

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



NUMBER 67

PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

SPRING 2019

Meeting with Dasho Tshering Tobgay

There was standing room only when over 50 members and friends of our Society welcomed Dasho Tshering Tobgay on 14th January 2019 in London's National Liberal Club. The topic of the former Prime Minister of Bhutan was a personal view on future challenges for Bhutan and his visit followed his participation in The International Society for Bhutan Studies Conference in Oxford.

The Dasho started by summarising his Oxford speech. He celebrated the leadership of the Kings who have overseen enormous and positive developments in Bhutan, while helping to protect society, culture and the environment; and their wisdom in invoking Gross National Happiness (GNH) as guidance for this endeavour. Then he picked out three challenges faced by Bhutan. Firstly, the risk that democratic politics undermines this legacy, either because future politicians lose sight of GNH in their policy choices, or because voting could have the same effect by favouring short-termism. His second challenge was that of development, including economic, welfare, health, education and population stagnation. As an enabler for development, "GDP isn't everything, but it is something", he said. Finally, he highlighted existential challenges: whether it be friction between neighbouring countries, the potential impact of uncontrolled immigration, or the occurrence of a major natural disaster such as an earthquake. Any of these could test the resilience of Bhutan.

Members' questions on politics, mining, the economy, urbanisation, waste management, and hydro power were met with good humour. The Dasho would not be drawn to express political regrets, but commended the new Government and the system which is producing administration changes rather than incumbency.

Asked for his view of the Bhutan Society, the Dasho praised the role that it plays. He made a particular plea for members to involve younger generations to ensure the UK-Bhutan relationship continues, and requested, "Where there are successes, to celebrate them; where there are challenges, to point them out."



FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

The 2nd Annual Film Evening

6pm Tuesday 26 March 2019

***at the Polish Hearth Club, 55 Princes Terrace, Exhibition Road
London SW7 2PN***

This promises to be a night of exciting and interesting movies. Starting at 6pm, we will view three to four short films. This will be followed by an interval of an hour and at 8pm we will show a feature film of about 90 minutes. This could be a documentary of life in Bhutan or a light hearted human story. The aim is to make all the productions different in content so that a broader image of Bhutan is depicted. Bhutan has a large and growing film industry but relatively few films are in English or have English subtitles.....So the hunt is on.

No tickets will be issued for this event. Members and Bhutanese honorary members may bring guests. There will be no charge for members and honorary members, but guests will be asked for a £10 donation.

Please support this evening. The larger the audience the more interested the filmmakers in Bhutan are in sending their movies and, at a later stage hopefully, getting the Directors to join us. The format will be similar to last year: join us at 6pm if you can or after the interval at 8pm.

Please contact Elizabeth Jacobson at tookiej@btinternet.com if you wish to attend so that we can ensure we have enough seats for everyone.

The Polish Hearth Club is offering the Bhutan Society a one or two course meal in the interval. Those interested should call the Club on 020 7589 0101 to book a table.

Highgrove visit

Several members have registered their interest in this tour. (see last issue) Once the date has been confirmed, full details will be circulated.

If you would like to join this tour, and have not already contacted the organiser, Dorothea Friesen, please do so before the end of March on:

dorotheafriesen@gmail.com

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

6pm Monday 8 April 2019

***at the National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place,
London, SW1A 2HE***

*The meeting will be chaired by the Society's President,
Sir Simon Bowes Lyon*

*After the AGM there will be a short break, followed
at 7pm by several short talks by visiting
Bhutanese post graduate students*

See enclosed notice for more information

SOCIETY NEWS

Annual Dinner 2018

On 26 October 2018, ninety two members and guests returned to the National Liberal Club for our Society's annual dinner. The reception was held in the Library and the dinner was served in the David Lloyd George Room, both grand rooms reflecting Victorian neo-gothic splendour.



