



Showtime in Bhutan

AARTI BETIGERI //

DRUK SUPERSTAR, BHUTAN'S IDOL ESQUE TALENT SHOW,
IS A CELEBRATION OF THE OLD AND AN OPPORTUNITY
FOR THE MODERN AND UPWARDLY MOBILE

IT'S JUST 20 MINUTES TO SHOWTIME. The studio is a hive of activity: at one end makeup artists attend to the drooping quiffs of the handful of middle-aged men sitting behind a semi-circular desk. They are the judges. At the other, stagehands pull at the lighting rig to make sure it is all directed squarely at the stage. On either side sit the contestants, nervously fidgeting as they await their turn, for on live television there is no room for mistakes.

It could be anywhere in the world, such has been the reach of the cultural juggernaut that is the Idol-era television singing competition, complete with its studio audiences and token harsh judge, strobe lighting and legions of fans. And here too in the once-reclusive Bhutan, the format is hugely popular. Its homegrown talent show is called Druk Superstar—in the local language Dzongkha, Druk is the word for Bhutan—and has everyone glued to their television sets for six hours each weekend—three on Saturday and three on Sunday—for close to five months.

The set is modest by international standards: the stage is on a raised platform draped in red carpet and a flimsy sheet of plastic is printed with the show's name and logo, as well as the thunder dragon emblem that is one of Bhutan's national symbols, against a bright blue background. There are no flashy designer outfits; rather, everyone is in traditional Bhutanese garb—the *gho* for men, *kira* for women. Audience members sit, primly and quietly, on plastic garden seats, arranged into rows.

But regardless of its simplicity, Druk Superstar is the biggest entertainment program on Bhutanese television. “Well, because it's the only one,” chuckles a staff member at the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), the country's only national channel that carries the program. There are no official television ratings, but each week the BBS gets between 80,000 and 100,000 SMS votes: this, in a country of just 750,000.

The show has even struck a chord with rural Bhutanese. Outside the main cities, most still follow ruggedly traditional agrarian lifestyles and many live far from developed regions. “We hear about people from rural areas who would walk for a day to get to a village or a town, where they can find a television,” says BBS' news editor Deki Choden Dorji.

“If you go out into the town now you'll find it empty,” says one contestant, Karma Phuntsho. “Everybody is near a television set.”

D RUK SUPERSTAR is the third incarnation of the show. First there was Bhutan Star, then Druk Star, both of which showcased unknown talent. Druk Superstar, however, takes the show to a new level with contestants who are already working in the country's fledgling entertainment industry. Think *Top Chef Masters*, or *Dancing With the Stars*—although instead of washed-up stars striving to stay in the game, Druk Superstar contestants are trying to get ahead. For some, it might be the goal of having the music they compose heard by a wider audience, and for others, it's the chance to be recognised on the



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ABOVE: Minzung Lhamo, a contestant from Bhutan's non-Dzongkha speaking south.

FACING PAGE: Karma Phuntsho is a popular choice among Bhutanese women voters.

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streets and in the bars of Thimphu.

Phuntsho, 23, hails from Trashigang, a town in the country's remote east. Now he works in the film industry as a cameraman.

“Most of the people here, some have acted in movies, some of them are directors, some producers, so they are already in the industry,” he tells me.

Why is he here? “To win. To be famous,” he says, somewhat shyly. Phuntsho hopes that Druk Superstar will propel him into the stratosphere of Bhutanese entertainment. “I want people to recognise me.”

Not all have the same ambition. Another contestant, Sherab Dorji, 28, works as a traditional physician, or *drugtsho*,



dispensing health advice based on centuries-old knowledge. But more relevantly, he is also a music composer, and hopes that Druk Superstar will help get his work out there.

“I joined Druk Superstar not to compete for the superstar title, but to get some publicity for my music,” says Dorji.

Still, there are some other enticements for winning. First prize is a Maruti Suzuki Swift Dzire. The second and third prizes are an Alto and a motorbike, respectively.

