

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



NUMBER 70

PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

SPRING 2020



Delegates from the UK Society attending the European meetings in Thimphu in November 2019. Also in the photograph are the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Dr Lotay Tshering and Vice President of the Society and British Hon. Consul to Bhutan, Michael Rutland OBE. A full report of the meetings of the European Friendship Societies in Bhutan is included on pages 6 and 7.

Annual General Meeting

**Tuesday 21 April 2020
at 6.00 pm
at**

**The National Liberal Club,
Whitehall Place,
London SW1A 2HE**

**After the AGM there will be a
break followed at 7.00pm by short
talks by Michael Rutland, and by
Bhutanese students in the UK.**

**Further information and agenda
enclosed**

Tuesday 24 March 2020

**The Annual Film Evening will be held at SOAS,
Thornhaugh St, Bloomsbury, London WC1H 0XG*
It will start at 6.00 pm with two short films, with a
short break at 6.45 pm followed by a feature film.**

*** Please note this is a new venue for this event**

Saturday 2 May 2020

**The visit to Michael Blooman's Arboreteum and
studio will be going ahead and members who
have already expressed interest will be contacted
shortly. Other members who are interested are
requested to contact the Events Group Secretary,
Nicholas Thompson on n.thompson@rediff.com**

See last Newsletter for more information on this event

MEETING REPORTS

Annual Dinner 2019

On 30 October 2019, over seventy members and guests returned to the Polish Hearth Club in London for our Society's Annual Dinner. This year twenty three Bhutanese students and residents in the UK attended.



Members were delighted that HE Aum Pema Choden, Bhutan's Ambassador in Brussels, was able to attend as our principle guest. Speaking at the Dinner, Ambassador Choden conveyed the deep appreciation of the Royal Government and the people of Bhutan to the Society for its contribution in fostering goodwill and friendship between the people of both Kingdoms and also for the growing ties between Bhutan and the United Kingdom.

Practical ideas for Bhutan to demonstrate resilience in the face of climate change

On 7 October 2019, Professor Steve Newman spoke to members of the Society about Bhutan and harmonious resilience in the face of climate change. Questions central to the talk were (1) how can we in the UK help our friends to become resilient to the massive pressures of climate change and (2) how can we equip wise advisors in Bhutan to make what Drukpa Kunley might call "auspicious mistakes", so we can all become happier and more resilient. He also followed Lama Kunley by making "provocative propositions" or asking "ticklish questions". Professor Newman's first involvement in Bhutan was in 2009 when he led a team of European consultants to assess how the EU could develop a new kind of relationship with Bhutan and continue the EU's support to the Renewable Natural Resources (RNR) Sector. Both parties wished to move from a project approach to one of budget support. He has been on many further missions for the European Commission since then, that have developed the links between RNR and climate change. The work has led to total funding of over 80 million Euros in terms of bilateral and regional funds.

In his view, judicious climate change resilience includes the following aspects:

1. Increasing food security in the face of rising import costs linked to the changing diets in China, India and other places where meat consumption is increasing
2. Obtaining synergy with other living things and the power of restorative landscapes
3. Ability to attract investment e.g. climate change finance to find solutions
4. Ability to find the positives in climate change e.g. opportunities for growing new crops as the weather changes
5. Ability to benefit from friendship and harmony as part of contrived learning partnerships at all levels in society, all scales of operation and across all sectors

MEETING REPORT

Negotiating religious practice as a woman in Bhutan

On 17 January 2020, members and guests listened with interest to Dr Françoise Pommaret speak about women religious practitioners in contemporary Bhutan and their emerging socio-religious roles. This is a summary of her talk.

The main religion of Bhutan is Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana) which has impacted the whole society and its way of thinking. However, when it comes to women, Bhutanese society faces two interdependent dichotomies:

- The first is between the ideal of Vajrayana where women are equal to men in attaining enlightenment, and the realities of the monastic set-up and the popular belief that women are impure and can only attain enlightenment in a man's (preferably a monk's) body.
- The second is that, although women in Bhutan are socially in a much better situation than many women in the world (inheritance, individual rights, financial independence), when it comes to



the monastic set-up, they are marginalised.

