectations that his education has instilled in him, in a city where his qualifications have meaning but only the toppers succeed.

After swearing off cigarettes, he is finally accepted into a Library Sciences course in Scotland, and moves to Aberdeen. The city is cold and grey, full of people who look "similarly preoccupied with their own business." Interactions with Aberdonians do not find much mention beyond misunderstandings in shopping centres and abortive attempts to find employment. A friendship struck up with fellow-student, Duncan, develops, but then vanishes on the next page. Rinzin discovers a renewed interest in Buddhist books and films, and finds refuge online, talking to friends back home and trying to describe how everything feels "hollow and dream like". His aversion to the bustle and anonymity of life in a western city and the resulting soul-searching is reminiscent of the introspection that characterises much foreign writing about life in Bhutan, and leads, predictably, to the same general conclusion: life is better back home.

Not a lot happens to Rinzin in Scotland, perhaps because of his homesickness, and there is never any possibility that his stay will be anything more than an interlude. As the novel's title – *Home Shangrila* – makes clear, the real search for happiness and contentment (and likely, a plum government post) can only begin in earnest once he returns to Thimphu, where he can articulate the cliché with more confidence: "I became more Bhutanese by going to the West."

Civic Dzongkha and popular English

Novels published in Dzongkha – the official language of Bhutan – are extremely rare. An internet search turns up one: a Facebook page for a romance titled *Drazin Lhamo,* by Shengap Khandu. In the bookshops of Thimphu, fiction and non-fiction Dzongkha titles are far outnumbered by English ones. "I prefer writing in English", Lingchen Dorji told me. "I mean, I have grown up reading and writing stories written in English."

Both languages jostle for space in the Bhutanese world of letters, and have each been assigned different tasks: Dzongkha for "preserving and bringing peace in the country and in achieving the objectives of Gross National Happiness"; English, crucially, as the medium of instruction in government schools. Since being declared the country's official language in 1971, "Dzongkha has come a long way," Pema Wangdi, Chief Research Officer at the Dzongkha Development Commission, told me via email. "It has evolved considerably as the national language of Bhutan and, compared to its colloquial form, it now has adequate terms for different fields, including political."

> *Novels published in Dzongkha – the official language of Bhutan – are extremely rare.*

The basics of the Tibetan script in which Dzongkha is written take much longer to learn than the Roman alphabet, however, and the headstart of English is compounded by the fact that other school subjects are taught in English, too. Whether Dzongkha can lend itself to literary creation also seems uncertain: "Even through translations I am amazed to see how rich the languages of authors like Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Orhan Pamuk are," said Lingchen. "I wish we had similar things to do with Dzongkha. Unfortunately I do not believe that our national language is capable of lending itself to that level of creativity. Not for the moment anyway."

Only one session of the 47 at this the 2015 Mountain Echoes was scheduled to take place in Dzongkha, its title – 'Speaking Dzongkha, Living Dzongkha' – a contention that the language is indeed still 'living and speaking' amidst the onslaught of English. There were no sessions on, or in, any of the other literary languages of the country. While Nepali is commonly heard on the streets of Thimphu, literary production in the language remains almost non-

existent inside Bhutan. This is a legacy of the state's harsh *driglam namzha* ('traditional etiquette') policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which sought to impose northern culture and language upon the Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas in the south, and eventually led to the exodus of almost one sixth of Bhutan's population to camps in Nepal. In Thimphu today, the few who are willing to talk about 'the ethnic troubles' assert that northerners and southerners are now well-integrated, although many in the south remain without citizenship.

Karma Tenzin's crime thriller *The Darkest June* was released on the first day of Mountain Echoes. It is a work of historical fiction of the burning down of the famous Wangdue Phodrang Dzong and monastery in central Bhutan in 2012. Spiced up by the addition of an Indiana Jones-style gang trying to steal a precious stone from the monastery, and a young clairvoyant man who sees the tragedy unfolding in his dreams, it is a mildly entertaining light read.

Escapades

Escapades: Awakenings: A Novel From The Kingdom Of Happiness BHUTAN …the last Shangri la on Earth by Doji Dhratyul released in 2013 claims to be a far more substantial offering than the other two books. Its jacket promises to 'lift the veil of misty romanticism' and show a stark, darker side to the happy clichés of rural life in Bhutan. Its departure point is the practice of visiting government officials being provided with local women to sleep with as they travel through rural districts, and 'night hunting'. These are both instances of 'tradition' being used to mask, or muddy, the fact that rape is often being committed. The protagonist, Chechey, grows up knowing that she is the outcome of one such visit to her mother by a well-known philanderer. Predatory men are an ever-present feature of government outreach and development programmes, including Chechey's father, who returns to the village and tries to rape Chechey (he does not know that she is his daughter) after a function.

