

# Thunlam



German Bhutan Himalaya Society | News & Reports from the Kingdom of Bhutan



Climate change  
in the climate-  
neutral kingdom

Photo: bhutan.travel



Parliamentary  
elections in Bhutan



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Photo: private



Dear friends of Bhutan,

In this issue of our Thunlam, we take a look at the most important events of 2023 in Bhutan. In particular, the focus was on the elections to the National Council and the National Assembly. We take a detailed look at the functions of the two chambers and the surprising election results.

On National Day on 17 December, the King of Bhutan surprisingly announced the founding of the “Gelephu Mindfulness City”. This city of mindfulness is to extend over 1,000 square kilometres and will focus on quality of life, renewable energy, modern infrastructure, education and Buddhist tradition in order to promote the Gross National Happiness enshrined in the constitution.

But first we report on activities in which the German Bhutan Himalaya Society (DBHG) e.V. was involved in 2023 and projects that we were able to support – also thanks to your donations.

**Our next Bhutan Day will take place on Saturday, 15 June 2024, at the Klimahaus in Bremerhaven. The main topic will be “Climate change in the climate-neutral kingdom”.**

Bhutan is a unique country that is committed to protecting the environment and the well-being of its people. But how does global climate change affect this climate-neutral country? What are the challenges and opportunities for Bhutan and its neighbours? What can we learn from Bhutan’s experiences and visions? We want to discuss these and other questions with you and our exciting guests.

An invitation to Bhutan Day and the **General Assembly, which will take place on the eve of Bhutan Day on 24 June 2024, also at the Klimahaus in Bremerhaven**, is enclosed with the printed version of this Thunlam and is available online on our website.

We would be delighted to welcome you to this beautiful venue.

Yours sincerely, on behalf of the Executive Board / Tashi Delek

Reinhard Wolf  
President; German Bhutan Himalaya Society

PS: If you have any comments or suggestions on the work of the DBHG or would like to support the DBHG in its work, we look forward to hearing from you.

# Bhutan Day 2023

On 24 June 2023, the Bhutan Day took place at the Kamalashila Institute for Buddhist Studies and Mediation in Langenfeld in the Eifel region.



Participants from all over Germany and a large community of Bhutanese who live, study and work in Germany took part in the event.

The topic of the day was: “The Economy and Gross National Happiness of Bhutan”. Ms Namgay Choden from the Bhutanese Embassy in Brussels delivered a welcome address on behalf of Ambassador Tshoki Choden.

Carissa Nimah from the Department of Tourism in Bhutan, Sanjeev Mehta, Professor of Economics at Royal of Economics at the Royal Thimphu College,

Sonam Chopel, founder of Druksell, and Uwe Dräger, who holds a doctorate in business informatics and worked as a project manager for the Sparkassenstiftung in Bhutan from 2020 to 2022, gave interesting presentations. ■



Dr Carsten Klein (Friedrich Naumann Foundation), Reinhard Wolf, Sangay Zangmo, Irmela Harz, Herbert Küster

Photos: DBHG



## In Memoriam Dr Manfred Kulesa

**I**t is with great sadness that we have to announce that our Honorary President Dr Manfred Kulesa passed away on 22 January 2024 at the age of 91. In him, we have lost an outstanding personality to whom the DBHG owes a great deal.

A member since 1994, he was elected President of the DBHG in 2000, taking over from Fritz Hermanns, the founding father of the DBHG. The year 2000 also saw the World Exposition (EXPO) in Hanover, which attracted the interest of many visitors to the Himalayan kingdom, which until then had been little known in Germany, with its magnificent Bhutanese pavilion.

In 2001, Manfred Kulesa was appointed the first German Honorary Consul for Bhutan. Even during his time as Honorary President from 2003 onwards Manfred Kulesa always supported the DBHG in word and deed (and wrote his own limericks!). It is thanks to him, among other things, that we were able to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the DBHG in the venerable Old Town Hall in Bonn in 2016. He amassed an extensive collection of Buddhist writings and artefacts, which he later donated to public institutions.

However, Manfred Kulesa's work went far beyond the DBHG. He came from an East Prussian family, came to West Germany as a refugee and pursued his personal and professional career with great international commitment. After studying law and gaining his doctorate in Frankfurt, he initially worked in Germany as Managing Director of the Evangelisches Studienwerk Villigst and the "Dienste in Übersee" organisation, then went to India in 1967 as a representative of the German Development Service (DED) and became Managing Director of the DED in 1969. This was followed by a long career with the United Nations, with posts in Turkey, Nepal, the Asia office in New York and China. In 1988, Kulesa returned to Germany as Director of the Development Policy Forum of the German Development Foundation (DSE) in Berlin. In 1991, he became Managing Director of the Joint Conference Church and Development (GKKE) in Bonn.

When he retired in 1996, Dr Kulesa was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit. He was a true philanthropist and always remained modest despite his impressive career. In his "active retirement", in addition to his work for the DBHG, he took over the chairmanship of the Asia Foundation in Essen and was acting Secretary General of the German Association for the United Nations (DGVN).

The DGVN paid tribute to him in an obituary, which we wholeheartedly endorse: "His success was based on his unusual personality, his wide-ranging knowledge, his consideration and understanding of others and his unfailing commitment to the observance of ethical and moral principles. He made decisions quietly and implemented them without much fanfare. If things didn't work out as they should, he helped himself over the hurdles with his caustic sense of humour. He didn't want to revolutionise the world, but he did want to make it a better place for everyone. It all comes down to the same thing, but the choice of means was crucial for Manfred. Violence was not part of his toolbox."

We will keep Manfred Kulesa – and his equally lovely wife, who passed away in 2021 – in grateful memory.



*(rw) On 30.11.2023, DBHG organised a webinar with Karma Ura on the topic of migration, especially in relation to Bhutanese migrating to Australia.*

Dasho Karma Ura, President of the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies (CBS) since 2008, has been studying the background and potential impact of migration on Bhutan. The CBS plays a leading role in promoting the understanding of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and conducts multidisciplinary research on Bhutan. GNH is a concept that strongly influences Bhutan's economic and social policies and has received international attention. Karma Ura was a member of the drafting committee of Bhutan's first constitution, which came into force in July 2008, and was awarded the honorary title of "Dasho" by His Majesty the Fourth King in December 2006 for his services to the country.

Karma Ura is the author of books, including "Bhutan, the Unremembered Nation". He is also active as a painter, with works in a Dochula temple in Bhutan and in the British Museum. He has been a visiting scholar at various universities, including Oxford, and is currently involved in the "Conceptions of Human Flourishing – Reformulating the SDGs" programme at the NEW INSTITUTE in Hamburg. ■

**Video:** *If you missed the webinar, you can watch it on the DBHG YouTube channel:*



*(rw) The Prime Minister of Bhutan, Dr Lotay Tshering, paid an official visit to the Federal Republic of Germany from 7 to 15 March 2023.*

This is the first visit by a Bhutanese Prime Minister since diplomatic relations were established between the two countries in November 2020. He met with Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier, Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Jennifer Morgan, State Secretary and Special Envoy for International Climate Action at the Federal Foreign Office, among others. He also visited the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) to discuss cooperation in education and research.

### **Visit to a vocational training centre**

To kick off his trip, he visited a vocational training centre of the Frankfurt Chamber of Skilled Crafts. The President of the DBHG also took part in this meeting. Together with other centres, this centre in Weiterstadt ensures the highest quality standards in initial and further training in over 130 skilled trades. A letter of intent was signed between the Frankfurt Chamber of Skilled Crafts and the Bhutanese Ministry of Education and Research on co-operation in technical and vocational training. The weekly newspaper



# Visit of the Bhutanese Prime Minister to Germany

DIE ZEIT reported: “The Prime Minister described Germany as a role model, especially in the training of skilled labour. He hoped that in ten to 15 years there would be vocational training centres in his country that met German standards. Germany should also help with the expansion of solar and wind energy.”

entitled “Chancellor meets Prime Minister Tshering” states: It is impressive that Bhutan is already climate-neutral today. Germany and Bhutan want to deepen their partnership, commit to a rules-based international order – and work together on climate and environmental protection.

## Scholz: “We have a lot in common ...”

“We have a lot in common, such as the fight against climate change and in favour of the international order,” said the Chancellor. He continued: “You are making history today. Because this is the first time ever that a Prime Minister of Bhutan is making an official visit to Germany.” He was delighted that Germany is one of the 54 countries with which the Kingdom of Bhutan now maintains diplomatic relations. The fact that both countries established diplomatic relations in 2020 emphasises the desire to deepen these relations even further.

The two countries have been working together for a long time on the preservation of Bhutan’s cultural heritage and on issues of climate and environmental protection. “Our commitment to democracy and human rights and our advocacy of an international order based on the strength of the law and not on the law of the strongest” is also evidence of great agreement, said Scholz.



Photo: © HWK Frankfurt-Rhein-Main

*Reinhard Wolf (DBHG); Prof Dr Erhard Meyer-Galow (Honorary Consul for Bhutan); Pema Choden State Secretary at the Bhutan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering; Erik Ruh (Chamber of Skilled Crafts)*

The visit certainly attracted attention in the German press. A press release from the German government



Photo: Wolfgang Kumm/dpa/picture alliance

*Bellevue Palace: Head of Government Dr Lotay Tshering was also received in Berlin by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Berlin*

### Grateful for Bhutan's clear stance

The Chancellor was particularly grateful for Bhutan's clear stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: "Your country clearly condemned the Russian war of aggression from the outset and defended the principles of the UN Charter." The Chancellor emphasised how important it was to expand and diversify partnerships with Asia – especially with countries with which we share important fundamental convictions. He emphasised the area of climate protection. With regard to the climate neutrality, which has been achieved through the consistent protection of forests and the expansion of renewable energies, he said: "Bhutan absorbs even more CO<sub>2</sub> than it emits – that is impressive!"

Scholz welcomed Bhutan's plans to "broaden its own energy supply and make it more future-proof" by expanding photovoltaics and wind energy. He further emphasised Bhutan's pioneering role in measuring prosperity. The so-called "gross national happiness" was invented as an indicator in the country. "I think it makes a lot of sense to measure our prosperity not only on the basis of economic parameters, but also to include non-material factors".

### Prime Minister in the operating theatre

SPIEGEL ONLINE wrote: Only since November 2020 has Germany maintained diplomatic relations with the Buddhist state, which is wedged between the superpowers of China and India in South Asia. Bhutan, the "land of the thunder dragon", as it is called in the local language, has fewer than 800,000 inhabitants and is about the size of Switzerland. Only the mountains are much higher. At just over 7500 metres, Gangkhar Puensum is said to be the highest peak on earth that no one has ever climbed. ... As a trained surgeon and urologist, Tshering is still a doctor on the side ... . At weekends, he still stands in the operating theatre of a hospital in the capital Thimphu "to relieve stress": "Some people play golf, some go archery – I like operating." SPIEGEL ONLINE writes: It's hard to imagine that this is a suitable model for the chancellor: Head of government Monday to Friday, specialist lawyer for labour law on Saturdays and Sundays. ■

**Video:** Press conference by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Prime Minister Lotay Tshering on 13 March 2023





# German and Austrian parliamentarians in Bhutan

Source: Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNS), Dr Carsten Klein, New Delhi, Head of the South Asia Office of the FNS

## *Celebration of German Unity Day and opening of the new Thimphu Press Club*

**T**himphu/Bhutan, 3 October 2023 – With a panel discussion on media trends in South Asia, the opening of the new Thimphu Press Club and an evening celebration with high-ranking guests, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom celebrated this year's German Unity Day in Bhutan's capital Thimphu. In addition, seven parliamentarians from Germany and Austria accepted the Foundation's invitation to the Himalaya kingdom.

### **Celebration of democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human and civil rights**

Christine Aschenberg-Dugnus, who was part of the group of German parliamentarians alongside Sandra Weeser, Torsten Herbst, Dirk Bergner and Olaf in der Beek, while Austria was represented by MPs Dolores Bakos and Yannick Shetty, emphasised that German Unity Day is a symbol of freedom, unity and peace. "The day reminds us of the values for which people took to the streets in East Germany in 1989: Democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human and civil rights. On the occasion of the day,

we join Bhutan in celebrating these liberal values on the opening day of the Press Club. Our countries are separated by a distance of thousands of kilometres and united by these values."

Bhutanese politicians such as Wangchuk Namgyel, Speaker of the National Assembly of Bhutan, and Bhutan's Foreign Minister Lyonpo Tandi Dorji also took part in the evening celebrations to mark German Unity Day, as did Germans living in Bhutan. A special highlight: His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, had sent champagne as a surprise, packaged in the colours of the German flag.

### **"I hope that this trip will be a new Expo moment."**

Uwe Dräger, representative of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society, emphasised: "On the occasion of the visit of a group of Austrian and especially German parliamentarians, I have to think of the spectacular Bhutan Pavilion at the Expo 2000 in Hanover. The Expo put Bhutan on the map for German tourists for the first time." With the pandemic, the flow of these



Photo: FNS

tourists has stopped. “I hope that this trip will be a new Expo moment.”

### Opening of the Thimphu Press Club

In the afternoon, the Thimphu Press Club was opened. It is based in the building of Kuensel, the oldest newspaper in the Himalayan kingdom. Torsten Herbst, member of the German parliamentary delegation: “We are gathering here today on the Day of German Unity. I grew up in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, former East Germany), and one year before 3 October 1990, in the autumn of 1989, I took part in the demonstrations against the GDR government as a schoolboy. We didn’t have a free press.” The Thimphu Press Club is therefore also close to his heart. “Bhutan’s young democracy needs a strong fourth pillar in order to find the best answers to very complicated political and social questions in public discourse.” The guests then set up a living memorial and planted trees. Bhutan, which relies primarily on hydropower to generate energy, is currently the only country in the world with a negative carbon footprint. Thanks to its huge forest areas, it absorbs more carbon dioxide than companies and private households emit.

### Panel discussion with the Bhutan Media Foundation

At the panel discussion organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) with the Bhutan Media Foundation, Dr Carsten Klein, Head of the South Asia Regional Office FNF pointed out that the media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion.

“This makes them a cornerstone of every democratic society.” In the rapidly changing states of the region, the media sector has also changed significantly, driven by technological advances, socio-political developments and the changing preferences of viewers, readers and listeners.



Photo: FNS

### Growing influence of digital and social media

Experts from the fields of media, journalism and communication from Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka analysed the challenges and opportunities facing the local media. They analysed the current state of press freedom and the challenges facing journalists, including censorship, threats to personal safety and targeted disinformation. Topics also included the growing influence of digital and social media in the region and how this affects journalism and accurate and ethical reporting. The experts emphasised the importance of strengthening the population’s media literacy and promoting fact-checking in order to combat disinformation and create a well-informed society.