Add to all this, the fact that in Himalayan cultural areas, women have always been perceived as the temptresses or the demonesses; in other words, the force which has to be subdued.

Therefore women in a male oriented religious context are often pushed to the fringes and take up socio-religious roles which, although they are Buddhist, relate to non-Buddhist beliefs. They are divine intercessors and through traditional rituals they repair the links between human beings and invisible deities.

According to the area they are called Pamo, Nyenjom or Delom. In traditional

Bhutan, Buddhist nuns were few and often neglected and were not given extensive religious education. However this started to change when girls, out of religious aspirations, started to join and be educated in nunneries in India and Nepal. Since 2009, and mostly thanks to the impetus given by the Bhutan Nuns Foundation (<https://bhutannuns.org>) under the patronage of Her Majesty the Royal Mother Ashi Tshering Yandoen Wangchuck, women joined the monastic establishment in Bhutan and received proper religious studies and an improved lifestyle.

Lay women do say prayers, do go on pilgrimages and organise traditional house rituals but, when the children are grown up, they sometimes devote their lives to religious pursuits and can even take residence near a religious establishment. Among the young women, the practice of Throma is gaining popularity. This liturgy, which is performed for the benefit of sentient beings and to cut attachments, is now practiced by groups of men and women who chant the prayers and play a large double-faced hand drum. These recent changes in Bhutanese society, including education and gender rights, have now allowed women to become more empowered and assertive in the field of religion.

Dr Françoise Pommaret is a cultural anthropologist, Director of Research at France's National Centre for Scientific Research and an associate Professor at the College of Language and Culture (CLCS) at the Royal University of Bhutan

Drametse Lhakhang in Mongar is restored

The Lhakhang underwent a major renovation in 2014 after the 2009 earthquake. The Lhakhang was constructed more than 400 years ago and three of the four walls of the Utse (central tower) destroyed by the earthquake, have now been restored.

According to project engineer, Thinley Wangchuk, the initial plan was to replace the wooden part, but it was found that the walls of three sides had suffered major cracks and it had to be reconstructed from the ground. He said restoration work was carried out in three stages. The first stage involved the restoration of the Utse, the second stage consisted of the construction of a conference hall, library, classroom and kitchen whilst the third stage



included the construction of a hostel block for 180 monks and toilets. The project also includes site development, electrification, installing fire safety measures, furniture and computers. Project officials are working on landscaping and beautification for the consecration planned to be held next year. The cost, of around Nu 170 million, has been funded by the Government. Being one of the most notable spiritual centres of Peling tradition in the east, the Drametse Buddhist College will incorporate sculpture, painting, English literature and IT courses besides the regular subjects. Drametse, which literally means 'peak without enemy' and the Lhakhang, an origin of Drametse ngacham (dance of drums of Drametse), was founded in 1511 by Ani Choeten Zangmo, the granddaughter of Terton Pema Lingpa. The Lhakhang houses important relics, which include Kudung and the sacred terms.

Green number plates for green cars

As from November 2019, electric vehicles (EV) will carry green number plates. In making this announcement, the Information and Communications Ministry said that it intends to offer incentives to all electric vehicle drivers, such as free parking and free entry into congested zones.

The main objective is to help maintain the status of Bhutan as a carbon neutral country and to distinguish EV's as an environment-friendly vehicle. The EV initiative was first launched in 2014 with the aim of both reducing carbon emission and dependency on fossil fuels. As of November 2019, there were 103 registered EVs, most of which are in Thimphu.

The Ministry has also initiated an EV project called 'Bhutan Sustainable Low Emission Urban Transport Systems' with the budget support from the Global Environment Facility and technical support from the United Nations Development Programme. The three-year project intends to facilitate the transition to low emission vehicles particularly the use of EV and aims to have 300 more EV's operating as taxis within Thimphu.