As a polemic against rape, masquerading as tradition, the first half of *Escapades* accomplishes what it sets out to do reasonably well. Vignettes of solidarity in the village, particularly following the deaths of Chechey's grandfather and stepfather, are sensitive without being idyllic, and there are some great illustrations of the gaps between the planners in Thimphu and the practicalities of rural life: "the government's programme of promoting the use of condoms to prevent HIV, AIDS and STIs was completely wasteful… particularly in rural areas where balloons were rare commodities. Weavers hoarded condoms to use the lubricant on their handlooms." This all changes when Chechey decides to revenge herself against her father and the also man who leaves her pregnant to return to his wife. She moves to Thimphu in search of wealth and influence. Continuing the novel's preoccupation with sex and power, she finds work as a high-class escort and immediately strikes up a relationship with Mr Ali, a government minister from the Middle East. He falls for her and lends her money to begin her own business.

From here, the plot freefalls into a kind of rags-to-riches feel-good joyride. Choedren, Chechey's daughter, graduates from Harvard and opts to come home and take over her mother's business once Chechey – tired of money, now that she has made a lot of it – embarks upon the somewhat inevitable spiritual path. As the world outside Bhutan features more and more in the lives of Chechey and her family, the strength of their Bhutanese cultural identity is expressed more forcefully, to compensate. This is done through banal expressions of loyalty to the King and frequent asides on aspects of Bhutanese culture, like prayer offerings and *chortens*, but is scarcely necessary. None of the main characters are developed to enough depth for the catalogue of vistas from 'abroad' to represent anything more than flashy additions to their lives. Learning English and buying Rolexes are accomplished with unquestioned ease, and told in a manner that would be appropriate in a glossy interior design magazine.

This fusion peaks at the end of Chechey's story, when she flies away to a mountain cave on her private helicopter to begin her new life of meditation and spiritual practice. An epilogue, set in the year 2037, sees the worldwide triumph of Gross National Happiness, with Choedren working at the Centre for GNH in Bumthang district, a place of learning that now enjoys "a similar status with that of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard."

In its telling of the struggles faced by women in a conservative Buddhist society, *Escapades* treads a similar path to

Kunzang Choden's more sober and thoughtful *The Circle of Karma* published by Zubaan in 2005. This remains easily the best of the limited fiction from Bhutan so far. Beginning somewhere in the middle of the 20th century, it follows the life of Tsomo, a pious young woman from rural Bhutan who wishes, like her brother, to learn "to read and write and chant those beautiful prayers" and further her study of religion. Her defiance of convention, however, is more understated than Chechey's trailblazing journey to the top. With her skills as a weaver to support her, Tsomo drifts through the Buddhist communities of Kalimpong, Kathmandu, Dehra Dun and Delhi, constantly fretting over whether to marry and try to start a family, or continue along what she believes is her karmic path. The lengthy internal monologues that accompany this indecision do sometimes stifle the plot, but there are some bitter and insightful comments on accepted male-female relationships.

Bookshops

Like Kathmandu and Darjeeling, Thimphu is well-served by bookshops for a city of its size. Books in Dzongkha generally fit the civic task assigned to the language by the Dzongkha Development Commission – histories, biographies of great lamas, religious works and coaching books for the civil service exams. Also published by the Dzongkha Development Commission are compilations of agricultural terminologies, guides to letter writing and, interestingly, a standardized list of the world's countries and their capitals; presumably there will come a day when Bhutanese diplomats will need to know the correct spelling of Chad and N'Djamena. Aside from the three new novels, English fiction by Bhutanese writers consists largely of translations. Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* and Dasho Karma Ura's *The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi: A Wind Borne Feather,* stand out among these. The Centre for Bhutan Studies provides the best of the nonfiction writing on Bhutan, and there are some fine collections of essays on history, anthropology and ecology by Bhutanese and foreign writers.

> *In support of National Reading Year, the government waived the five percent sales tax and 20 percent customs duty on all books imported into Bhutan in 2015.*

Far more shelf space is taken up by world literature, however. Cheap, post-copyright classics make up the majority of the fare in the bookshops-cum-stationers in Hong Kong Bazaar, sitting alongside packets of office paper, staples and the modern pulp of Chetan Bhagat and Shobha De. In the more literary bookshops on the other side of the main road, the classics still dominate, but in the more expensive Vintage or Penguin editions.