Members were delighted that HE Aum Pema Choden, Bhutan's Ambassador in Brussels, was able to attend as our principal guest – along with her husband Tokey Dorji and three of her senior staff. The Ambassador thanked the Society for holding the dinner in a quintessential English gentleman's club and allowing her to remember daydreaming in her youth of the exploits of Bertie Wooster and other members of the Drones' Club.

She confirmed that, following recent parliamentary elections, there had been a smooth and successful transition of power to a new Government in Bhutan. Political engagement of the Bhutanese, as candidates and voters, had increased and in absolute numbers,

was at an all-time high in the latest elections. The Ambassador reported that there was now a new and significant Five Year Plan (2019-2023) as Bhutan expects to graduate from the UN status of least developed to lower middle income country by the end of the Plan.

The Ambassador was delighted to see so many fellow Bhutanese at the dinner, especially the growing number of students, including several supported by Chevening scholarships awarded by the UK Government. She thanked the Society for supporting the students in the United Kingdom and asked them to maintain close links with us in the future. Our thanks go to Elizabeth Jacobson, Dinner Secretary, who organised the most enjoyable evening and even created table decorations and menu covers with hand crafted blue poppies. We are also very grateful to many members for their generosity in funding the dinner cost of Bhutanese guests.



Website Photo Gallery

As part of the development of the Society's website, we are considering adding an on-line photo gallery. We are therefore looking for Bhutan-related photographs - beautiful shots of course - but in particular the unusual perspective (both in a visual and social meaning), the quirky and the less visited.

Any photographs must be the property of the person submitting them and, in doing so, understands that the Society will have non-exclusive usage rights i.e. the person submitting the photographs will retain the copyright.

If you are interested in contributing to this new on-line gallery, please e-mail the Website Co-ordinator, Lucy Hornberger, at website@bhutansociety.org for guidelines BEFORE submitting photos.

The Movable Cultural Property Act

This Act, passed in 2005, defines the rules and procedures around the sale or export of non-valuable cultural properties or non-antiques. The transaction of non-valuable cultural properties is subject to approval from the Department of Culture. The Act also defines the rules concerning antiques or valuable cultural properties which are generally more than a hundred years old. Such objects cannot be sold or taken out of the country under any circumstances.

The Department of Culture believes that not many are aware of these rules and restrictions so a meeting with members of the Handicraft Association of Bhutan was held recently to acquaint them with this Act. Phendey Lekshey Wangchuk, the Chief Cultural Property Officer with the Department of Culture, said such measures are critical to preserving antiques. “This is one method to protect our antiques from being taken out of the country,” he said. “They include objects used for religious



offerings and worship, also movable objects, which are expressions and testimony of human creation, or are of the evolution of nature, which are of artistic, historical, cultural, religious, social, archaeological or technical value and interest as Kuten, Sungten and Thukten.” He added that the antiques don’t necessarily have to be very old and gave an example of the belongings of the late Geshey Gedun Rinchen, who was the 69th Je Khenpo of Bhutan, which are now considered as antiques.

One member of the Handicraft Association of Bhutan said the meeting had been very helpful as many of the business people and tourism agencies were not aware of the procedures involved in the transaction of handicraft items. Tourists were often having non-valuable cultural properties such as old Tensum, ritual objects, and handicrafts mistakenly seized by customs officials at Paro Airport as the items were being taken out of the country without appropriate documentation from the Culture Department. However if the items are classed as antiques, the owners risk facing prosecution since the sale of antiques is totally prohibited by The Moveable Cultural Property Act of Bhutan, 2005.

Successful currency exchange service

The Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) has collected USD 1M in 369 days after it had set up a foreign exchange counter in Paro International Airport. This is in addition to about USD 0.9 M the Bank of Bhutan (BoB) has collected at its foreign exchange counter in about seven months. Together, the two exchange counters at the Airport earned close to USD 2M.

RMA Governor, Dasho Penjore, said this initiative would not only facilitate the visitors exchange currency at the Airport, but also help the country build its foreign currency reserve. Even in the absence of RMA counters, he said private vendors and businesses were involved in facilitating the foreign currency exchange. “It is the same thing because those who benefit are Bhutanese and the currency is used within the country,” he said.

