

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

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During a recent visit with his parents, Crown Prince Fumihito and Crown Princess Kiko, Prince Hisahito, second in line to the Japanese throne, meets the young Prince Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck in Thimphu.

Diary Date

After the very successful second Annual Film Evening, a third is planned for 24 March 2020.

It will be held once again at The Polish Hearth Club in London. It will start at 6pm, with a food interval from 7- 8pm, and followed by further films.

Look out for more information in the next issue

Forthcoming meeting

Botanical Exploration of the Black Mountain in Bhutan

**Wednesday 29 January 2020 National Liberal Club
Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE**

Time: 7.00 pm

Speaker : Dr David Long

*David Long is an Honorary Research Associate at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh. From 1975 until 1990 he was an editor and co-author of the Flora of Bhutan written largely in Edinburgh. He participated in nine botanical expeditions to Bhutan between 1975 and 2017 and has described important new species of plants from Bhutan such as **Pinus bhutanica** and **Rhododendron kesangiae**. He is now a specialist on mosses of the Himalaya and Western China. In 2017 he participated in a German expedition to the Black Mountain of central Bhutan.*

The lecture will describe and illustrate the two pioneer expeditions to the Black Mountain by British botanists, Roland Cooper in 1915 and George Sherriff in 1937. Sherriff's diaries and photographs provide a wonderful insight into botanical exploration in a previous era in Bhutan. The talk will conclude with highlights from the 2017 expedition.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Saturday, 2 May 2020

Michael Blooman has kindly offered the Society a visit in May 2020 to his arboretum and studio near Lyme Regis. Many members will be familiar with Michael and his work. Trained at the Royal College of Art, he painted many watercolours in Bhutan between 1991 and 1995, some of which have already been sold for the Bhutan Trust Fund. Those remaining will be on view and any sales, likewise, will go to the Fund. As well as working in watercolour, Michael produces prints on his mid-19th century Albion printing press, inspired by the local Jurassic Coast. His work is in various public collections including that of the Lyme Regis Museum.



For the Society's afternoon visit, Michael will guide us round his three acre arboretum, which includes species rhododendrons from Bhutan and other Himalayan and Chinese Trees. Of the species rhododendrons, *R. falconeri* found in Bhutan and *R. sinofalconeri* are outstanding and should be in flower along with *R. augustinii* and rarities like *R. exasperatum* introduced by Frank Kingdon-Ward can be seen. Trees range from the remarkable leaves of the Chinese Tulip Tree, Bhutan Pine, Cunninghamia lanceolata, Snake Barks and the Chinese Davidia Handkerchief Tree. We will then be able to see the Bhutan watercolours exhibited in his house, as well as the printing press in his studio, before having tea and cake.

Michael's location does present some organisational challenges, as this cannot really be done as a day trip from London. So members may prefer to combine this with some of the other delights that the Dorset coast has to offer. There is also no parking on site and so we would need to walk from the village hall. Members who are interested are requested to contact the Event Group Secretary, Nicholas Thompson, by e-mail (n.thompson@rediff.com) so that we can gauge numbers and the feasibility of the visit.

The Future Contributions and Roles of European Friendship Associations

There are now some eighteen societies (Friendship Associations) in fourteen European countries with objectives to foster understanding of the culture of Bhutan, to develop good and friendly relations with Bhutan, to support projects in Bhutan and to promote Bhutan in their respective countries. Some have been in existence for more than twenty five years; others have been established much more recently. Their constitutions, structures and sizes vary, but the core objective of friendship is shared.

