

mirror

The first two weeks of 2014 will be recorded in the history of Bhutanese cinema for a unique experiment. A low budget short film produced with the help of friends and borrowed equipment found itself struggling to reach the prestigious Rotterdam Film Festival in The Netherlands. Director Tashi Gyeltshen's *The Red Door* needed more money to convert the film into big screen quality and also to travel with the film to the festival. The Royal Office of Media and Bhutan+Partners helped with the postproduction of the movie, but fund was still needed. It was then, that a handful of cinema enthusiasts decided to launch a small campaign on Facebook and Twitter to collect USD 2,000 in 10 days. Similar crowd sourcing attempts have been done for social causes, for lhakhang constructions, and for health funding, but not for a movie project. But as soon as the campaign was launched online, Bhutanese from far and near responded with enthusiasm and kindness. In a week's time the target was met making *The Red Door* an international movie produced and owned by Bhutanese.

Bhutan has produced movies of international repute with foreign funding, but the ownership of the movie stayed outside Bhutan. *The Red Door* campaign had non Bhutanese friends contributing, but without any claims on ownership. That's why *The Red Door* is a unique experiment.

The campaign had announced that the movie is not a commercially viable project. It's theme ran against popular ingredients of Bhutanese cinema, mostly borrowed from Hollywood and Bollywood. Here, cinema is yet to be considered as an art form and not just a source of entertainment. Director Tashi Gyeltshen sustained pressures to succumb to popular demand and make a formula movie. As an artist, he wanted to portray Bhutan without the trappings of Shangrila, at the same time being honest to the life and times of a country in transition. His first movie, *Girl with the Red Sky* tells the story of a girl battling with Aids. The Rotterdam Festival description of the movie called the *Red Door* "a metaphorical journey of a Bhutanese man during the various



Response to fundraising campaign for a short film from Bhutan shows people will support good art

phases of his life. Tashi Gyeltshen comes to terms with his cousin's suicide in this minimal, but meaningful tale." The additional amount of USD 1,500 collected from the current campaign will go into the production of *The Red Phallus*, the last movie in the director's red trilogy. *The Red Door* team plans to expand the campaign and include online payment facilities to raise funds for *The Red Phallus*.

For a small country like Bhutan, culture and art are its best ambassadors. *The Red Door*'s screening at Rotterdam and later at Fribourg in Switzerland will introduce the country to thousands of artists and movie buffs from around the world. The previous DPT government in its 2008 manifesto had promised support for art. But apart from funding for trainings, it could not help with directors who experiment with alternate cinema to take their work to an international audience. The PDP government had also promised an art endowment fund which could support artists like Tashi Gyeltshen. But as on now, nothing is clear on the establishment of the fund or how it will be utilized.

Sadly promotion of artists experimenting with modern forms has not received due attention. An anecdote from the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal, on how *Pather Panchali* (1955), rated as of the world's best cinema to be ever made, is inspiring. Young director Sathyajit Ray was half way into the film when funds ran out. He was advised to approach Dr. B. C. Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal for help. The government, though cash strapped, agreed to finance the movie and listed the amount in records as used for "roads improvement," referring to the title of the film which translates as Song Of The Road. If it was not for that support, India would not have got one of its greatest film makers who received an honorary Oscar in 1992 for his contribution to world cinema.

Bhutan has many struggling artists, who will, with a gentle push, can make it big in their respective fields. The government should come up with a mechanism to support such artists.