In 2023, Bhutan ranked 90th, Sri Lanka 135th and India 161st out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ press freedom ranking. ■

# Elections in Bhutan



*(rw) In 2023, Bhutan elections to the National Council and to the National Assembly were held. An overview of the parliamentary system in Bhutan.*

Photo: Pexels



The hereditary monarchy (Wangchuk dynasty) was introduced in Bhutan in 1907. One hundred years later, with the signing of the constitution by the king on 18 July 2008, Bhutan became a democratic-constitutional monarchy. Bhutan is strongly modelled on the British system. Bhutan also has a bicameral system, with the National Council ([National Council; https://nationalcouncil.bt/](https://nationalcouncil.bt/)), which is only partially comparable to the British House of Lords, and the National Assembly (<https://nab.gov.bt/>), which is comparable to the House of Commons.



## National Council of Bhutan

The National Council has 25 members, 20 members are elected directly by the people, one in each of the 20 districts; five members are appointed by the King. The members of the National Council may not belong to any party, including the state apparatus, the military or the police. The National Council may propose new laws, with the exception of laws relating to the budget. It may amend or reject laws passed by the National Assembly.



## National Assembly of Bhutan

The National Assembly is the legislative power and consists of 47 elected representatives

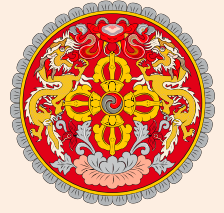
of the people. Two parties are represented in the National Assembly. They are elected in two rounds of voting (primaries and run-off elections): The two strongest parties in the primaries advance to the run-off elections, so that the winning party always has an absolute majority and does not have to form a coalition. The legislative period is 5 years, and MPs are elected in constituencies according to the majority voting system.

The first general elections to the National Assembly were held on 24 March 2008. Two parties stood for election: the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party (DPT) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The DPT won the elections with 45 out of 47 seats! Jigme Thinley was the first democratically elected Prime Minister from 2008 to 2013.

## A different party came to power in each of the first three legislative periods

The PDP came to power in the 2013 elections. It won 32 out of 47 seats. Note the landslide changes! Prime Minister became Tshering Tobgay. In 2018, the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party (sometimes translated as Social Democratic Party) won and Dr Lotay Tshering became Prime Minister. This meant that a different party came to power in each of the first three legislative periods. In the current 2023/2024 elections, however, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which had already formed the government from 2013 to 2018, won. More on this in the following articles. ■

# The National Council elections on 20 April 2023



(rw) Sources: KUENSEL from 21 January and 21 April 2023

Surprisingly, the voter turnout of almost 55% was the highest in the last 15 years. In the first election in 2008, it was 53%, in 2013 45% and in 2018 54.3%.

Another surprise was that only two of the ten incumbents were re-elected. Of the 90 candidates, only 5 were women, of whom only one, 39-year-old Tshering Tshomo from the village of Sonamthang in the district of Zhemgang was elected. Mrs Tshomo has a Bachelor of Education and has been working as a teacher for over 11 years. She said she grew up in her village and knows the problems in her district. “For three terms, we have given men a chance and now it is my job to represent the women of my district,” she said..

## Low political participation of women

KUENSEL had already analysed this at the beginning of the year: Despite the higher proportion of women among voters (51%), only a few women run for political

office. Although studies show that female politicians are widely accepted by the public, the political participation of women remains low.

Dorji Choden, the first female minister (2013–2018), Neten Zangmo, the BKP party leader in 2018, and Dechen Wangmo, Minister of Health until 2023, who was also President of the 74th World Health Assembly, are well-known names whose leadership is appreciated by many. However, their presence or dominance has not led to women running for office as expected. The parties are obviously finding it difficult to woo women: “We understand that the decision to run in an election is more difficult for women. All the women we spoke to were concerned about the vagaries of politics and the impact on their livelihoods and the wellbeing of their families”.



Tshering Tshomo,  
the only woman in  
the National Council

Photo: Kuensel

Photo: Unsplash

# The parliamentary elections on 30 November 2023

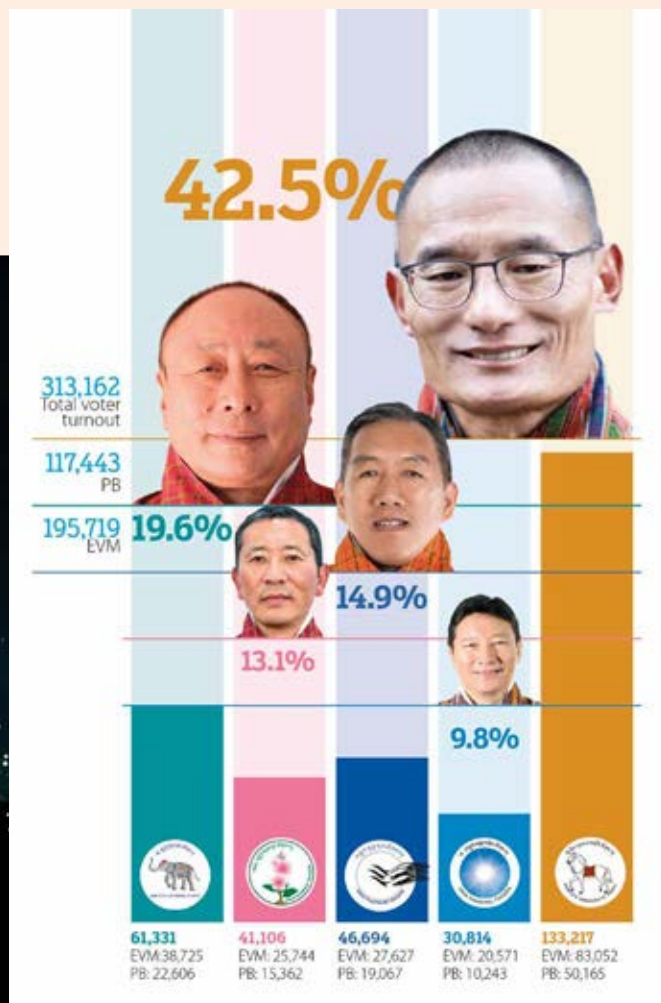
## Results of the primary elections on 30 Nov. 2023: Overwhelming and surprising

(rw) On the results of the primary elections on 30 November 2023, KUENSEL writes under the headline “Overwhelming and surprising”: The triumph of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which won 39 out of 47 constituencies in the primaries, was a real surprise. This unexpected result not only surprised voters, but also shocked other political parties and even the party’s own supporters and well-wishers. Many had expected the PDP to make a comeback. But the fact that it emerged from the primaries with more than twice as many votes as the second-placed Bhutan Tendrel Party was unexpected. The lead was so large

that in many constituencies, the four other parties together received fewer votes than the PDP.

## Bhutanese voters value the less powerful

Given the results of the primaries, many are saying that the PDP is on course to win the fourth National Assembly elections. The party garnered 49% of the votes in the primaries even though five parties were on the ballot. However, the assumption that the results of the primaries are an indication of the outcome of the general elections should be taken with a grain of salt. We have seen in the past how the tide has turned in the run-off. And this time, supporters of three parties that were eliminated in the primaries and therefore not allowed to contest the run-off are waiting to decide who to support. Besides, a political analyst said, a big lead is not a good sign for the winner. “Because knowing Bhutanese voters, they value the less powerful and tend to give a new party a chance, as they have in the past.”



*Result of the primaries: The two strongest parties advance to the run-off; the party of the incumbent prime minister is the second weakest with 13.1% as the second weakest of five parties out of the race.*

## Experienced candidates lined up in a short time

About the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP), which was also the second strongest party in the run-off, The Bhutanese writes under the headline “The BTP Miracle”:

The Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP) was the last of the five parties to register with the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) on 11 January 2023, but the first party to field all 47 candidates. The BTP not only fielded experienced political, civil service and business candidates in a short period of time, but also ran an extensive election campaign.

## What helped the BTP was the fact that its president comes from eastern Bhutan

The BTP candidates did well in the debates. While the BTP chairman was not a camera talent, he had a much freer and more natural style when speaking to groups of people and he engaged well with them across the country. What helped the BTP was the fact that its president was from eastern Bhutan. This helped the party to build a strong base in the east. However, it did not limit itself to the east but also came second

in most of the constituencies in the other parts of the country. The biggest challenge for the BTP in the final round will be to show that it is not only strong in the east through its president.

## Bhutan’s voters want economic upswing

And here is a good analysis of the results of the primary elections, published in “The Diplomat”, the international magazine for the Asia-Pacific region: Bhutan’s voters want economic recovery. The run-off election on 9 January will be held between the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP). Five parties took part in the primaries. The PDP and the BTP received 42.5% and 19.6% of the votes respectively. The ruling Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) only received 13.1% of the vote. As the fourth strongest party, it was unable to qualify for the final round. The DNT was in power during a difficult time for the country. Its term of office coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. The party fought the pandemic with strict and unpopular measures at the expense of the economy and severely restricted tourism. Foreign debt rose from 5.8 % in 2019–2020 to 15.1 % in 2022–2023. The rise in fuel prices has exacerbated the

Graphic: Wikimedia



*The emblem of Bhutan is used by the Parliament of Bhutan and was first introduced in 2007.*

country's economic problems. As a result, economic issues are at the top of the agenda in the upcoming elections.

### **The young population as well as experienced workers from the public and private sectors are emigrating**

Two days before the primaries, KUENSEL stated in his editorial: All parties have emphasised the revival [of the economy]. Bhutan's economy has indeed recovered and is growing at almost 4.5 per cent annually after shrinking by 10 per cent in 2020. However, inflation has outpaced growth rates. Youth unemployment was 29% in 2022. As a result, emigration of young people, especially to Australia, has increased sharply after the pandemic. Both the young population and experienced workers from the public and private sectors are emigrating because opportunities in the Himalayan kingdom are limited.

In the first debate between the presidents of the five participating parties, the PDP chairman focussed on attracting foreign direct investment and expanding the country's tourism sector. The president of the DPT

proposed to further expand hydropower projects. The PDP has proposed an economic stimulus programme of Nu 15 billion (approx. EUR 170 million) to be implemented within a few months after the formation of the government in order to increase liquidity in the banking sector.

### **Budget policy issues are important to voters**

Other budgetary issues such as property tax, housing and service infrastructure development are also of concern to voters. However, both parties have pledged to support the 1,000 square kilometre Gelephu Special Administrative Region announced by Bhutan's King Jigme Wangchuck in his National Day speech on 17 December. This region on the border with the north-eastern Indian state of Assam is to function as a vibrant economic hub between South Asia and South-East Asia, have an autonomous executive and legal independence, help provide well-paid jobs for the youth and create a favourable environment for Bhutanese living abroad to return home. The king said he would "personally" work for the success of the project. BTP president Pema Chewang said that whoever comes to power should fully support the king's vision.



His counterpart from the PDP also supported the project, saying that it aims to provide jobs and skills to Bhutanese youth in Bhutan.

### **Political differences between the parties smaller than in other democracies**

The king's announcement, in the middle of the election campaign, shows the continuing influence of the monarchy in Bhutan. It shows that the project will continue regardless of who forms the next government. As a result, the political differences between the parties are smaller than in other democracies, and they hardly run negative campaigns. However, it also shows the limits within which the elected government must work.

### **Elections in the midst of important foreign policy developments**

Foreign policy has taken a back seat during the elections, even if it is not completely ignored. All parties are in favour of increased cooperation with India in the field of hydropower and facilitating trade relations. However, Bhutan's fourth general elections are taking place amidst major foreign policy developments with its two big neighbours. Although Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with China, the country

is in talks to resolve the border dispute with China. In October, the two countries held the 25th round of border talks and signed a cooperation agreement on the "roles and functions of the joint technical team for demarcation and delimitation of the border between Bhutan and China".

### **Chinese territorial claims on the Doklam Plateau**

India is closely following the Sino-Bhutanese dialogue process as it is concerned about Chinese territorial claims on the Doklam Plateau. This area borders Indian territory near the "Chicken Neck", a narrow corridor that connects the north-eastern states of India with the rest of the country. Bhutan is at a critical juncture. Whichever party wins on 9 January has a difficult task ahead of it. On the one hand, it must revitalise the economy. On the other hand, it must work with China to solve the border problems. India is an important player in both cases. Bhutan needs Indian support to revitalise its economy and to ensure that the special economic zone development project in Gelephu gets off the ground. India will also have to stand by its side in resolving the border dispute with China. For better or worse, the next prime minister will also have to work in the monarch's shadow.





# The run-off election on 9 January 2024

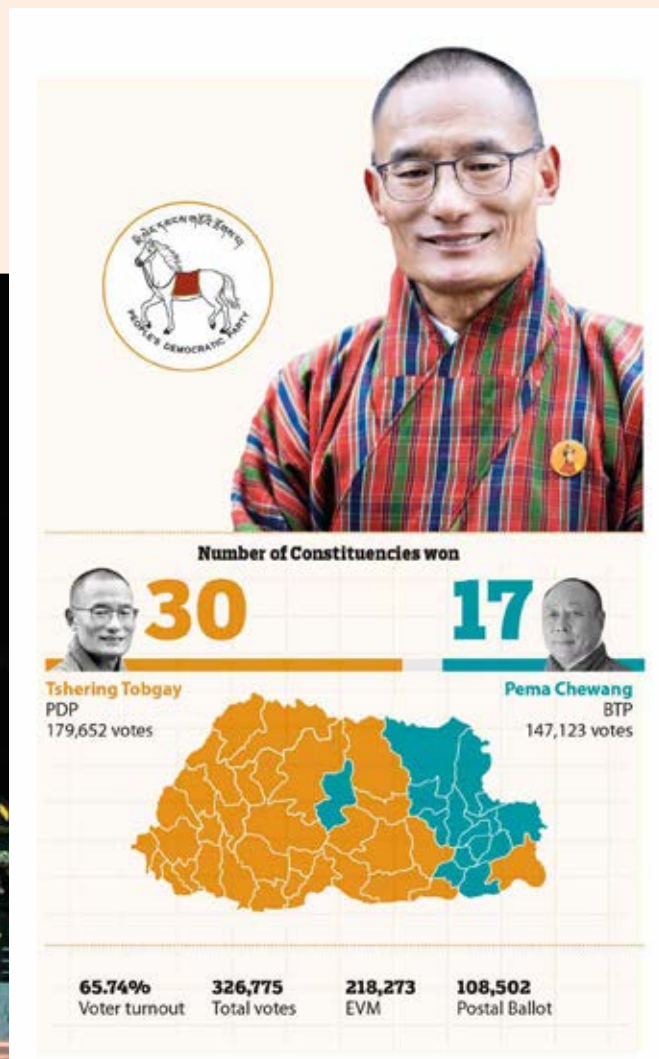
## Bhutan votes for a change of power.