At present there are five charging stations around Thimphu and Paro and, by the end of April 2020, another 15-18 charging stations will be available, which will include Punakha, Wangduephodrang, Haa, and Phuentsholing. A Government official said that focusing on EV's could increase the revenue of the country. "One of the greatest threats to fiscal deficit is the import of fossil fuel. We export clean energy to earn revenue, but at the same time, we expend a huge budget on fossil fuel which is ironic."

However, as it is an emerging technology, a lack of awareness, confidence and trust are major challenges. He added, "People still have the preconceived idea that electric vehicles cannot travel longer distances. Now with improved technologies, we have EV's that can travel 400-500 kms in a single charge. We want all the Government agencies to use electric vehicles and set an example to the public."

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Haa introduces a beautification audit

As Haa prepares for the sixth Royal Bhutan Flower Exhibition (RBF) later this year, the Dzongkhag Tshogdu has decided to introduce an annual beautification audit. This is to ensure that every investment made for the celebration would remain and be sustained. The Dzongkhag will pilot a beautification audit and the administration will come up with specific guidelines.

The Government has posted a Dzongkhag Beautification Officer (DBO) in every Dzongkhag and their primary mandate is to develop a long term plan for beautification of that Dzongkhag and to ensure long term sustainability where the aim is not to celebrate the flower exhibition as just a one off event. The DBO in Haa will also be tasked with the responsibility of auditing the beautification works every year, just like any



other financial audit. Dzongdag Kinzang Dorji said that the preparation of the RBF in Haa will be done on a permanent basis and nothing will be removed after the event, except for some items on the main event site. These developed sites will be an asset for the Dzongkhag and will be treated like any other asset and will be subject to full accountability. The audit will cover the entire Dzongkhag including the Dzongkhag administration office, religious institutions, community Lhakhangs, the main event site, dzongkhag administration, gewogs offices, schools, hospital and BHUs, RNR centres,

regional offices for forests and parks, riverine projects, telecom, BPC and Financial Institutions.

The RBF, which is scheduled for June in Haa, will showcase the Dzongkhag's commitment to portray Haa as Beautiful, Unique and Sustainable (BUS). The flowers will be only one of the components since "making beautiful" also includes, planting trees by the road, constructing parks and benches at public places, landscaping near important monuments and public places, and maintaining clean surroundings. The Exhibitions were traditionally held in a designated place. Celebrations, however, in Haa will cover all six gewogs, the town, drungkhag, and institutional areas such as schools, monasteries, BHUs, regional offices and all residential areas. All residents in the Dzongkhag have been asked to participate in the celebration by cleaning their homes, and planting flowers and trees in their surroundings.

Keeping traditional crafts alive



Lekila works as a caretaker at Trashigang Secondary School but, during his free time, he makes bows and arrows. In his younger days he was a good archer, but his mother took an aversion to his wasting time on such things and would even destroy his arrows. However Lekila persisted with his hobby and slowly perfected his skills to now make about 15 bows and 20 arrows every month. It has now become his chief source of income. He is particularly happy if there is a traditional archery tournament in Trashigang as he gets flooded with orders - which happens also as Losar and Thruwab approach. Lekila collects bamboo and shaft materials from many surrounding areas but he said those from Chamgang make the best arrows. "They are slimmer and lighter," he said. "Making

traditional bows takes time and although making an arrow is easy, it does require a lot of concentration." His business has stood him in good stead as, with the extra money, he has been able to buy a plot of land just above the school and pay off all his loans. "More important," he said, "I have been able to educate all my five children."

NEWS AND REPORTS

Meeting of the European Bhutan Friendship Associations

Forty five representatives from thirteen of the European Societies (Friendship Associations) participated in the meeting held in Bhutan between 20 and 29 November, 2019. The Bhutan Society of the UK was represented by Andrew Sutton, Dorry Friesen, Elizabeth Jacobson and Nicholas Thompson, as well as by Michael Rutland who was also a co-organiser of much of the programme.