Many things have changed over time, life in Europe is different now from the end of the last century; arguably developments in Bhutan have been even greater – constitutionally, economically, demographically and socially. Many of the European societies agree that it would be timely to review their activities and connections with institutions in Bhutan to ensure that they continue to be relevant, constructive and effective.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) have agreed to facilitate and support a meeting of representatives of the European societies to be held in Bhutan in late November 2019. Key objectives of this meeting would be:

- ***to gain understanding of the significant social and developmental issues being addressed by the RGoB***
- ***to have greater awareness and understanding of the range of current Civil Society Organisations in Bhutan and their activities and contributions in the country***
- ***to discuss contacts and support which European societies may be able to offer***
- ***to have greater understanding of the expectations of different stakeholders in Bhutan regarding the European societies***
- ***to share ideas where more cooperation is feasible between the European societies***
- ***to discuss issues identified as priorities by individual European societies.***

It is expected that up to four members of each of the European Friendship Associations will attend these meetings and that, of course, includes representatives from our own Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom.

Visit of Prime Minister of India to Bhutan

Narendra Modi made a two-day State Visit to Bhutan in August, shortly after his election for a second term as Prime Minister of India. In a statement before leaving Delhi, Prime Minister Modi said that his visit to Bhutan reflected the high importance his government attached to India's relationship with Bhutan. For Bhutan and her people, this visit was considered to be yet another milestone in the journey of the friendship between Bhutan and India.

The formal inauguration of the 720 MW Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Plant (MHP) was one of the highlights of his visit. The Project, which was started in 2011, cost around Nu 52bn and now has four operating turbines each with a capacity of producing 180 megawatts of electricity. As a result the country's installed power capacity has also increased from some 1,600 MW to about 2,300 MW and a gross revenue of Nu 12bn is expected annually from the sale of this power.



Bhutan's Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

There were several Memoranda of Understanding exchanged during the visit and these agreements were in fields that are a priority for Bhutan. They cover a wide range and include, among others, projects in the fields of education, research, space technology, and medicine and aviation safety. The Prime Minister also addressed the Bhutanese youth at the Royal University of Bhutan Hall . The Prime Ministers of Bhutan and India also launched the RuPay Card during the visit of Narendra Modi. The RuPay Card is an initiative of the Indian Prime

Minister to promote financial inclusion through digital technology in India. The RuPay Card scheme is made possible in Bhutan through the connection of the Bhutan Financial Switch with India's Financial Switch. According to Indian Media, the scheme will be launched in two phases. In the first phase, Indian banks will issue the cards for Indian travellers and citizens in Bhutan and in the second phase, the Bhutanese government will issue the card for its citizens. With the introduction of the RuPay Card in Bhutan, Bhutanese travellers to India can withdraw INR and also make payments with their RuPay Cards in India. Indian travellers to Bhutan can withdraw Ngultrums at ATMs and also make payments at Points of Sale in Bhutan.

Besides reducing the burden of carrying large amounts of cash, the launch of RuPay will also boost the Bhutanese economy by increasing the availability of Indian Rupees within the Bhutanese banking system. It will also help integrate further the economies of both countries. Bhutan is the second country to be part of the internationalisation of the RuPay scheme after Singapore.

Lord Vishwakarma statue cannot go into the river

September 18th was celebrated as Vishwakarma Puja, or the birth anniversary of Lord Vishwakarma, a special day in the Hindu calendar. Of late, however, the ritual has come into conflict with Bhutan's environmental rules and regulations. Environmentalists say that the practice of immersing the statue of Lord Vishwakarma into the river, which is part of the ritual, is hazardous to the aquatic ecosystem because of toxic paints used to decorate the statues. On the eve of the Puja, the National Environment Commission (NEC) issued an enforcement notification which meant that immersing the statues of Lord Vishwakarma



into the river was prohibited. This enforcement followed an initial notification, issued in January 2019, which stated that the dumping of waste in any body of water was against the National Environment Protection Act 2007 (NEPA), the Waste Prevention and Management Act of Bhutan 2009, and the Water Act of Bhutan 2011. Whilst it is recognised that a person has the

fundamental right to a safe and healthy environment, it comes with an equal and corresponding duty to protect and promote the environmental well-being of the country. The notification said that general waste, including construction waste and waste from rituals were being indiscriminately disposed of in various bodies of water, on the roads, at cross-junctions and in public spaces, and it must cease.