(rw) The German daily TAZ writes on the results of the run-off election: Bhutan votes for change of power. Economic problems have led to the previous government in Bhutan being voted out of office. India is likely to gain influence under the future government. The opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) has won the elections. With 30 of the 47 seats in parliament, the liberal PDP won almost a two-thirds majority. The remaining seats went to the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP). The 58-year-old PDP President Tshering Tobgay, who was Prime Minister from 2013 to 2018, will once again become head of government. 65.6% of the

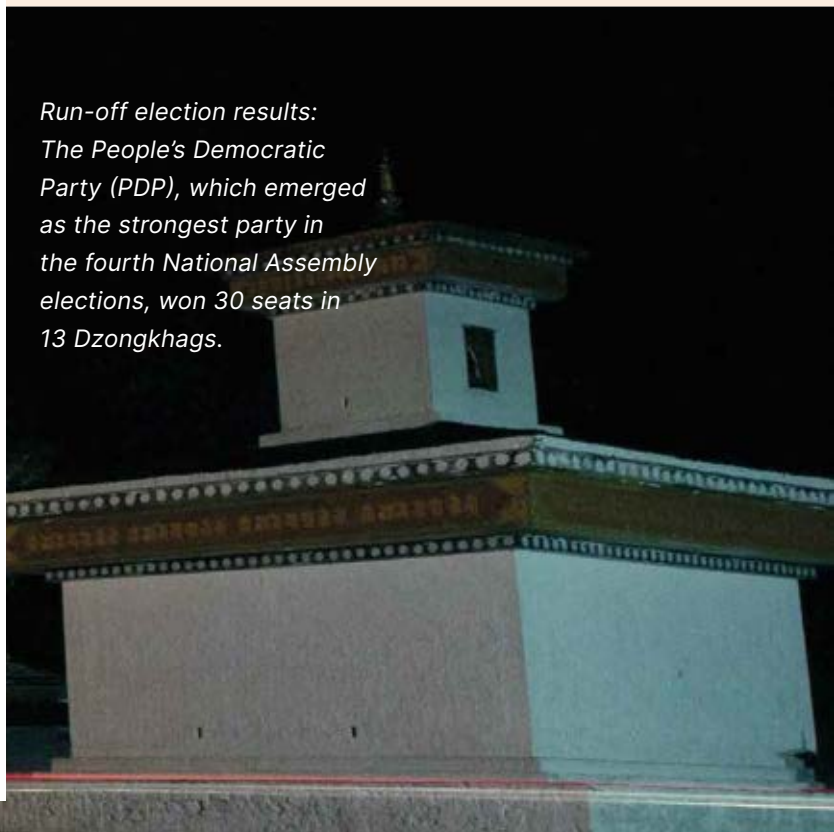
500,000 eligible voters cast their votes. These were only the fourth nationwide elections since the then absolutist King Jigme Singye Wangchuk transformed the country into a constitutional monarchy in 2008.

## Poor economic figures and youth unemployment dominate election campaign

Although both competing parties have now also declared their support for Gross National Happiness, the election campaign was dominated by the poor economic figures, including high youth unemployment. This has doubled in the last five years to 28.6%. Emigration has also risen sharply, especially to Australia. Within 12 months, 15,000 visas for Australia alone are said to have been issued. Election winner Tobgay promised an economic stimulus package totalling the equivalent of 180 million dollars to attract more foreign investors and tourists to the country. His new government is also likely to take a



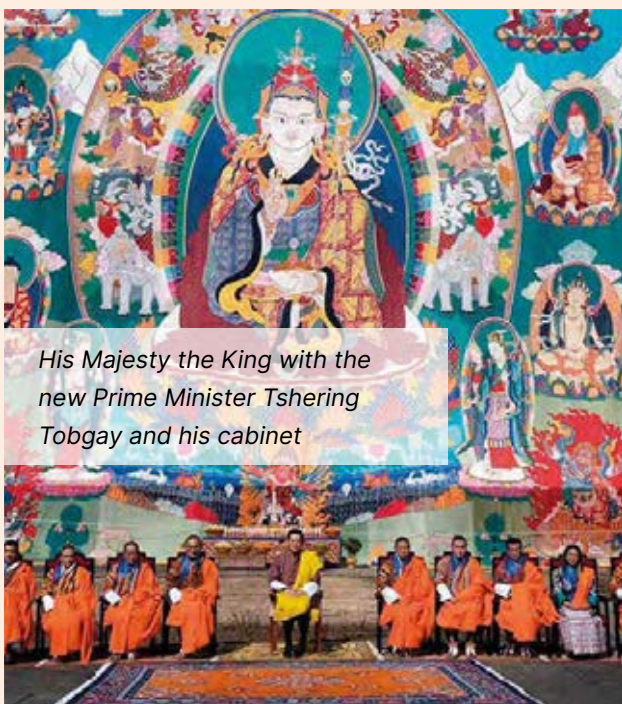
*Run-off election results: The People's Democratic Party (PDP), which emerged as the strongest party in the fourth National Assembly elections, won 30 seats in 13 Dzongkhags.*



more critical stance towards Beijing. Although there are no official diplomatic relations with Beijing, but the previous government appeared conciliatory in border disputes with the People's Republic. India and China are vying for influence. Bhutan is planning a special economic zone on its southern border with India.

### The proportion of women in the parliament of Bhutan is 4 %.

With only two women in the National Assembly, the representation of women in the legislature has reached an all-time low. A total of 23 women took part in the elections to the National Assembly. On the “Women in Politics: 2023” map developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, Bhutan ranks 131st out of 191 countries. The global average proportion of women in parliaments is 26.5%. In Bhutan, with the two women, it is 4%. KUENSEL continues: ... The unconscious bias against women's participation in politics, winning elections and holding leadership positions discourages Bhutanese women from engaging in politics, observers say. The existing political system was male-dominated and non-inclusive, which discouraged women from participating. The parties' decision to allocate only one or two seats to a female candidate exacerbated this situation. ■



*His Majesty the King with the new Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and his cabinet*

Photo: BBS



Photo: facebook.com/people/Zimkar

As has always been the case in recent years, the King's speech on National Day on 17 December 2023 was eagerly awaited. In the past, he has also set themes that have shaped the politics of the following years. This year, the overriding theme was the announcement of the construction of a new city of mindfulness, the “Gelephu Mindfulness City”. Dasho Kinley Dorji, former long-time editor-in-chief of KUENSEL, writes about this in his article “Towards a New Era and Legacy”: Bhutan is redefining the concept of a modern, sustainable city. No wonder for a country that has redefined the concept of human development. In fact, Gelephu Mindfulness City is a much-needed and valid interpretation of Gross National Happiness. Many people misunderstand Gross National Happiness as merely an alternative to materialism.

### Gelephu Special Administrative Region

National Day 2023 was the starting point for an initiative that could become a turning point for Bhutan. His Majesty the King announced the auspicious launch of the Gelephu Special Administrative Region, which is expected to give the country a robust economic boost. As a special administrative region, Gelephu Mindfulness City is neither a city nor an administrative region as they are usually known. Gelephu is unique because it has a “Bhutanese” identity, a blend of human life and natural ecology. Modern farms merge with natural flora and fauna, hightech transport systems intersect with roads that cross rivers, traditional architecture frames modern habitats, and electric cars drive side by side with wild tigers and elephants. And it signifies the interdependence of all sentient beings, i.e. all life forms.

# National Day: Announcement of the construction of the Gelephu Mindfulness City

*(rw) Towards a new era and a new legacy: Bhutan redefines the concept of a modern, sustainable city.*



Illustration: BIG

## Building bridges between Bhutan's heritage and the future

Based on the spirit of the Vajrayana teachings, the Gelephu Society will not emphasise religion, but will embody spirituality. A Bhutanese Vajrayana master cites the example of the cup and tea: tea represents

spirituality and the cup represents the culture of religion. In a culture where humanity is immersed in the cup, tea is forgotten. Hence the emphasis on Vajrayana as a spiritual teaching rather than a religion. In the context of Bhutanese history, Gelephu is an important step in the transformation process. We are not only experiencing a social transition, which means a generational change. We are experiencing a transformation: people are shaping their lives, building a nation. This is a colossal leap. The essence of change is the expansion of the mind. We are talking about becoming a developed country. We need to move out of the comfort zone of subsistence farming and focus on niche products in agriculture, low-cost travel to high-end tourism.

In order to grasp the new dynamics and the new scenario, we need to shed old ways of thinking and look at the big picture. We are initiating a revolution of ideas that goes beyond a city, a country or a conti-



Photo: facebook.com/NDBhutan

Illustration: BIG



ment. It is about changing or at least influencing the values of human existence. As we listen to His Majesty the King address the people of Bhutan and the world at large, with a special focus on the youth, we learn that the royal vision has been developed based on insightful observations, in-depth research and consultations with leading global thinkers and doers. The vision is not only long-term, but spans the centuries.

**Team of Bhutanese and international experts**

The international expectation is that South Asia is on the cusp of an economic transformation. His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the fifth monarch of the Wangchuck dynasty, has announced the most important initiative of his reign. He will personally

lead a team of Bhutanese and international experts to define his reign as a new era in Bhutan’s history, leaving a legacy for future generations.

**Words of warning**

Professor Dorji Wangchuk writes these admonishing words in a commentary: *Where do we go from here?* To be honest, our patriotism seems to have a very short lifespan in terms of commitments and behavioural changes, judging from the past editions of National Day. One day after the enthusiasm for National Day, we are back to our old selves. We are back to hierarchy, bureaucracy and VIP culture. Business people are back to waiting for customers or trying to get rich quick



Illustration: BIG

instead of looking for new opportunities, learning new skills or innovating their products and services.

# Gelephu – Bhutan’s Mindfulness City

*Bhutan unveils master plan for a modern Buddhist destination to make Bhutan an economic centre of Southeast Asia.*

Illustration: BIG, Blanke Ingels Group



**Video:** Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) unveils masterplan for major Gelephu project

Illustration: BIG

Simply put, not much will change. This is a great paradox because I know our respect for our King is real, the tears are real and the feelings are real. But as quickly as we get excited, the excitement seems to fade away.

### The concept developers of the Gelephu Mindfulness City

The vision of the masterplan developed by BIG, Arup and Cistri is based on Bhutanese culture, the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the spiritual heritage of Bhutan. Bjarke Ingels is a Danish architect and founder of the renowned architecture firm (BIG). He has won numerous

architectural awards and gained international attention for designing some of the most innovative and unique structures around the world. These include the Mountain Dwelling in Copenhagen, the Danish Pavilion at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, hotels in Norway, a museum overlooking Mexico City, the transformation of a brownfield oil industry site into a zero-emission resort on Zira Island off the coast of Baku, Azerbaijan, an integrated flood defence system, the DryLine, which won the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Rebuild By Design competition, and many other notable works. He was named Innovator of the Year 2011 by the Wall Street Journal and one of the Most Influential People of 2016 by Time Magazine.



Illustration: BIG, Bjarke Ingels Group

## Border negotiations with China



Source/Photo: Kuensel

**B**hutan and China have been negotiating the still unclear border demarcation between the two countries since 1984. While the Bhutanese Prime Minister expressed confidence in several interviews that the border disputes would soon be resolved, the Indian press also voiced concerns about this friendly rapprochement, as India's geostrategic and security policy interests were affected.

### Continuation of the cooperation

KUENSEL wrote about the 25th round of border talks between Bhutan and China that took place in Beijing on 23 and 24 October: Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Dr Tandi Dorji, led the Bhutanese delegation and China's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sun Weidong, led the Chinese delegation. According to a press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both sides took note of the progress made through a series of expert group meetings since the 24th round of border talks in 2016. The two heads of delegation agreed to build on the positive momentum. They signed the cooperation agreement on the responsibilities and tasks of a joint technical team for the demarcation and delimitation of the border between Bhutan and China. Both sides also exchanged views on enhancing bilateral relations and matters of mutual interest. ■

## European Union pledges 42 million €

(rw) Source: BBS/Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bhutan



Photo: mfa.gov.bt

**T**he 11th annual consultations between Bhutan and the European and the European Union took place on 05 May in Thimphu. The EU has pledged EUR 42 million to Bhutan as part of the 2021-2027 multi-year programme.

### Priority areas: Climate change and green growth, good governance and digital transformation

The support focuses on three priority areas: Climate change and green growth for a resilient Bhutan, good governance and digital transformation to drive change in education and public service delivery.

EUR 31 million was made available for the period 2021–2024 of which a financing agreement was signed in September 2022 including EUR 15 million to promote to promote sustainable agri-cultural and food systems in Bhutan was signed. On the margins of the consultations, Bhutan and the EU signed a new financing agreement totalling EUR 9.3 million to strengthen local governance in Bhutan and digitalisation in the education sector. education sector. The consultations were co-chaired by Ms Pema Choden, Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan, and for the EU by Paola Pampaloni, Deputy Director General for Asia and the Pacific, European External Action Service. ■

# New survey on gross national happiness

(rw) Source: Kuensel, 24 May 2023

The official report on the new Gross National Happiness (GNH) survey was published in May 2023. KUENSEL asks in an editorial: Are we happier? The latest survey shows that we are happier than in the last survey eight years ago, in 2015. 93.6% of Bhutanese are happy. This is an increase of 3.3% compared to 2015, which is remarkable considering that many Bhutanese are unhappy.

## It is unclear whether the study took the migration factor into account

A lot has changed since the last survey and it is reassuring to know that we are happier now, especially considering the exodus of Bhutanese seeking their fortune outside the country. A study by the same centre found that more than 50,000 Bhutanese have left the country since the last survey in 2015. According to those who have left or are considering leaving the country, they are in search of opportunities for a decent, if not better, standard of living. To find that, they had to look outside Bhutan.

The increase in happiness can be attributed to improvements in various areas such as housing, income, schooling, services, literacy and positive feelings. It is unclear whether the study took the migration factor into account, but it is certain that many people are unhappy and leave the country for various reasons. Will another study in five years or sooner show a similar improvement? Only time will tell. ■



Photo: Adobe Stock

# Bitcoin provides 50% more salary for civil servants

(rw) Source: The Bhutanese, June 2023

The Bhutanese government has decided on an impressive salary increase of around 50% for civil servants. The Bhutanese writes: The total cost of the salary hike is Nu 6 billion (about EUR 70 million); money that the government does not have for the most part. The salary revision is made possible by Nu 4 billion provided by the state-owned Druk Holding and Investments (DHI) as a one-time additional payment for the financial year 2023–24, followed by another additional payment of Nu 4 billion for the financial year 2024–25, bringing the total amount to Nu 8 billion in two years. The DHI in turn takes the money from its special projects, particularly Bitcoin mining. When the DHI announced that it was mining bitcoin in late April 2023, there was some speculation as to whether the DHI's investment in bitcoin mining was worthwhile; but the Nu 8 billion it has invested shows that the project is not only self-sustaining but also yields great returns. Bhutan's constitution states that salaries and allowances can only be paid from domestic revenue. The 1020-megawatt Punatsangchu

A hydropower plant is scheduled to go into operation by the 2025–26 financial year, which will then take on the burden of the increase.