The key objectives for this meeting were outlined in the last Newsletter (*Issue 69 page 2*) and the programme developed to address these objectives included a number of briefings and presentations involving:

The Honourable Prime Minister

Officials from the Ministries of Health, Education and Foreign Affairs

Director General of the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB)

President of the new Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies

Chairman of the Civil Society Organisations Authorities Board

CEO of the Thimphu TechPark

President of the Loden Foundation, along with some entrepreneurs supported by the Foundation.

UN Country Co-ordinator for Bhutan

Dasho Dzongdag on Haa's Tourism Policy

A wide range of issues, challenges and opportunities were discussed which included the following:

Skills, employment & entrepreneurship

- Over 3,000 university graduates a year enter the job market.
- The Government takes up to 500, and the corporate sector another 500; the rest risk being unemployed or under-employed. The TechPark and the Loden Foundation are examples of organisations aiming to fill the gap, but much remains to be done.
- *'Bhutanese people are traditionally hard-working, but as the country received lots of aid, two generations grew up being 'spoon-fed' by, and dependent on, the state'* (Dr Karma Phuntsho, President, Loden Foundation).
- Cultural perceptions remain a challenge; in particular, graduates (or their parents) prefer a Government sector job or seeking work abroad (esp. to Australia and the Middle East).

Climate change

- The climate crisis is a major threat and Bhutan is already beginning to suffer from erratic rainfall patterns. There is likely to be major disruption to the two current pillars of the economy: hydro power and the pristine ecosystems which draw tourists.
- Additional threats include climate-related disasters (e.g. the bursting of glacial lakes) and a future influx of climate migrants (e.g. from low-lying Bangladesh).
- Bhutan takes its responsibilities seriously and chairs the UN's LDC group on Climate Change.
- Despite Bhutan's green image, gaps are evident, e.g:
 - The TCB markets Bhutan as 'the world's only carbon negative economy' while seeking to increase the number of tourists who fly in, while new concrete hotels continue to be built to accommodate both international and regional tourists.
- Bhutan exports green energy to India, but also imports fossil fuels in the winter.

LDC graduation

- Bhutan is scheduled to 'graduate' and join the UN's Middle Income Countries at the end of the period of the current Government - in 2023.
- Many donors have either scaled back their Aid Programmes or pulled out altogether.
- There will be changes in trade rules and tariffs and, potentially, domestic taxation.
- Many people - including the Prime Minister - see this as an opportunity which should be approached with enthusiasm, as the chance to replace grants with loans and investment, seems attractive.

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NEWS AND REPORTS

Meeting of the European Bhutan Friendship Associations cont'd

Demographics and rural – urban migration

- The fertility rate in Bhutan has been slowly declining in recent years and at 1.95 is currently below the replacement rate.
- From an environmental perspective this may well be a good thing, as it will be seen to help avoid the pressure of high populations on forests and resources. However, from a macro-economic point of view, an ageing population is a major challenge. The Prime Minister is among those concerned about birth levels below the replacement rate.
- The rapid growth of Thimphu is impossible to miss for anyone who has visited previously, while areas of eastern Bhutan in particular are suffering from abandonment of farms.
- On rural-urban migration, the Prime Minister raised the interesting issue that it is not just about encouraging younger citizens to stay in or move to rural areas, but also those, such as Government employees who stop work aged 58, to return to their villages in retirement.

Tourism

- The official strategy or mantra of 'low volume, high impact' remains, but what does this mean in practice and what will be the effect if the number of tourists rise to 500,000 a year?
- International tourist numbers have levelled off over the last few years and the growth in total numbers during this period is due almost entirely to South Asian, principally Indian, tourists. There are serious issues - a key one being that South Asian (SAARC) tourists do not have to pay the daily charge, employ a local driver or guide or book through a travel agent. So, few bring any economic benefit and there are reports of a lack of respect for local culture.
- There are around 1,500 to 2,000 tour agencies and the market is saturated.
- The Director General of the Tourism Council of Bhutan reported that:
 - A draft new National Tourism Policy was being presented to the Government and is expected to be approved in 2020
 - One key feature is to be a single 'Sustainable Development Fee' (SDF) which would apply to all tourists, regional and international alike