While it is the Constitutional requirement and RMA’s mandate to maintain a reserve enough to finance 12 months of imports, Bhutan now has sufficient reserves to meet 24 months of imports. The RMA has plans to establish more such counters. The rupee counter at the Immigration Office in Phuentsholing collects about Rs 500,000 on a daily basis and within five months, the rupee counter has added more than Rs 13 million to the rupee reserve, which will easily meet the rupee needs of the pilgrims visiting India.

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

The new Government

Following their win at the third Parliamentary Election in October 2018, the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), led by their Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering, has appointed 10 new ministers to their Cabinet: three ministers each from the east, south and west and one from the central area of Bhutan. They include:



Dasho Sherub Gyeltshen, 63, Ministry for Home and Cultural Affairs.

Dr. Tandi Dorji, 50, Minister for Foreign Affairs. He is also the founding member of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT)

Loknath Sharma, 47, Minister for Economic Affairs

Namgay Tshering, 39, Minister for Finance

Jai Bir Rai, 45, Minister for Education

Dechen Wangmo, 42, Minister for Health.

She is the only woman minister in the Cabinet.

Karma Donnen Wangdi, 47, Minister for Information and Communications

Dorji Tshering, 39, Minister for Works and Human Settlement

Ugyen Dorji, 32, Minister for Labour. He is the youngest minister in the Cabinet

Yeshey Penjor, 54, Minister for Agriculture and Forests

One of the highlights of the DNT's Election Manifesto was its 25 important and urgent pledges that it has promised to start working on within 120 days of the time it gets into office i.e. before early March 2019. Summarised below are those pledges:

25 PLEDGES IN 120 DAYS

1. Establish a high level committee to draft the country's new long-term vision, *Bhutan: Vision 2045* to carry our nation forward.
2. Establish a dedicated water agency with a plan of action to ensure water - DRINKING and IRRIGATION - for all by 2021.
3. Close Samrang meat processing plant and convert it into vegetable farming project. PROMOTE vegetarian meals during official functions
4. Develop "Suung Joen" app to enable Bhutanese to communicate freely without the need to recharge voucher. Remove five percent voucher tax.
5. Implement free nutritious lunch program in all schools.
6. Initiate and implement discontinuing examinations until Class VI, and removing Class X cut-off point.
7. Free access, 24/7, to all online data within the country - BBS, online shopping, websites browsing and document downloading - by installing intranet technology.
8. Institute the fourth pay commission to revise civil service salaries and allowances.
9. Begin projects to address stray dogs problem, manage wastes more efficiently and develop a blue print for building adequate residential complexes.
10. Set up insurance schemes for farmers to protect their crops.
11. Develop professional service standards and minimal turn-around times for all public services.
12. Institute mechanisms for delivery of all public services in gewogs and thromdes through one-stop shops.
13. Contributing to decentralisation process, support tshogpas by opening offices for them at chiwogs.
14. Establish a tourism development board and initiate implementation of *Bhutan Tourism Review, 2016* recommendations.
15. Finalise a framework, in consultation with teachers nationwide, to reduce teacher workload. Provide administrative/HR support for extra/co-curricular activities.
16. Review the national youth policy and implement a national youth action plan to address the needs of our youth.
17. Identify and list the country's skills needs and design a program to train youth for employment. Complete review of employment policies to strengthen it and draw up strategies to achieve jobs and livelihood opportunities for all.
18. Enumerate and provide budget to all community lhakhangs to support them to conduct annual rituals and festivals.
19. Cabinet ministers will use electric/hybrid cars for local travels.
20. Meet taxi tshogpa, thromde representatives and other agencies to address issues facing taxi drivers over parking space, professional driving licence and ownership, age of vehicles and age of drivers.
21. Review the 12th Plan to include revolving fund for CSOs and funds for film and documentary promotion.
22. Review and revise working conditions and salaries of RBP personal to ease long duty hours and appropriate compensation for additional duties.
23. Initiate *Sonam Gongphe* project, where the government will buy farmers' produces. Review and revise the function of farm shops to buy from farmers at floor price without impeding small businesses in the gewogs.
24. Establish a private sector development committee led by the Finance Minister in partnership with BCCI. Together implement *Private Sector Development - The Way Forward, 2016* recommendations.
25. Initiate recruitment of domestic workers by reviewing and amending immigration rules and regulation. Institute stringent monitoring standards and guidelines for that.