In the past, there have been major salary increases when the economy was doing well, especially when hydropower plants such as Chukha 1988, Tala 2007 (55% increase) and Mangdechu 2019 were commissioned. The main purpose of the current salary increase was to stem the exodus of civil servants and public sector employees to Australia.

### “And what about the rest of us?”

KUENSEL poses the question in an editorial: And what about the rest of us? Will the pay review drive up the cost of living? This is the question that people outside the civil service are asking. Bhutanese unfortunately have no control over the cost of living as it depends on developments in other countries, especially India, from where we import everything from salt and cooking oil to furniture and luxury items. Or, more recently, from Bangkok, China and South Korea. The standard of living in Bhutan is closely linked to our imports. The policy of self-sufficiency that we have talked about for decades exists only on paper, is gathering dust or has long since been discarded.

The pay rise in the public sector is impacting other sectors, particularly the private sector, which has long been seen as the engine of economic growth but has not been given the necessary fuel to drive growth. After decades, the private sector consists of only a handful of large companies and a few start-ups. Ironically, it is the least favoured sector when it comes to employment.

The pay rise is undoubtedly necessary. But it has not been accompanied by clear policies to encourage private sector growth. When the cost of living becomes more expensive for those who do not get a pay rise, the destination is emigration to Australia or Canada. This does not bode well for a country that promotes happiness as a development philosophy. In the private sector, salary increases are feared because they drive up the cost of living. For example, the cost of housing and transport are the main drivers of inflation in Bhutan. Can we bring these factors under control? The general population should not suffer the consequences of a salary increase. ■



Photo: The Bhutanese

*The Bhutanese delegation at the conference*

Bhutan left the group of Least Developed Countries (LDC) at the end of 2023. This group was introduced by the United Nations General Assembly in 1971. Bhutan is the seventh country to move up after Botswana (1994), Cabo Verde (2007), the Maldives (2011), Samoa (2014), Equatorial Guinea (2017) and Vanuatu (2020). This brings the number of LDCs down to 45.

In order to qualify for promotion, certain economic, social and environmental criteria must be met. These criteria relate to the areas of economy, society and environment.

### Joint progress by Bhutan and its development partners

At a conference, Mr Ugyen Dorji from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed Bhutan’s apprehensions and expectations on this welcome development. Bhutan greatly appreciates the support and cooperation it has received from the international community over the last five decades and would like to express its gratitude to all development partners and the United Nations system for their support in realising its socio-economic and sustainable development goals. Bhutan’s emergence as a middle-income country reflects the collective progress made by Bhutan and its development partners.

Although Bhutan is pleased with this success, the country is also concerned about the many challenges that still lie ahead. To ensure sustainable success, it is important that Bhutan can continue to count on support and cooperation. Ugyen pointed out that Bhutan continues to rely on grants for capital-



# Bhutan's fears and hopes of joining the group of middle-income countries

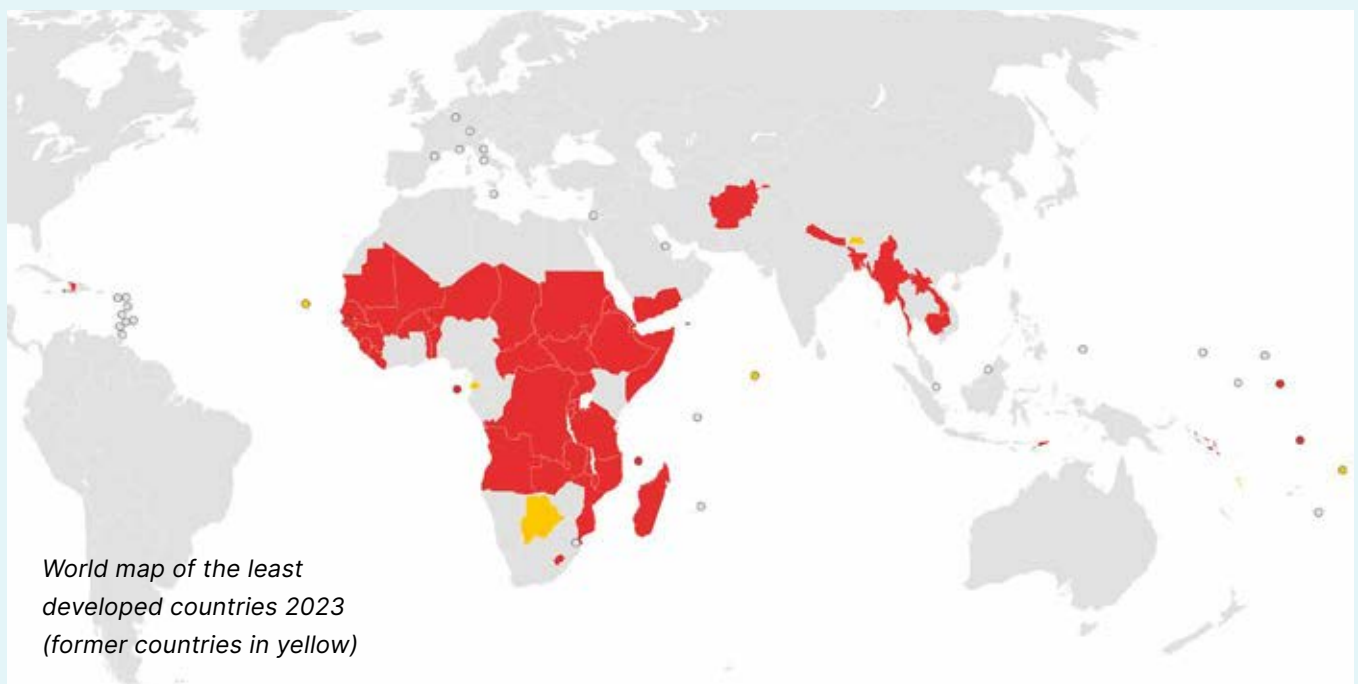
(rw) Source: *The Bhutanese*, March 2023

intensive development activities as domestic resources are inadequate. However, it is recognised that donor funds are becoming increasingly scarce, which could constrain development spending and hamper future growth and development.

## Support in the development of financing resources

Bhutan therefore needs support in developing alternative and innovative sources of financing. Bhutan is a country that is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. It is constantly plagued by landslides, floods, storms, forest fires and earthquakes that affect water, energy and food security.

Ugyen Dorji emphasised that the limited production capacities and the restricted diversification of exports can have a negative impact on the economy. This has led to high import volumes and persistent current account deficits, resulting in a significant accumulation of foreign debt. As a landlocked country, efficient trade facilitation is crucial for Bhutan to ensure smooth movement of goods and services. It is important to improve the competitiveness of Bhutan's export sectors, which could be adversely affected by the loss of preferential market access. Bhutan has introduced extensive reforms in the sector to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the government. ■



# A milestone on Bhutan's path to climate change adaptation

Source/Photo: UNDP; 12.10.2023



UNDP representatives Mohammad Unus and Dasho Paljor J Dorji presented Bhutan's first NAP.

**B**hutan's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) was officially launched in September 2023. The plan provides a comprehensive and strategic framework to prepare for and adapt to the impacts of climate change. The aim is to protect both people and nature.

The NAP is the result of several years of careful planning and consultations with government authorities, regional and local planners, civil society, academia and the private sector. The country's most important sectors – water, agriculture, forests and biodiversity, energy and human health – were analysed in detail. The current and future climate risks and the capabilities required for effective adaptation were also taken into account. It also identified the regions most affected by climate change and their adaptive capacity. Bhutan is notable for being one of the few countries in the world that is already carbon neutral. Its forests absorb more carbon dioxide than the country emits. At the same time, the country is incredibly vulnerable to climate change. ■



Photo: Kuensel

**S**tudies have repeatedly warned that Lake Thorthormi could outburst at any time, earning the lake the nickname “ticking time bomb”. Residents of the village of Thanza in Lunana were in for a shock on 30 October at dusk when the alarm bells at the Lake Thorthormi monitoring station in Lunana rang and they scrambled to move their belongings to safety to escape a possible flood of the glacial lake. Staff from the National Centre for Hydrology and Meteorology (NCHM), who checked on the ground, noticed “abrupt changes” in the water level of Lake Thorthormi later that night. Changes were also observed in the moraine walls of Thorthormi's tributary lakes I and II, which consist of glacial debris. The water of Lake Thorthormi could overflow into the neighbouring Lake Raphstreng, only about 3 km away, which would



1. Betsho
2. Rapstreng Tsho
3. Thorthormi Tsho
4. Lugge Tsho

# Flooding due to outburst of a glacial lake in Bhutan

(rw) The glacial lake Thorthormi, which has been described as a “ticking time bomb” has had an outburst forecast for the “worst-case scenario” since 2010.

lead to devastation and destruction in the low-lying areas and settlements.

## 25 “potentially dangerous” glacial lakes

Glacial Lakes Outburst Floods (GLOFs) have increased in frequency in the second half of the 20th century, costing lives and destroying livelihoods in Bhutan and the Himalayan region. A devastating GLOF killed 20 people at Luggye Lake in Bhutan in 1994. Studies have confirmed 25 “potentially dangerous” glacial lakes in Bhutan, Thorthormi being one of them. In the 1950s, there were no lakes on the Thorthormi glacier, but today there are numerous lakes that are growing in size and are interconnected. The lake, which was only 1.28 km<sup>2</sup> in size in 2001, is now by far the largest

glacial lake in Lunana with a total area of 3.42 km<sup>2</sup> and continues to grow. Thorthormi lies between Lake Luggye and Lake Raphstreng. A rupture would trigger a chain reaction. The worst-case scenario would be a GLOF of these lakes with a discharge of more than 53 million cubic metres of water, which would be three times as catastrophic as the GLOF of 1994.

There are more than 700 glacial lakes in Bhutan, but they are growing at an alarming rate due to climate change and rising temperatures. A significant amount of ice and billions of litres of water are lost from Bhutan’s mountains every year. Between 2004 and 2020, Bhutan lost 17 billion tonnes of glacial ice, which is equivalent to the incredible amount of 17,000 trillion litres of water. ■



# Economic losses increase as the glacier melts

(rw) Source: *The Bhutanese*, 19 December 2023

(rw) *Climate change has become synonymous with money. Affected countries and regions, including Bhutan, are desperately seeking means to minimise the vulnerability caused by climate change.*

**T**he Himalayan-Hindu Kush region suffered economic losses of up to 45 billion US dollars between 1985 and 2014 due to flooding and destruction caused by climate change.

ice-covered dams are becoming unstable. They could cause considerable destruction as a large part of the population and infrastructure in Bhutan is concentrated in large river valleys. The glaciers in Bhutan are shrinking at a rate of almost 30–60 metres per decade.



Photo: Kuensel

*World Climate Change Conference (COP28), Dubai: Bhutan pavilion shows concern about rapidly melting glaciers*

Bhutan's national environmental strategy "The Middle Path" emphasises the development of hydropower, industry, agriculture and tourism as key paths to sustainable development. However, these sectors are all severely affected by climate change. Hydropower and agriculture suffer from unpredictable rainfall patterns and temperature fluctuations, while infrastructure such as roads will be increasingly affected by landslides and flash floods. Bhutan's vast forests with their rich biodiversity will also be affected by climate change. ■

The region has the largest ice reserves outside the poles and feeds ten major rivers that sustain the lives of 240 million people in the mountains and more than 1.6 billion people downstream. Global warming here is faster than the global average. A global temperature rise of 3°C could lead to the melting of 75% of the glaciers in Bhutan and Nepal by the end of the century, which would make access to water more difficult, jeopardise food and energy security and result in a significant loss of biodiversity.

## Bhutan's development depends on the climate

Bhutan's development is highly dependent on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, hydropower and forestry. The risk of disasters from glacial lake outburst floods is increasing as water levels in several glacial lakes are approaching critical thresholds and the



Photo: undp.org

# Filmmaker Jamyang cycles to emphasise the urgency of climate protection measures.

(rw) Source: Kuensel, 13 June 2023

Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk, actor and filmmaker from Bhutan, is undertaking a remarkable journey called “The Messenger – Ride for Action” to draw the attention of world leaders to climate change. His mission gives voice to nearly two billion people who are highly dependent on the glacial water of the Himalayan region and affected by the challenges caused by climate change.

Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk has become an environmentalist. He was inspired to embark on this extraordinary journey during a leadership workshop in New York in 2020: “Although I have been interested in the environment since I was young, it was only during the pandemic that I came up with the idea of campaigning for climate protection”.

## Raising awareness for climate protection

Jamyang has visited more than 15 schools in Bhutan and cycled through 15 districts in Bhutan to raise awareness about climate change. During his journey, he found



Photos: Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk

a discarded plastic bottle that he stumbled across. He filled this bottle with glacier water to highlight both the dangers of plastic pollution and global warming. His campaign focuses on three key messages: planting and caring for trees, switching to renewable energy sources and integrating climate education into school curricula. ■



**Note:** Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk will report on 15.6.2024 on his activities at the Bhutan Day.

# Climate change threatens Bhutan's headwaters

(rw) Source: Kuensel, 20.09.2023. Study in the Trashigang region shows the dangerous effects of climate change on the country's resources.

**A**lthough Bhutan's larger rivers are not currently experiencing water shortages, small communities on mountain slopes that rely heavily on small streams and springs are struggling with severe water shortages. Sources are the most important source of drinking water in the country and account for 67.6 % of the water supply.

## Bhutan's water resources are susceptible to changing precipitation patterns

According to the latest reports, 69 of the country's 7,399 water sources have already dried up and a further 1,856 are on the verge of drying up. Road construction, forest fires, overgrazing and changes in land use are all contributing to the drying up of water sources. Sources are fed by rainwater, especially in the pre-monsoon season. Bhutan's water resources are susceptible to changing precipitation patterns caused by rising air temperatures in the Himalayas. Thereafter, it will decrease in the pre-monsoon season. This poses a threat to hydropower, but also to agriculture. ■



**Note:** On Bhutan Day on 15 June 2024, the German Bhutan Himalaya Society (DBHG) will host Dr Pema Gyamtsho, Director General ICIMOD as a guest (online). He will

■ speak about environmental and climate risks in the Hindu Kush - Himalayan region.



Photos/Illustration: Kuensel

## Bhutan loses glacier water every year

(rw) Source: Kuensel, 31.10.2023. A recent study by the National Centre for Hydrology and Meteorology (NCHM) shows that glaciers in Bhutan are reacting sensitively to climate change.