The Department of Forests and Park Services, which is responsible for ensuring that statues and other materials are not disposed of into rivers after the Puja, potentially had a challenging day. In Thimphu alone, there are more than 2,500 construction projects underway which meant that about 2,500 statues could be immersed in the Wangchhu river before that evening. Traditionally, the statues were made of mud and painted using natural dyes, whereas many are now made using Plaster of Paris (PoP) and coated with chemical paints that contain heavy metals and other toxic agents. A Department source said that substances from the paint used break down slowly in the river and could harm fish and other aquatic organisms by depriving them of oxygen and could lead to long-term problems like sediment contamination and possible poisoning throughout the food chain.

Whilst using non-toxic paint and natural materials to make statues had been suggested, neither notification specified where and how most of the current statues could be disposed of and, as no alternatives had been planned, most were left lying on the river banks. Officials said some of the accumulated statues were burnt on open dumps and landfill sites, but they would also consult Hindu Pandits to find out if immersing the statues were absolutely necessary. The Hindu Pandits have now confirmed that it is acceptable in future to leave the statues in a suitable open space.

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Pressure on trees from smoke offerings

Early every morning, high above Thimphu, a young monk opens the doors of Changangkha Lhakhang. Life at this popular tourist destination has already begun with the usual prayers and rituals. He places bunches of incense sticks inside the sangbum, a small stupa in the shape of a vase, for a smoke offering and then pieces of fresh cypress and pine are laid on top of the incense.

Informed by religion, smoke offering is an indelible culture and a Bhutanese way of life. Unfortunately the implication of the deep-seated belief of offering smoke to the deities is showing in the most visible forms - the thinning of trees - especially species like cypress and pine. It has become difficult over the years to find trees nearby to be used for smoke offerings and huge cypress trees with their branches lopped stand testimony to this daily practice at the Lhakhang.

Before performing any kind of Buddhist rituals, smoke offering is a requirement for cleansing and purification in the monasteries. But such offerings also happen at home, which add yet further pressure on the nearby forests. The head lam of the Memorial Chorten, Leki Tshering, said that during important rituals the monks go as far as Dochula to collect supplies. "Trees and shrubs such as pangpoe, bahu, sulu, arura, tsendhen, tongphu, and poikar can be used as an offering, but we don't get pine trees. Sometimes, we ask commuters to bring pieces of junipers trees from Dochula."

Although controlled lopping could contribute towards tree growth and timber quality, excessive and unhealthy lopping can cause stress and expose trees to external ailments, pests, and diseases, affecting the tree growth. Forestry officer, Tshering Dorji, said, "Unnecessary lopping could lead to leafy biomass being decreased and the canopy opening being increased which can lead to an increase in growth of understory species." Forest and Nature Conservation Rules and Regulations (FNCRR) 2017 prohibit



lopping activities and requires a special permit and defaulters are liable for a fine of Nu 500 per tree. However the practice is widespread and people rarely come to obtain permits and only fifteen applicants were approved in the past nine months to collect herbs and aromatic substances for manufacturing incense and related substances.

According to National Forest Inventory report, there are close to 14 million juniper trees - corresponding to more than 8 million cubic metres volume - in the country. The species is mostly found at higher altitudes but if further encroachment continues, the species is at risk considering its slow growth as it takes three times as long as other trees to grow. Juniper is also required during cremation and the FNCRR 2017 allows a total of four cubic metres of juniper wood for each cremation. With Bhutan's death rate estimated at about 6.5 per 1,000 persons, about 5,000 cubic metres of juniper are also felled annually for cremation.

NEWS AND EVENTS

WeChat brings home missing yaks

The small and remote ancient hamlet of Soe, which is home to around 200 people and twenty eight households, is among the villages farthest from any surfaced road. It has no access to television, radio, and newspapers and most people have not seen any form of traditional media. It is among the last villages to catch up with a modernising country, having been connected to the electricity grid only three years ago and to a mobile phone network only three months ago.