In the last two months, whilst discussions are underway on many of these manifesto promises, some significant achievements have been noted. They are:

1. The Prime Minister's visit to India where the tariff for the Mangde Chhu has been agreed at Nu 4.12 per unit which is higher than the Indian Government had initially proposed.
2. A budget of Nu 47bn for 2018-19 has been approved.

SOCIETY NEWS

Traveller's Tales

Before our third trip to Bhutan last October, Martin and I reviewed our "to do" list to see what we wished to accomplish and one priority was trekking to the Laya Highland Festival. Introduced by the King in 2016 to mark the birth of his son, The Gyalsey, the Festival promotes and showcases the unique culture and traditions of the highlanders.

The trek is 19Km long, climbs to 3840m and the whole journey took us five days. Our journey started with a natural hot spring bath in Gasa before arriving at a monk's farmhouse in the dark. It was only in the morning that we saw, and gasped at, the views of the mountains around Gasa Dzong. It was like stepping into a film set. Blessed by our monk, we set off with 3 horses. One carried our cold lunches (**hot** lunches are non-negotiable) one carried our luggage and the third was to carry us if we needed to take a break from trekking. Our trek followed the Mochu (Mother) river and our narrow path was a mixture of steep (*often*), straight (*seldom*) and downhill (*not enough*) - with a dash of scrambling - which was quite scary. There was a great atmosphere when trekking and we met everyone from the comedian hosting the event to the army carrying Festival lottery prizes!



We eventually arrived in snowy Laya. Cold and weary, we warmed up with hand-churned suja next to the farmhouse kitchen bukari, then slept in the altar room under yak blankets. During the Festival, the excitement was palpable in the 1000+ crowd, all dressed in their best attire, jewellery and conical hats. We watched well organised events- a tug of war, horse racing, cultural shows and ate a complimentary hot

lunch with tea. Yak rides and tents offering HIV tests were also available. Our precious souvenir was a traditional Layap hat made by a school reviving old traditions!

Our conclusion: The altitude, cold and snow were challenging. Yet being amidst stunningly beautiful, natural scenery, whilst attending this Festival in one of the remotest places on earth, made it all easy and a privilege.

EDITORS NOTE: Thanks to our member Dee Cano for this story. Please do share more of your travel tales with us, especially about visiting the more remote areas of Bhutan.

Membership Survey

Some months ago we asked for your thoughts and ideas about The Society. Over fifty of you responded with comments that will be an important part of the review currently being undertaken by the Committee. Thank you to all who participated; it is much appreciated.

Here is a short summary of what you had to say:

Areas of interest. Nearly 80% listed culture and religion, but over 50% also listed flora and fauna, crafts, trekking, conservation and current affairs

Communications. Most members preferred to receive information and updates via e-mail and the Newsletter with very few checking the website. Printed copies of the Newsletter were preferred to an electronic version. In terms of Newsletter content, the response was very positive. (*That's good news! Editor*) There were some suggestions for additions, namely more information about visiting Bhutanese students, which was echoed in several other parts of the Survey. There was also a request to include feedback from those members exploring new and different areas and activities in Bhutan. (See *Traveller's Tales* page 6)

Suggestions for the website centred around increasing the scope of what is covered, with at least 50% wanting more information or links to cultural events, historical data, flora, fauna and wildlife reports and possibly an option for members to share photographs of their travels in Bhutan. (See note on *Website Photo Gallery* on page 3)

Meetings and events. Looking at the type of events held by the Society, there was a similar high level of support for lectures, film evenings and the Annual Dinner. Excursions were not as popular. There were however many who would like meetings to be less London-centred with at least one regional meeting a year, and for a more informal or social evening involving Bhutanese traditions, cooking etc.