**T**hree reference glaciers, Gangjula, Thana and Shodug, lose billions of litres of glacier water every year. According to Sonam Lhamo, Senior Hydrological and Meteorological Officer at NCHM, 45% of the water in Bhutan's rivers comes from glaciers. Bhutan has a total of 567 glaciers with an area of 55.04 square kilometres, according to the Bhutan Glacial Lake Inventory 2021. Of these glaciers, 17 are considered potentially dangerous as the natural dams of the glacial lakes can break and cause devastating floods. A recent study by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) shows that due to rising temperatures, snow-covered areas and snow volumes will decrease in most regions this decade. Even if global warming is limited to 1.5 °C, warming in the regions of the Hindu Kush Himalayas will be at least 0.3 degrees higher. According to the study, river runoff will initially increase until 2050. After that, it will decrease in the pre-monsoon season. This poses a threat to hydropower, but also to agriculture. ■

# Number of snow leopards has increased by almost 40

*The 2022–2023 National Snow Leopard Survey confirmed the presence of 134 snow leopards in the country.*

(rw) Source: BBS, 16.09.2023.

**T**he 2022–2023 National Snow Leopard Survey confirmed the presence of 134 snow leopards in the country. In 2016, 96 snow leopards were recorded during the first survey. The snow leopard is globally endangered and is on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. There are only 4,000 left in the wild in 12 countries in the high mountains of Asia.

The snow leopard's habitat is being destroyed, its prey is becoming scarcer, there are conflicts with humans, poaching and climate change are threatening it. The global population of snow leopards is declining, although Bhutan's conservation efforts are having a positive impact. A new species of deer, the white-lipped deer, was also discovered during the study. ■



Photo: Kuensel



Photo: animalia.bio



Photo: Pixabay

## Drain Strain!



caricature: Kuensel

(ud) This caricature illustrates Bhutan's problem: despite the inflow of aid money, foreign remittances, economic upturn and tourism, these are not enough to compensate for the consumption of hard currency reserves.reserves.

**B**hutan is facing major economic and employment challenges, which have been exacerbated by COVID-19. The country is struggling with structural problems as its exports are limited, mainly hydroelectricity and some agricultural products. Tourism, an important foreign exchange earner, has come to a standstill due to the pandemic and is only recovering slowly.

Bhutan has to import many goods such as fuel, gas and food in exchange for hard currency, which has led to import restrictions. This economic weakness leads to employment problems, especially for young people, and to an exodus of young people abroad. Planned hydropower projects are also suffering from planning and construction problems as well as the effects of climate change, leading to a further outflow of hard currency. ■

# Why Bhutan missed its hydropower target ...

... and what this says about the geopolitics of energy.

(ud) Source: *The Third Pole* 9.3.2023. "The Third Pole" is a platform that promotes information and discussion about the Himalayan watersheds and the rivers that originate there. Author: Chenchu Dema; an award-winning journalist currently based in Punakha, Bhutan, who has been writing about crime, politics, justice and the environment for 13 years. She currently works as a journalist for Kuensel and has worked as a freelancer for the British BBC, among others.

**B**hutan wanted to achieve a hydropower capacity of 10,000 MW by 2020; the delayed projects cost over a billion dollars more than planned. Fifteen years ago, Bhutan announced that it would be able to generate an additional 10,000 megawatts of electricity from hydropower by 2020. So far, the country has achieved less than a quarter of this target: the total installed capacity is 2,326 MW, compared to 1,480 MW in 2008.

Of the four hydropower plants under the 10,000 MW programme, only one, Mangdechhu, has been completed and is in operation. The other three are years behind schedule and will cost over a billion US dollars more than originally expected, with only one expected to go into operation in the foreseeable future.

The issue of delays and cost overruns related to the project was raised in the National Council – the upper house of Bhutan's parliament – in June last year, which noted that there was growing concern about it. As hydropower accounts for 14% of GDP and 26% of government revenue, the sector is an important pillar of economic growth, as Kalyani Honrao, research analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit, emphasises.





Construction work in December 2017 on one of the Punatsangchhu hydropower plant projects. The two power plants, the largest to be built in Bhutan, were supposed to be completed by 2020, but have been significantly delayed and caused additional costs.

The story of why the country has not reached the 10,000 MW target is a complex combination of geological, administrative and financial problems. Despite growing evidence that the effects of climate change require a rethink of dam project planning, Bhutan remains committed to hydropower and generates almost all of its electricity this way. This is partly due to the renewable energy ambitions of India, the main consumer of its surplus electricity.

### Poor geological conditions delay projects

Loknath Sharma, Bhutan’s Minister for Energy and Natural Resources, told The Third Pole that India and Bhutan had committed in 2008 to jointly pursue the target of 10,000 MW by 2020 as it was mutually beneficial and built on historical ties and relationships. India committed to provide support and financing and to buy Bhutan’s surplus power after 2020.

Chhewang Rinzin, Managing Director of Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC), the state-owned power company responsible for Bhutan’s hydropower sector, said: “The 1,200 MW Punatsangchhu I and 1,020 MW Punatsangchhu II projects ... have been significantly delayed due to poor geological conditions.”

Once completed, the two Punatsangchhu projects will be the largest in Bhutan in terms of installed capacity. The Punatsangchhu II project is almost complete and is scheduled to go into operation in October 2024 – almost seven years late. The Punatsangchhu I project was due to be completed in 2016, but was affected by accidents due to the destabilisation of slopes. Most of

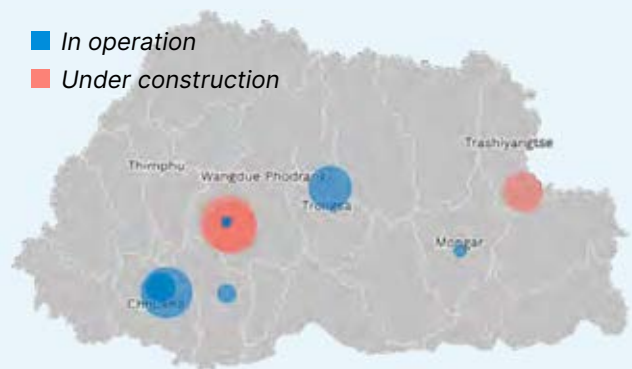
the work has been completed, but no date has been set for commissioning.

Sharma said: The expansion of hydropower is not only a capital-intensive endeavour, but also has a long lead time. It is even more difficult to build hydropower plants in a Himalayan region with a very young and fragile geology. These complex geological challenges have led to delays in projects in the country, resulting in time and cost overruns.

### Large hydropower plants in Bhutan

Status of the 10,000 MW programme until 2020

- In operation
- Under construction



Project	Capacity	Project status
Punatsangchhu I	1,200 MW	In operation
Punatsangchhu II	1,020 MW	Under construction until approx. 2024
Mangdechhu	720 MW	In operation since 2019
Kholongchhu	600 Mw	Under construction

There are concerns in the wider civil society about this. Yeshe Dorji, an environmentalist and well-known blogger, said: “We have been misled all along

about our hydropower projects. The locations of the projects are wrong – they are too far away from the market; the pre-feasibility study and geological survey were shoddy and amateurish.”

**Large hydropower plants in Bhutan**

<b>Power stations</b>	<b>Capacity</b>	<b>Commissioning</b>
Basochhu Upper Stage	24 MW	2001
Basochhu Lower Stage	40 MW	2004
Kurichhu	60 MW	2002
Chhukha	336 MW	1998
Tala	1,020 MW	2007
Dagachhu	126 MW	2015
Mangdechhu	720 MW	2019
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,326 MW</b>	

Sharma told The Third Pole that India and Bhutan are working to finalise the ongoing projects on time.

**Complex bureaucracy**

Administrative factors have also delayed the projects. Prior to the 10,000 MW initiative by 2020, the hydro-power projects supported by India were implemented as intergovernmental projects. India provided funds in the form of grants and loans and Bhutan commissioned the projects. Under the scheme agreed in 2008, this was converted into intergovernmental

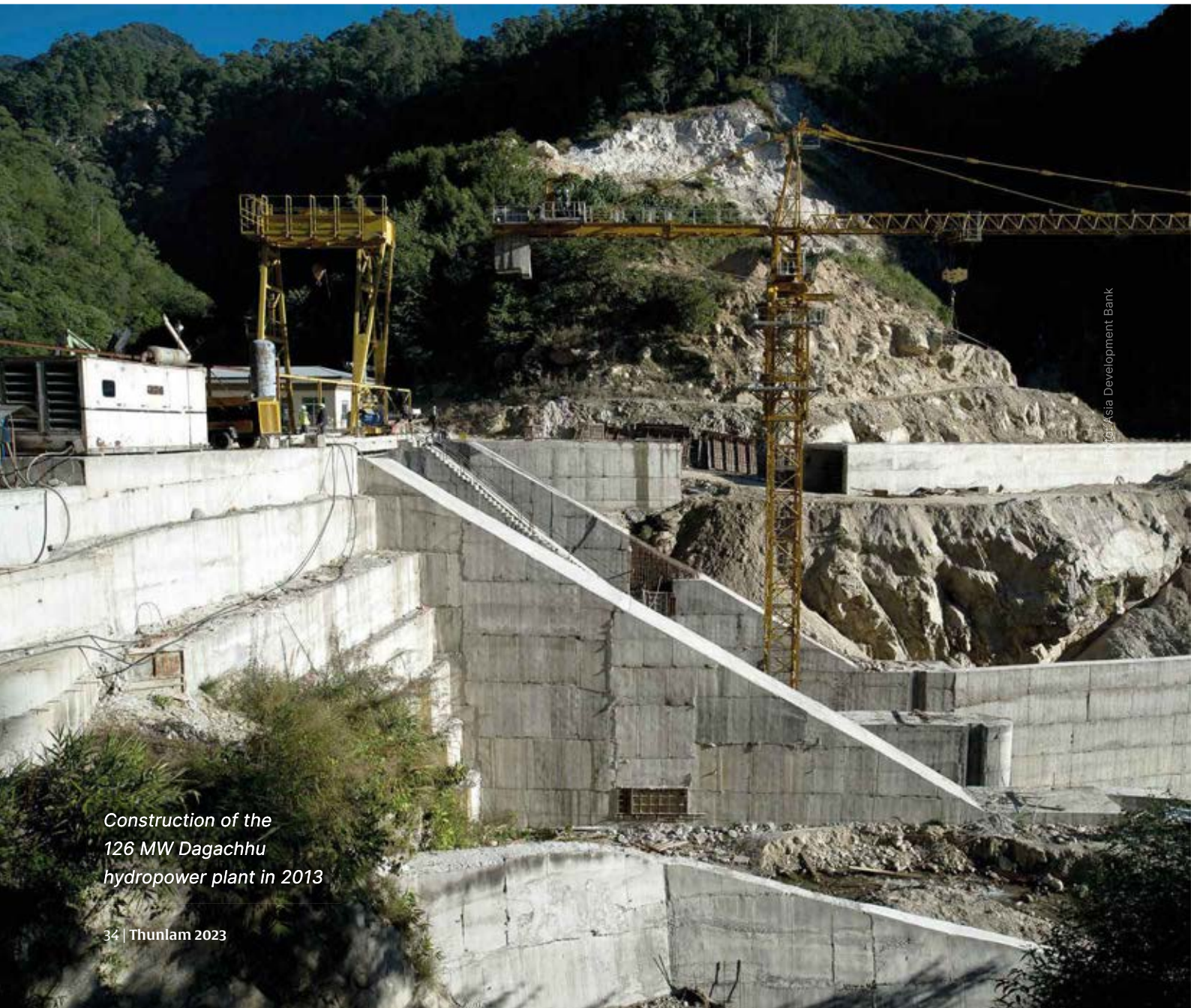


Photo: Asia Development Bank

Construction of the 126 MW Dagachhu hydropower plant in 2013

joint ventures. The first project to be implemented as an inter-state joint venture was the 600 MW Kholongchhu project, which involved state-owned hydropower companies from both countries: Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVN) from India and Bhutan's DGPC. The project was financed by Indian state-owned companies.

### **It was assumed that such projects would progress more quickly as companies would be able to act faster**

However, as the two companies are public sector companies, any differences in the interpretation of the joint venture agreement had to be referred to the two governments. Major differences between the shareholders and a 50:50 vote split reportedly led to a stalemate, meaning that the joint venture agreement for Kholongchhu could only be signed in 2020. In February, it was announced that DGPC would carry out the Kholongchhu project alone and that SJVN would transfer its shares in the joint venture company to DGPC.

Sharma told The Third Pole: "Given the changing energy landscape and the evolving power market in the region, [both] sides are reconsidering the joint venture mode as it was not in the interest of both countries."

### **Costs for hydropower plant projects escalate and burden the country's financial stability**

During the discussion in the National Council in June 2022, it became clear that the Punatsangchhu I project was originally supposed to cost 35.15 billion Bhutanese Ngulturm (USD 425 million), but has now cost BTN 93.76 billion (USD 1.13 billion) and is still not in operation. The Kholongchhu project was originally expected to cost BTN 33.05 billion (USD 400 million), but has increased to BTN 54.82 billion (USD 660 million) and is still far from completion.

Punatsangchhu I was financed with a grant of 40 % and a loan of 60 % from India, Punatsangchhu II with a grant of 30 % and a loan of 70 %. The annual interest rate for the loans is 10%. At the end of December 2022, the debt for the hydropower plant accounted for almost 70% of Bhutan's foreign debt and over 80%

of GDP, with long delays and cost overruns putting additional strain on the country's financial stability. Environmentalist Yeshey Dorji told The Third Pole that he was angry about the cost of the loans, especially as they have increased with the delays.

However, the pricing of the electricity purchased from India means that Bhutan will realise a net return of 15% above the cost of the dams built with Indian financing. This is guaranteed in the cost structure of the four 10,000 MW projects by 2020. External commentators, including the World Bank, have therefore stated that they consider the debt to be sustainable.

Rinzin of the DGPC said that despite the cost overruns, the cost per megawatt of installed capacity of the projects had remained below or at least competitive in the region and beyond.

### **Climate change is another factor that could drive up costs further, as it may require changes to the design**

Rinzin said that Bhutan is exploring more climate-resilient and sustainable hydropower systems such as pumped storage and seasonal storage power plants, which require more engineering and are much more expensive. In India's latest budget in February 2023, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the country would look into pumped storage power plants.

The first Bhutanese hydropower project with a reservoir will be the 2,585 MW Sankosh project. Originally conceived more than 30 years ago and still in the planning phase, Sankosh has been the subject of controversy for years.

"There is a renewed interest at the level of the two governments to move forward with the Sankosh project. The detailed project report (DPR) for the 2,640 MW Kuri-Gongri project has also been finalised," said Rinzin. The Kuri-Gongri project, which was originally planned as a run-of-river power plant, is now planned as a dam and reservoir. The Sankosh and Kuri-Gongri projects have been discussed and studied, but no agreement has yet been signed for their construction.