One of the highlights of the trip for many was visiting the Haa Valley, which retains many traditional-style farmhouses, and to hear from Dasho Dzongdag of plans for a sympathetic development of Haa as a tourist destination including:

- A moratorium on the construction of new, high-rise hotels of the type that have been sprouting up in Thimphu
- Banning new sawmills from operating and clamping down on any current ones that infringe their licence
- Encouraging the development of home-stay accommodation. Whilst this does present some practical challenges for overseas tourists, it offers significant benefits for local hosts.

A discussion on the final day between the various European Societies covered many topics and it was agreed that this gathering in Bhutan had been most beneficial and that it would be helpful to have similar meetings in the future.

The Hungarian delegation gave details of their proposed plan for hosting the next meeting of Society representatives in Europe which would hopefully take place in September 2020.

NOTE: More information will be available in the next Newsletter about the development and roles of the Civil Society Organisations in Bhutan. Plans are also being developed for future communication opportunities for European Societies directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bhutan.

The fourth-generation Shagzop

Trashiyangtse is known for hewing Dapa (wooden bowls). However, only a few people in the Dzongkhag can narrate the history of its origin. The art is long associated with people of two gewogs in Bumdeling and Yangtse. Today, there are more than 40 artisans in Trashiyangtse, but not all are known to be skilled artisans. The master artisans, Shagzops, have made their livelihood through wood turning over many generations. Most of the Shagzops are descendants of renowned master artisan Pema Norbu, who died around 1968. Today, two of his grandsons, Tenzin Jamtsho and Jangchub, are said to be revered artisans in the Dzongkhag. Tenzin Jamtsho, 66 and his brother Jangchu, who inherited the skills from their ancestors, are fourth-generation artisans. Tenzin Jamtsho was busy making Dapa at his workshop above Trashiyangtse town and said, as he started giving the coarse bowl a rough shape, "This is what my father did after inheriting the skill from my grandfather Pema Norbu, and he learned from his father Lobzang." He claimed that Shagzops became popular after his father exported both skills and products to other Dzongkhags. What makes the product more expensive is the pattern (locally called Dzab), that decorates the burr. All the patterns that come with the burr have a name. Tasochenma or the pattern of horse teeth is considered the most expensive, followed by Woogthra or the pattern of owl feathers. Likewise, the Meri chenma (flame patterned), Phozab (large stripes), Mozab (small stripes), are considered as more common patterns. Bowls of seven to eight-inches in diameter, made of highly figured wood burrs, fetch enough money to buy a decent car, costing approximately Nu 700,000. However these are now uncommon. The appealing finish to the product is done with lacquer and helps the patterns look more elegant. The lacquering process can be done only between the end of June and September when there is the right proportion of humidity and temperature to dry the lacquer properly. Traditionally the soapy milk sap was harvested from a tree (seyshing) and stored in containers. Today most in the business use imported Japanese lacquer. For patterned burrs, a minimum of twelve to thirteen coats of lacquer have to be applied whereas simpler burrs require only about seven coats. With dwindling sources of wood burrs, Shagzops employ burr hunters in places further afield such as Dagana, Haa, Wangduephograng and Chukkha. One of the Shagzops said that, to prevent over harvesting of burrs, the forestry division allow only two matured trees to be cut per year by a Shagzop and then only with a trade licence which has a long approval process. Products in the showrooms in Trashiyangtse and elsewhere, range from traditional bowls such as Geylong Zheycha and Draphor (both used by monks), Gophor (small bowl with a lid), Bayphor (Tibetan bowl), Pa-Dapa (large bowls used as meat containers), Phob (cup), Tsamder (used for serving snacks), Lhungzed and Karma-Lhungzed (begging bowls), Nyey shan phob (silver hatched cup) to modern wine cups and beer mugs.

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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.