The Annual Dinner, whilst being held in high esteem, is considered by many as very expensive, particularly for members who live outside London. There was also a significant wish to hold a less formal event that allows greater mingling between members, Bhutanese visitors and students.

The future. Looking at the future of the Society, members were positive, but wanted greater involvement with visiting Bhutanese, more opportunities to be involved with fund raising activities and events of a style and nature that would attract younger members.

Thank you all again for your contributions.

NEWS AND UPDATES

Bhutan Society Trust Fund - Project READ

During the latter part of 2018, The Bhutan Society UK Trust Fund worked with Book Aid International to fund the transport of over 100 cartons of new books to Bhutan. This totalled over 5,000 books including 43 braille books for the school for the visually impaired in Khaling, Trashigang in Eastern Bhutan.

Book Aid International is the UK's leading international book donation and library development charity. Every year, they make books available to an estimated 29 million people around the world through their extensive network of partners and supporters in the UK and around the world. For this Project they sourced and selected the new books from UK publishers and arranged the freight and shipping to Kolkata. All books were stamped to show they were donated by The Bhutan Society UK Trust Fund. READ Bhutan arranged freight clearance at Kolkata and the books were delivered to the READ (Rural Education and Development) Bhutan Office in Thimphu. The donation from the Trust Fund of around £2,000 covered all the shipping and transit costs.



READ began working in Bhutan in 2008 with the goal of transforming rural communities by creating access to information and resources and building a culture of reading. Before READ established its first Centre there was only one public lending library in Bhutan. With the help of their partner communities, they have so far established nine rural lending libraries in the country. READ is helping to create vibrant places to live and thrive by, for example, providing agricultural training

to farmers or environmental sustainability programmes for children. Some of their most popular training programmes include literacy programmes (in partnership with the Ministry of Education), reading and writing groups, computer literacy classes, women's health classes and community radio. Their work is coordinated by seven staff members at the READ Bhutan office and eighteen librarians, who are called Centre Coordinators, in the nine READ offices around the country. These are located at Shemagangkha (Chapcha), Yangthgthang (Haa), Mendhagang (Punakha), Ura (Bumthang), Rongthung (Trashigang), Khotakhpa (Pemagatshel), Panbang (Zhemgang), Chuzagang (Sarpang) and Thimphu.

When the consignment from the Society arrived at the READ Bhutan office, staff unpacked and sorted the entire shipment of books into various categories so that they could be organized and transported to all nine READ Centres.

Any members who might be interested in supporting a future shipment should contact rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com



Keeping Rombu traditions

For the Lhops (Doyaps) of Lhotokuchu in southern Bhutan, life is frozen in time through an indigenous and unique culture of entombing their dead in their own lands. The residents say that the tombs known as the Rombu hold significant value in their lives. Left as a tradition to the descendants, Lhops say it connects them to their ancestors. The residents of these villages, on a slope that rises from the Amochhu (Torsa) bank, put the dead body in a box made only from the wood of the Kimbu tree and walled by specific stones. It is then left on their own land as a tomb. The Lhops can use neither other peoples land, nor government land, to keep the Rombu. However, with the increase in population and land use, maintaining this practice is becoming a challenge. Doyaps say their lands are getting smaller and they have often pondered also about land shortage risk due to its use for Rombu. As a Rombu cannot be dismantled, the threat of land shortage is imminent and is compounded by the tradition of dividing lands on inheritance.



However, the younger generation has mixed feelings on the Rombu. A young graduate, who works locally, doesn't think this unique Lhop tradition and culture will last forever. "Youth are going outside and copying other cultures and with modernity, it will be difficult to follow these practices." She believes change is inevitable. Meanwhile, a village elder, who also recognises that their traditional way of life would eventually disappear, said, "As long as we are alive, the tradition must go on."

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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.