"In terms of creating reservoirs for pumped storage, while there are always concerns because the Himalayas are younger and more unstable compared to the

Alps in Europe, the size of the reservoirs for pumped storage could be much smaller in the proposed Sankosh and Kuri Gongri projects,” Rinzin added.

### **Delays in hydropower plants mean Bhutan has to import electricity**

In 2008, Bhutan assumed that it would use the electricity from its hydropower plants for its own growth and export the rest. As only a few power plants have been commissioned, the country now has to import electricity from India at times. Before 2021, electricity imports from India to Bhutan were minimal and were offset by exports.

Since then, however, there has been a boom in the establishment of energy-intensive industries as Bhutan has built a new dry harbour in the town of Pasakha and expanded the Jigmeling and Motanga industrial parks along the India-Bhutan border. This has pushed up the country’s overall electricity demand, which it struggles to meet domestically during the winter months when water flow is low and Bhutan’s run-of-river dams can only guarantee 415 MW of their total 2,336 MW installed capacity, the DGPC said. Between January and March 2022, the country had to buy power from the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX).

### **Affordability of imported electricity is likely to become a problem for Bhutanese consumers**

So far, Bhutan has been able to buy electricity relatively cheaply. While the market clearing price (MCP) on the IEX was 14 Indian rupees (USD 0.17) per kWh during the period Bhutan was importing power, the country managed to keep the price below INR 3.32 (USD 0.04) per kWh by importing during off-peak hours.

Chhewang Rinzin warned that “Bhutan will resume importing electricity from January to April and in December 2023. MCPs are expected to be much higher and the issue of affordability of imported power for Bhutanese consumers is likely to become a problem.” He also said that to facilitate imports, the entire Bhutanese power system will come under India’s Deviation Settlement Mechanism regulations, and if Bhutan cannot predict and manage power demand, huge liabilities could arise from the provisions for penalties.

### **What is the mechanism for equalising deviations?**

The reliability and stability of the electricity grids depends on demand and supply being harmonised. Therefore, there are regulations in place to ensure that there are no discrepancies between the promised supply from producers and the promised demand from consumers. Any discrepancy between the promised supply and the promised demand would have a destabilising effect on the grid, sometimes leading to grid outages.

### **To ensure that producers and consumers honour their commitments, India has introduced the Deviation Settlement Mechanism (DSM), which provides for penalties in the event of non-compliance**

Bhutan is now also obliged to comply with these regulations for imported electricity. Non-compliance can result in penalties totalling several million Ngulturns under the DSM. Nepal must also comply with the DSM. “For a small country like Bhutan, the import duties and deviation penalties could prove to be a major financial burden,” said Rinzin.

Minister Loknath Sharma said, “With the completion of ongoing projects and development of large scale solar projects, we will endeavour to maintain a net surplus throughout the year. We are also actively working on developing some reservoirs and pumped storage. Power trade between Bhutan and India will only grow if we utilise the diversity of energy demand and available resources.”

### **Call for diversification away from hydropower**

At a conference on 13 October 2022, Dechen Dema, senior engineer at the Renewable Energy Department, part of Bhutan’s Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, said that dependence on a single energy source could lead to future shortages.

### **Integrating hydropower with renewable energy technologies**

Sharma told The Third Pole that there is a need to integrate hydropower with renewable energy technolo-

gies. Bhutan's Sustainable Hydropower Development Policy (2020), for example, emphasises the development of green hydrogen alongside hydropower. It also recommends keeping one or two river systems dam-free until the existing projects are no longer viable.

Honrao of the EIU said that the government should take steps to diversify the energy mix given the impact of climate change, which makes Bhutan's energy sector vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations in hydropower generation. ■

*The Third Pole has contacted the Indian Ambassador to Bhutan regarding the issues raised in this article but had not received a response at the time of publication.*

*Photos below: Bhutan's first ground-mounted solar plant to feed electricity into the grid was only connected to the grid in August 2021: the 180-kilowatt plant in the village of Rubesa in Wangduephodrang district.*



Photo: Department of Renewable Energy, MoEA, Bhutan

# Revenues from hydropower fall by 33 %

(ud) Source: Business Bhutan, 8 August 2023

*Export sales of hydropower fall by a drastic 72%*



Photo: The Bhutanese

**B**hutan, known for its abundant hydropower resources, has witnessed a significant drop in revenue from its large hydropower projects in the first five months of 2023 compared to the same period last year. Revenues from these projects have reportedly dropped by 33%, with revenues generated through exports falling to Nu 937 million during these months, compared to Nu 3,497.62 million last year.

Between January and May 2023, the six major hydropower projects in Bhutan generated a combined revenue of Nu 3.2 billion from both domestic sales and exports. This is in stark contrast to the Nu 4.8 billion generated in the same period in 2022. One of the contributing factors was the drastic decline in export sales by 72%. The export of electricity from the large hydropower plants generated only Nu.937 million in the first five months of 2023, compared to Nu.3,497.62 million in the same period last year.

Total electricity generation was also down, with a decline of over 100 million units in the first five months of 2023 compared to the previous year. This decline occurred despite the temporary shutdown of the Tala hydropower plant from January to mid-March 2022 for maintenance work.

## **Bhutan's dependence on domestic electricity consumption in the winter months**

One of the main reasons for this decline is Bhutan's increasing dependence on domestic electricity consumption in the winter months. In previous years, the country was able to export more electricity than it consumed domestically. In 2023, however, the trend has reversed and domestic demand has risen dramatically.

This shift has led to more electricity being sold domestically. As the domestic tariff is lower than the export tariff, this has impacted the overall revenue. In an earlier interview, Dasho Chhewang Rinzin, the managing director of Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC), pointed out the impact of domestic consumption on overall revenue. “The increase in domestic demand has impacted our revenue as the domestic tariff is lower than the export tariff,” he explained. In the first five months of 2023, domestic sales of electricity increased significantly, generating Nu 2.2 billion, an increase of Nu 953 million compared to the same period in 2022.

At the same time, the domestic tariffs were revised and reduced from September 2022. The domestic tariffs for Chukha, Kurichhu, Tala and Basochhu hydropower plants have been revised from Nu 1.42 to Nu 1.34 per unit, while the tariff for Mangdechhu hydropower plant has been reduced from Nu 3.77 to Nu 3.64 per unit.

Revenue from hydropower also declined in May 2023 compared to the same month last year. The country’s revenue stood at Nu 1.4 billion in May 2023, compared to Nu 1.7 billion in May 2022, a decline of almost Nu 200 million.

### **Difficulties covering their own electricity needs in the winter months**

Bhutan also struggles to meet its electricity demand during the winter months, resulting in the country importing power from the Indian Energy Exchange. In 2023, Bhutan had to import electricity worth Nu 1.75 billion from January to April. In 2022, however, the country only imported electricity worth Nu 800 million until March.

Despite the challenges facing the hydropower sector in 2023, Dasho Chhewang Rinzin had pointed out that the long-term power purchase agreement with India allows Bhutan to export surplus power after meeting domestic consumption, giving the industry an opportunity to recover. In addition, Dasho explained that industry stakeholders and policy makers are closely monitoring the situation and looking for solutions to increase hydropower revenue and support the country’s sustainable energy goals. ■



## **The future of the Bhutanese economy in times of dwindling human resources**

(ud) Source: *Bhutan Times*, 22 Mai 2023

*The following article clearly shows the problem of labour shortages despite the paradoxically high youth unemployment. One reason for this is the neglect of the private sector, which governments have wanted to strengthen in recent years. The challenge lies in the power of implementation.*

**U**nderpopulated Bhutan is once again facing the problem of increasing inactivity and massive migration abroad. With a population density of just 20.38 people per square kilometre, Bhutan remains one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, according to UN population projections for 2022. The population density of neighbouring countries such as Nepal is 203, India 464 and Bangladesh a whopping 1,300 people per square kilometre.

According to UN population projections, Bhutan's population will be 782,455 in 2022, an increase of about 0.64% from the previous year. Bhutan's population is expected to grow at a similar, if not lower, rate in the coming years, indicating low fertility and lower birth rates.

While the low population density is a blessing for a country that has few natural resources and minerals, the flip side of the coin is that Bhutan has always had a great need for labour. Today, the country imports more than 100,000 migrant workers every year to bridge the growing gap caused by the shortage of local labour in the country's booming construction and manufacturing industries.

### **Various reasons for not being employed**

Despite the acute labour shortage, especially in the skilled manpower sector, a recent study conducted by the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) revealed that by 2022, about 23% of Bhutan's total registered population (782,455 in 2022), i.e. about 178,983 people, will be economically inactive. NSB identified various reasons for inactivity, including lack of skills, qualifications and experience, people waiting to study, disabled people, domestic workers, people retiring (for meditation) and others.

The NSB report paints a bleak picture: around a fifth of the country's economically active population is not in any form of work or employment, which is socio-culturally and economically unhealthy for a country with a small population. One of the biggest obstacles to the creation of platforms and sufficient employment opportunities for our citizens is the stifled and curtailed growth of the private sector, exacerbated by low wages and unfriendly monetary and banking policies. Economically active individuals in the country do not have much choice or room for growth apart from employment in the state sector as it is still the most secure and best paying sector.

### **Focus on the liberalisation of the private sector**

If Bhutan wants to make the most of its shrinking population, it should focus on liberalising the private sector and encouraging its growth while ensuring

that citizens have access to finance, albeit under more affordable and friendly conditions.

The country's banks and financial institutions have some of the highest lending rates, while the ailing private sector has been neglected and left to fend for itself. Such indifference to the private sector and unfriendly banking and monetary policies, which are also reflected in our bureaucratic foreign direct investment policies, will only add salt to the gaping wound of the increasing number of economically inactive people.

### **The dilemma of mass migration**

The dilemma of mass migration of Bhutanese, which has already become a national problem, will only worsen as more and more skilled and economically active citizens will opt to work abroad, further widening the gap of low human resource base.

Bhutan should work towards making it easier to do business in our country and encourage private enterprises and entrepreneurs through people-friendly banking and monetary policies. Otherwise, the dilemma of rising rate of unemployment and mass migration will haunt us for decades to come. ■



Photo: Unsplash





# Bhutan's economy should focus on economic efficiency

(ud) Source: Kuensel, 22 Mai 2023

*Outlook of the global economy and its impact on Bhutan.*

**T**he head of the Global Economic Monitoring Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Hamid Rashid (PhD), emphasised that Bhutan's economy should focus on improving efficiency to achieve long-term economic growth. He was speaking at the Friday Forum of the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies in Thimphu on 19 May on the prospects of the global economy and its impact on Bhutan. He explained that Bhutan's economy grew at an average of 6% annually between 1990 and 2020, outperforming comparable economies where Nepal grew at an average of 4.4% and South Asia at 5%. However, economic growth will slow to 1.9 % between 2020–25 and 3.3 % between 2025 and 2030, he added. Economic growth is estimated at 4.5% in 2023 and 4% in 2024. “For a large economy, this growth is impressive, but for a small

economy like Bhutan, it is worrying. Bhutan's economy could have grown much faster, between 7% and 10%.” The global economy is also expected to grow by 3.1% in the period 2001–2020. “Global growth is likely to average 2% over the next decade.”

## **Bhutan's GDP will decline in the coming years**

Given the vulnerability of Bhutan's economy to global external shocks as highlighted by the pandemic, which saw the economy shrink by 10%, he said that this would mean less tourism revenue for Bhutan as advanced economies would have less money to spend. This will result in Bhutan's GDP declining in the coming years, he said, as Bhutan has a narrow economic base and is largely dependent on hydropower and

tourism. “The tightening of monetary policy in industrialised countries to curb high inflation will create limited fiscal space, leaving less money available for discretionary spending.”

### **Donor trilemma: curbing inflation, safeguarding financial stability and boosting economic growth**

“This difficult environment means a decline in official development assistance and foreign direct investment for Bhutan, as donor funds are now being diverted to the reconstruction of Ukraine,” he continued. He also emphasised that developed economies are facing a trilemma: Curbing inflation, ensuring financial stability and boosting economic growth. “These three goals cannot be achieved simultaneously.” Another challenge for Bhutan is the great inequality between urban and rural areas, said Rashid. He noted that the average per capita income in Bhutan’s urban areas is ten times higher at USD 8,000 in nominal dollar terms than in rural areas at around USD 900 per capita. “This will have a significant impact on rural-urban migration.”


### **Bhutan will age before it gets rich**

With an ageing population and slow population growth compared to industrialised countries, Bhutan will

age first before it gets rich, unlike other economies that get rich first and age later. “More elderly people will have an impact on overall output. If Bhutan’s economy grows at a rate of 7 per cent, it would take 10 years to double its GDP, according to projections. At 10% growth, it would take seven years to double, and at 15% growth, it would double in five years. However, at an annual growth rate of 3.3%, it would double in about 23 years. On the other hand, Bhutan aims to double its GDP from USD 2.5 billion to USD 5 billion by 2029 and to USD 10 billion by 2034.”

### **Bhutan has enormous potential to recalibrate its growth model**

Rashid said Bhutan has tremendous potential to recalibrate its growth model and achieve a much faster growth rate and there is an opportunity to strategise. “Gross value added in terms of employees and the share of sectors in employment are very unevenly distributed,” he said. For example, the value added per employee in the hydropower sector is USD 77,000, while in agriculture, forestry and fisheries it is USD 2,500 lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. “About 4,000 people are employed in the water and water-related sector, which generates a GDP of about USD 300 million. While about 50% of the labour force is employed in agriculture and generates a similar amount of GDP.” He added that there is great scope



for rapid improvement in the agricultural sector. He further emphasised that long-term economic growth depends on total factor productivity (TFP) – how capital and labour productivity together add value. “GDP growth in Bhutan since the 1990s has averaged 5.7 per cent, with almost two-thirds of GDP growth coming from capital accumulation, which is declining. This means that capital is being invested in the construction of hydropower plants and infrastructure in the economy.

### **A low TFP indicates economic inefficiency**

This has led to rising labour productivity and declining marginal productivity.” Rashid said that Bhutan’s labour productivity growth was 9% of GDP, similar to India with an annual growth rate of 3.4% in the last 50 years. However, TFP in Bhutan contributed only 6% to growth, while in India it was 25%. “Low TFP indicates economic inefficiency. TFP determines how efficient the economy is when combined with factor inputs,” Rashid said, adding that TFP is associated with innovation and ingenuity.

He further explained that the country’s debt has increased due to capital accumulation. Despite Bhutan’s external debt to gross national income ratio of 140 per cent, Rashid said that Bhutan’s hydropower debt is not a concern as it is for the construction of

income generating assets. There are three types of debt: Borrowing from external sources to support current consumption, borrowing from external sources to build infrastructure that does not directly generate revenue, and debt for the construction of revenue-generating facilities. “However, Bhutan’s debt compared to other countries could be much lower if the country had different pricing models (joint ventures instead of borrowing to build projects). As foreign financing, including India, is becoming scarcer, Rashid said Bhutan should utilise domestic resources to create liquidity and ease financing constraints.”