Every year in October, Soe attracts around 400 people, including some sixty government officials, to its Mountain Festival which it has been running for six years and Bhutan's most popular trekking routes – Snowman Trek, Laya-Lingzhi Trek, Jomolhari Trek, and Soe-Yaksa Trek – pass through the gewog.



However the arrival of 3G cellular service has caught the imagination of the villagers. Most of them are already on WeChat touching base and forming groups to discuss community issues. Soe is also home to Ap Chonyi Dorji, the composer and singer of the celebrated but haunting song dedicated to a handsome yak identified for slaughter, which touches a special chord in the mountains around Soe. It is perhaps this link with the past that has prompted local yak herders to work collaboratively to use the voice messaging app to bring missing yaks home. One herder said that WeChat had made yak herding so much easier as the whole community of herders is now on WeChat sharing real time information on the whereabouts of over 1,400 yaks.

The villagers have also realised that such new resources are a powerful tool of empowerment. They hope that WeChat, the only form of media they can use, not only brings home their missing yaks, but also drives home their message against waste resulting from the hundreds of tourists and their guides who pass through the village. Whilst they bring loads of foodstuffs, including packaged foods appreciated in the mountains, many leave waste along the trails which is proving to be a mounting challenge.

Winning App

Team Druk Rimdo Service, an online service for rituals, won the best business idea at a Global Women Start-up Conference in Thimphu this September.

Ngawang Choden, who owns a cafe in Punakha, is the creator of the Druk Rimdo Service. The Service aims, via an online app, to make it easier to access monks and nuns to perform religious rituals at home. The app has the option of several different rituals and the number of monks or nuns required, along with the prices. She said, "The app is like any other online shopping facility. We are all aware that religion is the root of our culture in Bhutan, so whether you are religious or not, it is expected that you will perform all the traditional rituals. As a result the demand for monks and nuns is high and whilst the supply is also high, it's just not organized properly."

Twenty women from diverse backgrounds took part in this three day event which aimed to support women moving towards financial independence through business entrepreneurship. Druk Rimdo Services will represent Bhutan in Singapore at a global summit in March 2020. Sixty seven cities around the world will be participating in the event.

BNB launches new services

With the launch of Bhutan National Bank (BNB) payment gateway in August, tour operators can now directly receive payment from their international visitors. The system, that rides on the national online international payment gateway, will accept 135 different currencies from around the world and cards including VISA, Mastercard, AMEX and Discover, among others. Without access to a proper payment gateway, tour operators had to spend weeks processing payment of visa fees from their international guests. Some tour operators shared bitter experiences of having lost visitors due to the lengthy and unsecure banking processes.

Finance Minister, Namgay Tshering, when inaugurating the new corporate building recently, said that the bank's credit relationship has grown by over 40 times from Nu 687 million to about Nu 30 billion in four decades. He said, "There is immense development in the banking service and BNB is one of the banks that offers employment opportunities and a high salary to the employees."

REPORTS AND UPDATES

Overcoming nutritional issues

To help address problems of childhood anaemia and stunting, the Ministry of Health (MOH), with the support of UNICEF, has recently launched “Sprinkles”. This is a micro-nutrient powder, packed in one gram sachets, that contain a blend of fifteen vitamins and minerals, which can be easily mixed at home to make food more nutritious for children.

During their first three years, children have increased nutritional needs and are at a higher risk of developing deficiencies if not fed adequately. The National Nutrition Survey, carried out in 2015, found that two in five children were anaemic, whilst one in five were stunted - both serious public health issues according to the World Health Organization.