In support of National Reading Year, the government waived the five percent sales tax and 20 percent customs duty on all books imported into Bhutan in 2015. "We're ordering extra books this year. All of the bookshops will be taking advantage of this," Tsering Nidup of Megah Enterprises told me last August. He estimated his shop would save about 150,000 Indian rupees. "They'll all be English books, mostly fiction, and mostly modern authors."

Fleeting darkness

The most recent clutch of fiction from Bhutan will disappoint the cynical sections of the international audience hoping for a rebuttal of the Shangri-La dross still being pedalled about the country, particularly in its backpedalling from the realism achieved by *The Circle of Karma* eleven years ago. That all three novels are ultimately in tune with the representations of the government and tour operators, grates far more than problems with language, the telling rather than showing and frequent inane dialogues. Rinzin's happy return in *Home Shangrila*, Chechey's renunciation and the worldwide triumph of GNH in *Escapades*, and the nationwide mourning that will invariably follow the destruction of the monastery in *The Darkest June* are, essentially, elements of the Government's civic vision transposed into fiction, written by authors who are a part of the machine. Doji Dhratyul is the administrative head of

Gasa District; Karma Tenzin is a former top policeman; and Lingchen Dorji works at Sherubtse College at the Royal University of Bhutan.

There are brief glimpses of darkness, but they are fleeting. Rinzin's desperate job hunting in Thimphu evokes the enormous pressure faced by many young Bhutanese, and the thin end of a wedge of much more serious and real life problems of drug and alcohol abuse, loneliness and suicide, that have arisen in his generation. Despite their literary potential, however, they are barely mentioned. After going for the jugular at the beginning, *Escapades'* reversion to type is more disappointing in this regard. The depictions of fatalism and subservience in the village and the abuse of power by government officials are refreshing, but as the story moves with Chechey into the present, these themes are dropped. Choedren flirts briefly with politics after she returns from the United States, and makes 'the eradication of molestation, exploitation and victimization of rural girls and women by urban men' a part of her manifesto. After this, we never hear anything more on the subject.

> *Mountain Echoes has certainly claimed an intimate and exclusive place for itself among the literary festivals that have sprung up in Southasia post-Jaipur.*

Mountain Echoes has certainly claimed an intimate and exclusive place for itself among the literary festivals that have sprung up in Southasia post-Jaipur. Kalki Koechlin, Janice Pariat, Patrick French and other big names came, sat with local writers and artists and produced some fascinating discussions and performances in a beautiful setting, all with minimum pomp and ego. At night, speakers, aristocracy and royals mingled, drank and danced with the hoi polloi in the bars and nightclubs around town. The suspicion that the upkeep of the country's image weighs heavily on the minds of Bhutan's writers remains, though; that the most recent local fiction echoes the general sentiments of Bhutan's foreign chroniclers does not convince that the story is as perfect as it is made out to be. Rather, it suggests that the conditions and sensibilities in the public sphere – as well as in the imaginations of its writers – that would allow for fuller explorations of its more unsavoury and uncomfortable aspects are not yet in place. Aside from the neglect of present day worries, there has still been no real attempt in recently published literature to talk in detail about the elephant in the room. The displacement of the Lhotshampas is yet to receive a full treatment by a writer from inside Bhutan. Karma Phuntso's recent *The History of Bhutan* does make some (very) small steps in this regard, however, the most sympathetic and nuanced portrayals of the 'ethnic troubles' are still to be found in the writing of foreigners, particularly Jamie Zeppa's *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* (1999) (the standout among the travelogue-memoirs), and Michael Hutt's *Unbecoming Citizens* (2003).

While the Bhutanese world of letters remains characterised by such deference and restraint there seems little to hope for in the way of literary appeal, other than more innocuous translations of folk tales. Two of the latest three novels mention GNH or the Fourth King in their acknowledgements and dedications. Right to Information legislation remains stalled in the upper house of parliament and the media is timid in comparison to its Indian and Nepali counterparts. Voyeurs from outside the country may have some time to wait for bolder voices to step up – ideally from places more edgy than the civil service – and take a gamble on what can be said or written. Until then, Thimphu will continue to offer a beautiful setting for literary gatherings like Mountain Echoes, but little homegrown talent to contribute to the proceedings aside from choreographed dances and puppet shows.

-Ross Adkin is a freelance journalist based in Kathmandu.

- For missing copies Click Here
- To buy online Click Here

- For a list of retailers Click Here
-
-
-