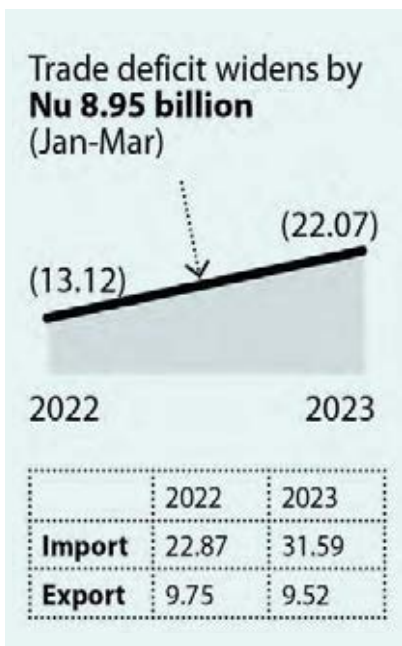
### **Focus on human capital instead of physical capital**

Rashid also emphasised that Bhutan should focus on human capital rather than physical capital and that the country should also identify new growth sectors that have a dynamic comparative advantage. “Bhutan can take advantage of cheap energy and hydropower by adding capital and tapping the resources to build the identified sectors.” He added that the country needs to identify bottlenecks in productivity growth and target the productivity of each sector. “For example, by creating incentive structures that stimulate growth in sectors such as agriculture that are efficient.” ■

# Worrying increase in imports to Bhutan

(ud) Source: Kuensel, 11 July 2023

Foreign exchange reserves are a weekly topic in Bhutan. Two articles illustrate: The solution is crucial for the country's long-term independence.



Graphic: Kuensel

Trade deficit increases by 8.95 billion Ngultrum

The increase in the import bill is mainly due to an increase in fuel imports from Nu 1.71 billion to Nu 3.3 billion. In addition, imports of smartphones increased from Nu 379.12 million to Nu 635.85 million, construction materials such as steel from Nu 357.44 million to Nu 777.08 million and rice from Nu 677.19 million to Nu 751.71 million.

Exports to India and other countries fell by around 2.5%. Total exports including electricity fell from Nu. 9.75 billion to Nu.9.52 billion. In particular, exports of ferrosilicon, a major export commodity, declined by around 23% to Nu.3.73 billion as compared to Nu.4.85 billion in the same quarter last year. In addition, Bhutan's electricity exports to India fell by around 70% from Nu 721.84 million to Nu 218.51 million due to poor hydrological conditions.

In the first quarter of 2023, Bhutan recorded a significant increase in imports. Latest figures show a 38 per cent increase in imports to a total of Nu 31.69 billion compared to Nu 22.87 billion in the same period last year.

In 2022, Bhutan's import bill increased by around 32% to Nu 118.79 billion compared to the previous

Bhutan's trade deficit rose to Nu 22.07 billion in the first quarter of this year, an increase of Nu 8.95 billion compared to the previous year. This deficit has a serious impact on the country's foreign exchange reserves, which are essential for import financing, international obligations and controlling capital flow. Sharp increase in imports, inflationary pressures and devaluation of the Ngultrum are exacerbating the decline in foreign exchange reserves.

Bhutan's debt amounted to 159.16 billion Indian rupees and 988.69 million US dollars on 31 March 2023. Despite a moratorium on non-essential vehicle imports in August last year, foreign exchange reserves fell from USD 736 million in August to USD 698.3 million in March. To protect the reserves, the government suspended all housing loans from 9 June to 31 December.

## Urgent need to strengthen foreign exchange reserves

The ADB warns that Bhutan's reserves will violate the constitutional mandate to cover essential imports for 12 months if they continue to decline by 2% per month, as will be the case in 2022. The revised values for essential imports for 2023 are USD 603 million under normal circumstances and USD 464 million under critical circumstances.

Bhutan is vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on imports for more than 80% of its goods as reserves are inadequate. If the reserves do not improve, further moratoriums/bans could be imposed, which could affect imports of furniture, processed meat, food, junk food, alcohol and LED TVs. Strengthening the foreign exchange reserves is urgently needed to ensure Bhutan's economic stability. ■

## Bhutan's imports exceed exports by a factor of three in the 1st quarter of 2023

(ud) Source: BBS, 7 September 2023

In the first three months of 2023, Bhutan imported goods and services worth over Nu 30 billion.

In the first quarter, Bhutan's imports were three times higher than exports, which totalled around Nu 10 billion. Electricity worth over Nu 1.5 billion was imported while ferro alloys worth nearly Nu 3 billion were exported.

After a trade deficit of almost Nu 80 billion in 2022, the trend of a growing gap between imports and exports is expected to continue. In the first quarter, the deficit was Nu 22 billion. The main imports include diesel fuel (nearly Nu 2.5 billion), petrol (over Nu 850 million), rice (over Nu 750 million), smartphones (nearly Nu 650 million) and vaccines (Nu 560 million). Exports in the first quarter of 2023 included base metals worth over Nu 5 billion, mineral products over Nu 2.5 billion and vegetables nearly Nu 1 billion. Food, beverages, vinegar, tobacco and other goods worth over Nu 450 million were also exported.

India is Bhutan's largest trading partner, with over Nu 23 billion of the total imports of over Nu 30 billion coming from India. Goods and services worth nearly Nu 3 billion were imported from Singapore, while imports from Hong Kong and China together totalled around Nu 2 billion. Most of Bhutan's exports in the first quarter went to India and Bangladesh, at around Nu 7 billion and over Nu 1 billion respectively. ■



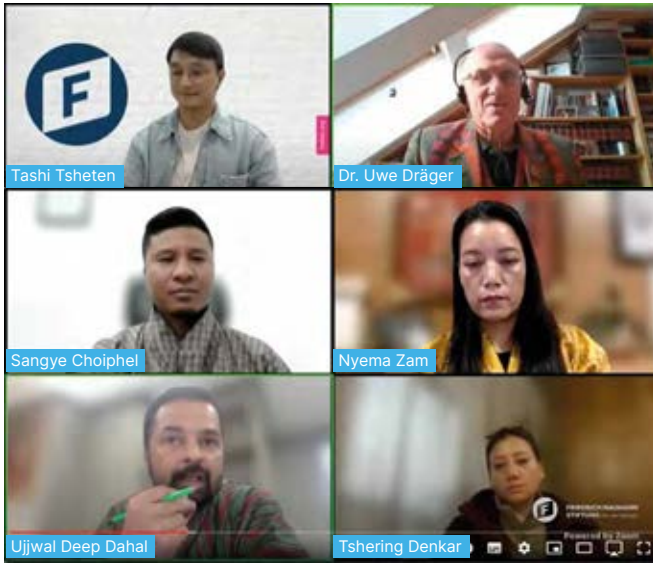
## Entrepreneurs forge ahead despite challenges – call for co-operation

(ud) Source: Kuensel, 11 December 2023. This article deals with a panel discussion on “Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Economic Growth in Bhutan”, organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. Dr Uwe Dräger, member of the DBHG, was the keynote speaker.

The emerging start-up scene in Bhutan is slowly awakening from the slumber caused by the pandemic. During a panel discussion on “Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Economic Growth in Bhutan”, leading representatives of the entrepreneurial landscape discussed challenges, opportunities and the development of a thriving ecosystem. The speakers, including DHI CEO Ujjwal Deep Dahal, Samuh founder Nyema Zam, Denkar's Getaway and Rikesh Gurung of Green Road, discussed the challenges and emphasised Bhutan's transition to a digital economy and a global innovation hub.

### Secondary sector as the main source of financial gains

In his keynote speech, Dr Uwe Dräger from the German Bhutan Himalaya Society analysed Bhutan's economic situation, highlighted challenges and identified potential opportunities for growth. He explained that the primary sector contributes 20% of GDP, the secondary sector 34% and the tertiary sector



**Video:** Recording of the panel discussion on “Entrepreneurship and Innovation for economic growth in Bhutan”.

46%, with over 50% of the labour force employed in the primary sector. Dr Dräger emphasised that the secondary sector is the main source of financial gains, although it only employs 10% of the workforce. He pointed out Bhutan’s economic dilemma as most goods are imported and the dominance of the public sector in the tertiary sector poses challenges for sustainable growth. A confusion of competences and unclear decision-making structures further complicate the business landscape. Dr Dräger used specific examples such as the lack of standards for solar power processes and unclear regulations for power generation to highlight the need for clarity in this area.

### Long-term planning and coordination

He suggested that long-term planning and coordination, especially in agriculture and tourism, are crucial for economic transformation. Cleaning up the skills mess, promoting sustainable development and targeted incentives were presented as key steps, emphasising a “Bhutanisation” of solutions to align strategies with existing infrastructure.

### Technological progress drives Bhutan’s innovation landscape

The discussion emphasised Bhutan’s progress towards a digital economy and the crucial role of collaborati-

on for innovation. Despite unique challenges such as limited access to capital and the need for digital skills, failures were seen as learning opportunities. Technological advancements, particularly in the areas of drones and digital identity, are driving the innovation landscape in Bhutan. Small proof-of-concept projects such as drone testing and design demonstrate a participatory approach to building an innovation ecosystem.

The panellists emphasised the need for cooperation for successful innovation. A national law for the drone industry was cited as an example of this collaborative approach. Nyema Zam reported on the potential for a thriving export industry in Bhutan, particularly in the creative arts sector, if technology is utilised and expanded into larger markets. The protection of intellectual property was emphasised as critical to fostering innovation, with a focus on clear legal frameworks and awareness raising.

International collaboration was considered important and innovators from around the world were invited to contribute to Bhutan’s innovation ecosystem. The idea of an international fund modelled on the Yozma Fund in Israel to attract investment and support local start-ups was discussed. The long-term goal is to turn Bhutan into a global innovation centre.

### Key sectors: Hydropower & Tourism

Bhutan’s unique strengths such as hydropower and tourism were identified as key areas for development. The entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of pooling experiences and exploring how Bhutan can strengthen its influence in these sectors. The discussion emphasised the importance of leveraging Bhutan’s own strengths. Although the government recognises the importance of the private sector, greater involvement was called for in order to see it as a true partner in economic development.

Bhutan’s young population is seeking opportunities at home and participants emphasised the urgency of swift action to harness this potential. They emphasised the importance of an economy in which the private sector plays a vital role. Bhutan is at a critical juncture where collaboration, innovation and intellectual property protection are essential for sustainable entrepreneurship. ■

# Demographic development and migration

(hk) Sources: Kuensel, 24 Januar and 20. May; The Bhutanese, February 2023

*A large number of articles have been published on the topic of “migration”, in particular emigration to Australia. The following article summarises these articles without, however, indicating the allocation of the individual aspects to the articles.*



**Video:** DBHG organised a webinar with Dasho Karma Ura (see page 6) on this topic.

Photo: Kuensel

In 2020, 10,240 children were born in Bhutan and 5,115 people died in the same period. This represents a net increase in the population. Although this net increase has continuously declined slightly in recent years, at first glance there is no problem with the demographic development. However, there is one significant factor that has a decisive influence on demographic development: migration – specifically emigration abroad.

There has been a sharp increase in emigration via Paro airport alone, the figures for which are known. From January 2015 to June 2022, an average of 245 Bhutanese emigrated every month. In the second half of 2022, however, the monthly average was already 3120 (i.e. more than ten times higher) and in January 2023, 5,099 people left the country, as well as 5,542 in

February 2023. It can be assumed that the numbers will continue to rise or at least stagnate at a high level. The destinations of emigration are diverse, with 118 countries listed as destinations. However, it is important to note that Australia and the Middle East are the predominant destinations.

## Emigration of civil servants

The issue of “emigration of civil servants” is increasingly being recognised as a major problem. Here, too, it can be seen that an average of 64 civil servants resigned per month between January 2015 and May 2022. In the months from July 2022 to February 2023, the number rose to 234 per month. In the first three months of 2023, the total was already 1005 people. A large

Graphic: Kuensel



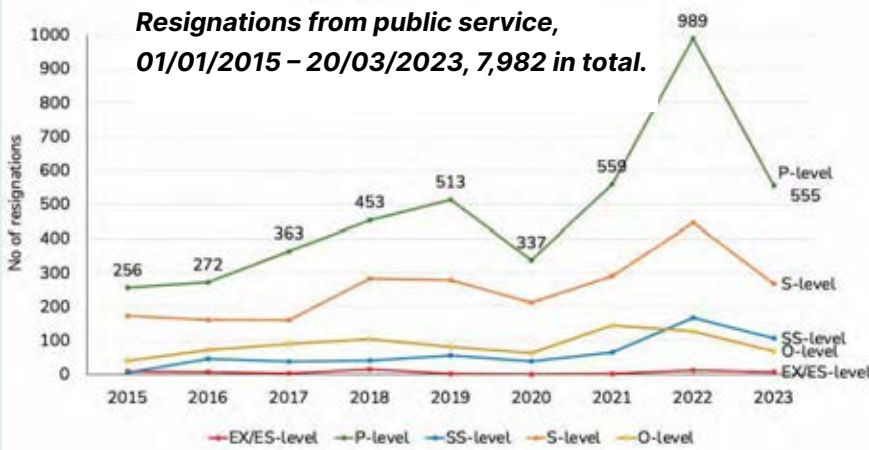
zenship of foreigners who marry abroad?

It is interesting to note that the majority of emigrants come from the urban areas of Bhutan. The resulting shortage of labour in the urban regions increases the pressure on rural areas as more people move from there to the cities.

**70 % of the labour force would like to emigrate**

The developments described above are also documented in a report by the Bhutanese Ministry of Labour, which states that 70 % of the workforce would like to emigrate. The fluctuation in the public sector is probably not wrong at all to break up encrusted structures, but the private sector in Bhutan has so far not been able to make attractive offers to counteract emigration. Worryingly, Bhutan is not only losing many young talents but also a talent pool that was supposed to build up the private sector. A radical policy change is therefore called for.

Graphic: Kuensel



proportion of these people see their goal as emigration, as they are voluntarily leaving the service and not retiring.

One article literally states “Healthy downsizing is always a goal of HR management, but unplanned attrition leaves a mess”.

**Two aspects are often discussed in this context:**

- a) the tension between individual success in migrating and earning more and the quality of public services. Here, the tension between individual interests and solidary behaviour towards the nation is put to the test.
- b) What happens to expatriates who marry abroad? And the question: what about the Bhutanese citi-

It is still possible to replace teachers, who have been leaving the profession in increasing numbers in recent years, but it will be more difficult to find doctors and nurses. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends a ratio of 1 doctor per 1,000 inhabitants. In Bhutan, the number is stagnating at 1 to 5,000.