The main cause of child malnutrition in Bhutan is poor child feeding practices and the Survey found that almost nine in ten children do not get the recommended varied diet. It has been agreed that the increased burden of anaemia and stunting, particularly among infants and children, needs to be addressed, especially in view of the “devastating impact on cognitive and motor development of an entire generation of children both now as well as in the future,” said Health Minister, Dechen Wangmo. “The Sprinkles Programme is a part of the maternal and child health policy, which is working on accelerating better health outcomes of all mothers and children in Bhutan. We have a responsibility to finally break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and, by stopping child malnutrition today, we will essentially be securing a healthy and productive future for our next generation.”

The MOH is confident that the Sprinkles Programme, which is an evidence-based and cost-effective intervention, will improve the quality of complementary food for children aged six months to two years. Health centres will distribute the product to mothers and caregivers when they bring their child in for routine growth monitoring. The Programme was piloted in nine health centres in three dzongkhags of Samtse, Dagana and Mongar, and assessed to have been successful in improving the infant and young child feeding practices and nutrition status of children aged six months to two years. It is intended that the Programme will be used in all Health Centres by June 2020.

Wetlands and river systems critical for habitat conservation

Bhutan’s wetlands and river systems are one of the most important habitats in the world for the critically endangered white-bellied heron and the vulnerable black-necked crane. According to records with the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) every winter, about 600 black-necked cranes visit the country and twenty-five white-bellied heron out of sixty individuals in the world are found to be living in the country.



Bhutan is estimated to have more than 3,500 high altitude natural wetlands, which is a source of various ecosystem services in the country and the region. Wetlands are considered an important aspect of a natural environment as they provide cultural and regulating services such as climate regulation, carbon sequestration, and flood protection. The omnivorous black-necked cranes feed on seeds, tubers, fish, vertebrates and invertebrates in the wetlands and agricultural fields whilst the shy and elusive species, the white-bellied heron, live along the few rivers of Bhutan. However in recent years extraction of river materials is said to have disturbed their habitats, thus displacing the species from its original place.

New look at the baggage collection area at Paro Airport



Booming Stock Market

The Bhutanese stock market, considered among the smallest in the world, has seen significant growth during the past five years. Going by its records, its value has grown from Nu 22.5bn in 2014 to almost Nu 50bn today. This booming market is attributed to technological advancements in the country which have made access to the market easier and the introduction of share splitting, where the face value of a share is brought down for the low-income group to participate. According to the Royal Securities Exchange of Bhutan Limited (RSEBL), another major factor is the people's increased financial literacy. Since 2017, the RSEBL has been conducting a Financial Literacy Programme on the fundamentals of the Stock Exchange. Promod Chhetri, the General Manager of RSEBL, said, "We started a weekly literacy programme and we are gearing up for a road show next year in all the regions. We have trained more than 2,500 investors." However, despite the increased financial literacy rate, it is still challenging for the RSEBL to have companies listed on the stock market. Most private businesses prefer not to do so because of the limitations of government policies regarding e-commerce and lack of incentives for the listed companies. Listing a company requires a considerable amount of paper work, full public disclosure of company information and is also financially expensive. Today there are twenty-one companies listed with the Authority. The RSEBL was established in August 1993 as a non-profit making organization under the aegis of the Royal Monetary Authority.

Playful parenting

In a bid to promote playful parenting throughout the country, the Ministry of Health (MoH) will shortly implement a Project called '*Prescription to Play: A Framework to integrate, scale-up and sustain playful parenting in the health system (P2P)*'. The draft framework, which was exchanged between the implementers in late September, will be completed by the end of the month by the MoH and Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan. The Project attempts to help Bhutanese parents become better care givers. The MoH and the Save the Children Fund in Bhutan are initiating a three-year programme which aims to empower parents to engage in playful learning with their children. Parents will be trained to help their children reach their full potential by engaging with them in playful learning.

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NOTE

*If you have not done so already, please send your e-mail address to ***rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com*** who will add it to the database.*

There is no plan to go paperless, but it is often convenient to communicate information electronically at short notice.