In the background, as I chat to Phuntsho and Dorji, other contestants are warming up on stage. This week’s theme is traditional songs. To the untrained ear, traditional Bhutanese music can sound a little like Chinese opera, but plenty of people in the audience seem to enjoy it, tapping their feet and mouthing the words, so clearly it has a solid following.

In fact, it is a focus on Bhutan’s traditional music forms that has ensured Druk Superstar’s popularity. There are two types: *zhungdra* and *boedra*. The former dates back to the 17th century and is based on folk music; it is slow and usually accompanied by a guitar, while the tempo in *boedra* songs is much faster. These are sung alongside traditional instruments: the *dramnyen* (lute), *lingm* (flute) and *chiwang* (fiddle). Then there’s the *rigsar*, a more modern music style that emerged in recent decades, which is also featured in the competition.

“People enjoy watching our own people singing our own traditional songs,” says Kencho Wangdi, who launched Druk Superstar, as well as last year’s version, Druk Star. “Entertainment in Bhutan has been dominated by Bollywood and Western music, so we came up with the idea of our own people singing our own songs on television.”

There are barely any cars on the road between two and five o’clock on weekends, Wangdi explains. Druk Superstar’s popularity can be measured not by Nielsen ratings, but by street traffic.

THE COMPETITION BEGAN in April with 28 contestants, divided into four teams, each named after a symbolic Bhutanese animal: the snow lion, the thunder dragon, the tiger and the *chung*, the garuda bird. All but the tiger are mythical creatures, while it’s not known whether the tiger ever set paws in Bhutan.

Given Bhutan’s intense focus on preserving and maintaining its cultural traditions, it is not surprising how pivotal a role traditional music plays. This country of hilltop-hugging clouds, of saffron-robed monks and steep mountain passes has cautiously been opening up to the world in recent decades, with every step measured against its poten-

tial impact. Bhutan is yet to lose its innocence, and leaders would like to keep it that way.

For a long time the placid, sylvan nation was cut off from the rest of the world, first by the steep mountains that ring the tiny country, and then by a kind of self-imposed isolation—Bhutan began permitting tourists to enter the country only in 1974 and officially introduced television in 1999. Even now, strict laws govern Bhutanese lives, decreeing that all buildings incorporate traditional architectural elements, while tourism and government sector workers must wear customary dress to work. One of the BBS staffers I photograph rings me later and asks me to take her picture again when she has had the chance to change into a *kira*: she’s nervous about being seen in civilian clothing.

Mahayana Buddhism permeates all facets of daily life. Prayer flags and chortens dot the countryside, and it is not uncommon to see little stacks of flat rocks on the side of the road, carefully placed there by passing pilgrims. What will soon be the world’s largest seated Buddha is being built atop one of the many hills overlooking Thimphu and its surrounding ridges and valleys. It is bright gold and beneath the statue will be a temple and a series of halls, possibly even a convention centre. Bhutan is impossibly green and forested; indeed, the constitution mandates at least 60 percent forest cover. (Currently, 72 percent of Bhutan is forested.) Smoking cigarettes is banned, and transgressors could face jail time.

Elsewhere, citizens might rail against such an interventionist, even aggressive, approach to upholding traditional culture, but here, locals are in full support. “We love our king, why would we question him?” says one BBS employee, almost accusingly, when I ask whether the channel has the freedom to criticise the monarchy.

The magic of Bhutan is that it offers a tantalising glimpse into how life might be, might have been, without the corrupting tentacles of consumerism and cynicism. Druk Superstar straddles the divide between tradition and modernity. The aesthetic might be 1980s-era, the sets might be wobbly, but the ability to reach remote and isolated villagers, and have the entire nation gathered around the same metaphorical TV set, is undeniably powerful.

AFTER THE FIRST SERIES of Bhutan Star, Kencho Wangdi took over the format, tweaked the rules and created Druk Star and Druk Superstar. “Nobody had had the idea of promoting our own culture and songs, and there was a chance our folks songs might have disappeared.”

“I’m not used to seeing this kind of public humiliation of young people, who are being told, ‘Oh, your intonation was wrong, your pronunciation was wrong.’ I think it’s very humiliating and un-Bhutanese because we never do that.”

RIGHT: Dechen Zangmo is an established pop singer whose debut album *Honey* was released last year.

FACING PAGE: Inside the studio of Druk Superstar.

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Wangdi made the move into entertainment in 2004 after a career as a marketing manager with Pepsi, peddling sugary soft drinks in a country that otherwise favours salted butter tea. He decided to follow his dream of a career in film and television and soon became an active participant in the industry, which puts out a surprisingly high 20-odd movies each year. “The film industry is going like anything here, everyone wants to make movies,” he says.

Getting Druk Superstar off the ground, he says, was fairly easy. “Although it has been difficult to get copyright from other film producers for the songs we use, which are often from movies.” I ask him if it could be that they’re jealous of his success with Druk Superstar. “Perhaps. Not all, just a few.”

Wangdi might be keen to highlight the service his show is doing in upholding the country’s traditional and cultural heritage, but there is an undeniable monetary element to it as well. Each SMS costs five Bhutanese ngultrum, which is equivalent in value to five Indian rupees. A chunk goes to the telecoms department while the remainder is shared between Wangdi and BBS. Wangdi says he only gets a little more than one rupee per vote. Still, with up to 100,000 votes coming in each week, that’s a lot of ngultrum—it adds up to far more than the average annual Bhutanese income, around \$2,000.

Now, however, outside influences are steadily marching in. Teenagers in Bhutan, as well as those in India’s North-east, are looking farther north for their cultural cues, all the way to South Korea. Young trendy kids shun the *gho* and embrace the faux hawks and stovepipe pants of their K-pop (Korean popular music) idols. The South Korean cable channel Arirang TV is popular, as are DVDs of Korean serials and films with names like *Boys Before Flower*. Despite the questionable translation, their popularity stems from the relative innocence and conservative mores of these programs.

K-pop has created some conflict, with elders anxious that the influx of foreign influences might accelerate the loss of traditional ways, and that Bhutan’s glorious homegrown culture could diminish as a homogenised global identity takes hold. Bhutan, for all its efforts, is not impervious to



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the Bieber-ification of the world. But Druk Superstar is a program with a foot in each valley: in one way it is a celebration of the old, of keeping traditions alive and buoyant, and even finding new audiences in Bhutan’s youth. But in another way altogether it is an indication of how a newly globally literate, thoroughly modern and upwardly mobile population is acutely aware of the benefits that television can bring, and is clamouring to claim a stake.

Not everyone is in favour of the reality singing show, however. “I don’t know that we are ready for it,” says children’s writer Kunzang Choden. “I’m not used to seeing this kind of public humiliation of young people, who are being told, ‘Oh, your intonation was wrong, your pronunciation was wrong.’ I think it’s very humiliating and un-Bhutanese because we never do that.”

It’s not just that the notion of public criticism is at odds with the Bhutanese national character, but Choden also points out that the shame and embarrassment involved is new. “Especially in a small society where we know each other, we know the contestants, we know their parents. I heard that one young girl broke down and cried on stage. That in itself is not Bhutanese at all.”

I ask Wangdi whether the judging is too harsh, too Simon Cowell-esque for such a gentle place. “No,” he says flatly. “They make lots of critiques, some give good feedback, others... well since they are judges they have to take care and are very strict. But they give very fair judgements.”

As I watch the program from the BBS newsroom—where the staff have abandoned their workstations and are gathered in a conference room, feet on table, to watch—it is hard to tell whether the judges are fair or excessively harsh as it is all in Dzongkha. But for Karma Phuntsho and Sherab Dorji there is good news: both survive the round and make it through to the next week. The dream of being recognised down Thimphu’s main street is still alive. ■

The final episode of Druk Superstar was aired on 14 August. The winner was Ulap Leki, a popular stand-up comedian and actor.