**Birth rate down to 1.8 children**

Great observation is also necessary with regard to the birth rate: While the fertility rate in 1982 was still 6 children per woman, well above the necessary reproduction rate of 2.1, this has now fallen to 1.8 in 2022 (a figure that is quite comparable to Germany). Bhutan still has a younger population, but the demographic trend is forecast to reverse by 2038 at the latest. Bhutan will then have the same problems as the western countries.



## Sociological theories of migration

Meanwhile, sociological migration theories are also being discussed in the Bhutanese media about the behaviour of international migration movements. The focus here is on the so-called network theory. This theory looks at the migrant networks in the host country, which provide strong incentives for migration. A Bhutanese who emigrates to Australia is not a stranger there, as he finds a large Bhutanese community to help him.

### 79 % of Bhutanese are satisfied with their work in Australia

The institutional theory, which looks at the offers of assistance for migration, is also discussed. Assistance is therefore also an (“undesirable”) incentive for emigrants. Finally, young people who do not specify the goal of migration are considered “backward” and “lazy”. Very good education, especially in English, is a major incentive system that usually only comes into play in former colonies of England. Although Bhutan was never a colony, it is comparable to India in this respect due to its similar education system. It is also interesting to note that 79% of Bhutanese in Australia are satisfied with their work.

### Tackling unemployment through skills development combat unemployment

The question now arises as to what to do in view of these facts. What options does the Bhutanese government have to counteract this? The Bhutanese government has launched a number of initiatives to combat unemployment and the associated migration pressure through skills development. These include the Skills Development Plan (SDP), which forms the basic course for private entrepreneurship. The Build Bhutan project, which provides young people and the unemployed with manual skills, and finally the Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme (YELP), which promotes the employability of young people, should also be considered in this context. The responsible ministry sees a good opportunity for positive development in the tourism and hospitality industry once the pandemic has subsided. Whether this will be sustainable in the medium and long term remains to be seen. ■

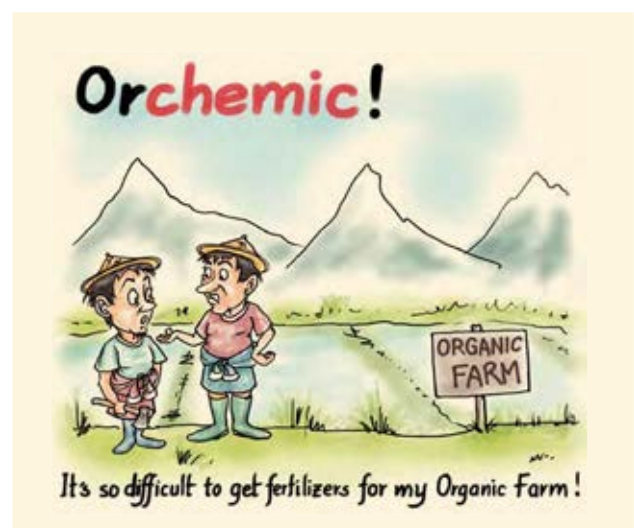
## Organic farming

(ih) Source: BBS, 18 February 2023.

According to the National Organic Flagship Programme (NOFP) 110 farmer co-operatives produce and market organic products.

The country currently only has four internationally certified products: Lemongrass oil\*, edible flowers from “Bhutan Blossoms”, ginger and Himalayan pine essential oil. A further 65 products are certified according to the “Bhutan Organic Standard”. These products certified by the Bhutan Food and Drug Authority are currently only accepted for export in Singapore, as international organic labels such as ECOCERT (IMO) are expensive.

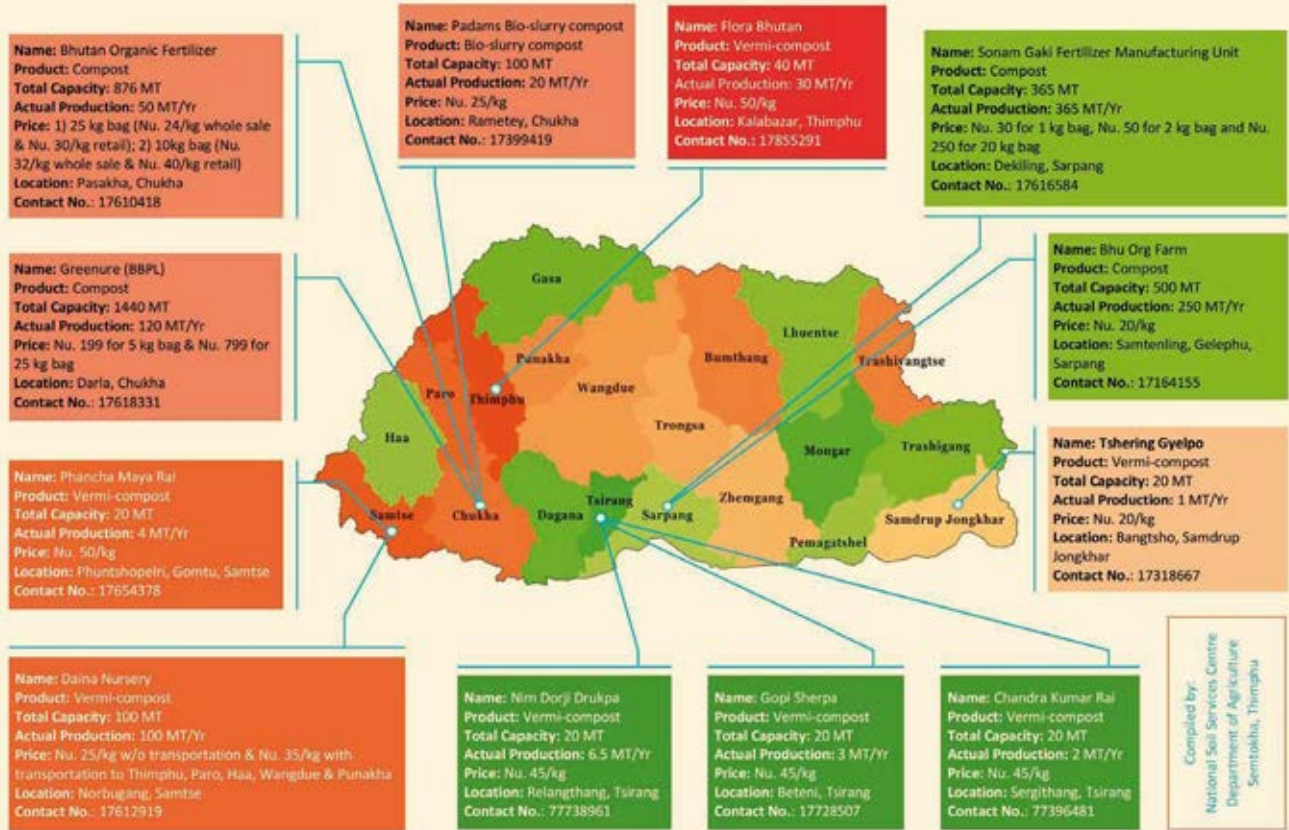
Organic farming is also about avoiding harmful chemicals in the field. But fertilisers and pesticides are still imported! Speaking of fertilisers: Now further obstacles are being placed in the way of small entrepreneurs who produce organic fertilisers. The state-owned Farm Machinery Corporation Limited in Athang Gewog in Wangdue Phodrang is building a bio-fertiliser plant and making it difficult for small businesses in Sarpang to sell their products. The Sonam Gaki Organic Manure Fertiliser Unit in Dekiling Gewog uses a mixture of dry leaves, urine (from cattle), sawdust, charcoal and chicken excreta to produce organic fertiliser. The unit can produce one tonne of organic fertiliser per day. ■



Caricature: Kuensel

\* Since 2004, the wild-collected lemongrass from Bio Bhutan Pvt. Ltd. has been certified organic – a prerequisite for exporting lemongrass oil to Europe.

Locations of organic fertiliser manufacturers in Bhutan



Graphic: nssc.gov.bt

# Nothing new from the hazelnut

(ih) Source: BBS, 14 April 2024

The residents of Serkhagphu-Yengkhartshing Chiwog in Dramedtse Gewog in Monggar are disappointed with the hazelnut production.



Graphic: BBS

Despite a cultivation area of over 7,000 hectares and the hope of a good income source, the hazelnut bushes are still not bearing fruit after a decade.

Mountain Hazelnuts Venture Limited has implemented a grafting programme to improve production in the hazelnut orchards, but some farmers doubt its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the company is asking for patience and believes that its efforts will bear fruit in the next two to three years, as Jeff Nicholls, Chief Operations Officer, emphasises.

At a cost of more than Nu 31 million (equivalent to 3.5 million euros), Mountain Hazelnuts Venture Limited has completed the grafting of more than 1,350 hectares of land since last year. The company has exported 3.5 tonnes of hazelnuts this year at a price of two US dollars per kilogram. ■

# Agriculture and climate change

(ih) Source: Kuensel, 24. June 2023

*Climate change is causing problems for farmers in Bhutan, but on the other hand it also has positive aspects: The farmers in Laya can now grow leafy vegetables.*

Two decades ago, eating leafy vegetables was a rarity for Rinchen Gyeltshen and her family of eight; even the village elite did not have the luxury of such a nutritious diet. The harsh highland climate at an altitude of up to 4,000 metres made the cultivation of leafy vegetables almost impossible. Instead, the 62-year-old and his wife lived mainly on dairy products, occasionally supplemented with turnips, potatoes and radishes.

## Agricultural development

A remarkable transformation has taken place in the remote region. Today, all 286 households in Laya Gewog are proud of their greenhouses, which are filled with green leafy vegetables all year round. Even the local astrologer of Lungo, known for his mystical predictions, now enjoys spinach with every meal, delighting in the delicate flavour of the vegetables that his wife skilfully prepares on the wood-fired stove.

In 2011, Gewog's agricultural sector launched a comprehensive programme that provided free materi-

als for polytunnels, vegetable seeds and training in vegetable management. This initiative was a major turning point that boosted agricultural development in the region and breathed new life into the mountains. As a result, vegetable production increased from 16 tonnes in 2017 to an impressive 20 tonnes in 2022.

## Laya as a leading exporter of vegetables

Today, Laya is a leading exporter of vegetables, especially broccoli and cauliflower to Singapore. The introduction of the submerged bed method in Lungo has further improved the possibilities for vegetable cultivation. Farmer Pem Zam was determined to try out this innovative technique on her land. Inspired by the success stories of her friends and relatives in Laya, Pem Zam dug more than a metre deep into the ground and created a three-metre-wide bed to harvest fresh, green vegetables all year round. Despite pest pressure from aphids and butterfly larvae, she harvests around 40 bunches of saag even in the harshest winter months and success-fully grows coriander, broccoli and cauliflower at altitudes of up to 5,000 metres. ■

# Yak herders: majestic mountain landscapes, indigenous knowledge and hidden meanings

(ih) Source: Dr. Ritu Verma: *Yak herders in Bhutan*, published in the magazine “Tashi Delek” by Drukair, January 2023

*The habitat of the yaks in Bhutan stretches from Haa in the northwest to Merak-Sakteng in Trashigang at altitudes between 2,500 and 6,000 metres.*

**A**round 30,000 yaks currently live in Bhutan, although their numbers are declining. On festive occasions, they are adorned with handmade textiles and decorations from Bhutan and Tibet. Their handmade bells produce melodic, almost magical sounds.

## The relationship between yaks and humans is close

Yaks are of central importance to the pastoral peoples of the Himalayas. They serve as beasts of burden and provide meat and milk for the production of cheese and butter. Yak wool is made into clothing, blankets, tents and ropes, while yak dung is used as fuel. During the winter months, yak herders in the valleys trade yak products for salt, rice and tea.

The relationship between yaks and humans is close; each yak has its own personality and disposition. Yaks symbolise a sense of community, compassion, connection

with nature and other living beings as well as happiness, contentment and continuity. In Bhutan, the land of Vajrayana Buddhism, the belief in reincarnation plays a major role, even among the yak herders. Rebirth as a human is regarded as the highest, but rebirth as a yak is also considered favourable. This belief is depicted in the recent Bhutanese films “My Beloved Yak” and “Happiness Lies in the Himalayas”.

The Royal Highland Festival in Laya has been attracting travellers and adventurers from all over the world for several years. Travelling to culturally preserved places like the Yak herders in Bhutan reminds us of our responsibility as travellers, pilgrims and tourists. The kindness, compassion and wisdom of the Yak herders remind us that we are all connected to each other, to nature and to this wonderful planet we inhabit together. Let us do all we can to protect and care for it, for the benefit of future generations of humans, yaks and other living beings. ■

**Video:** Impressions from the Royal Highland Festival (see also page 74)



# Bhutan's rice problem – Challenges for farmers are increasing

(ih) Source: *Business Bhutan*, 19 August 2023

**T**he ban on the export of rice other than basmati rice from India has caused concern in Bhutan as rice is a staple food and India has traditionally been a major source of rice imports. India, one of the world's largest rice exporters, put the embargo into effect on 20 July.

Bhutan is heavily dependent on Indian rice imports, which are estimated at 70,000 to 80,000 tonnes per year. Domestic rice production is around 27,000 to 30,000 tonnes per year. Bhutan needs about 115,000 tonnes of rice per year to meet its demand, based on an average consumption of 150 kg per person per year (410 g/day). The area under rice cultivation will decrease from 40,804.95 acres in 2020 to about 40,106.81 acres in 2022. As only 2.7% of the arable land is used for rice cultivation, Bhutan's self-sufficiency rate for rice is around 27–30%. The export ban on Indian rice therefore poses a direct threat to the country's food security, which is heavily reliant on imports to meet its needs. ■

## Rice growing has to do with passion and tradition

(ih) Source: *YK Poudel, Kuensel*, 12 July 2023

**T**he air is filled with the scent of fresh earth as the terraces are being prepared for rice cultivation. The farmers are busy ploughing the earth and planting the seedlings. Ropai – rice cultivation – is an annual event for over a thousand farming communities in Dagana. Khem Lal Poudel, 77, has been growing rice (paddy) all his life. Just last week, he completed paddy planting on his four-hectare field.

Poudel helped out for the first time at the age of seven. “Under my father's guidance, I learnt the ancient art of rice cultivation, which is passed down from generation to generation. Back then, we had to rely solely on our strength and simple tools,” said Poudel. “But the joy of seeing the seeds slowly grow into golden rice paddies was divine.” As much as he enjoyed doing things the traditional way, a powertiller had to be used at some point. Now that his age is advanced and he is short of farm labourers, Poudel reluctantly had to give way to the modern machine. Over the years, Poudel has seen a significant change in rice farming. Technology and machinery have made the work less

arduous. What used to take a whole day can now be done in a few hours. “But it’s not as much fun anymore.” “Technology has its advantages, but there’s something special about the traditional way of doing things,” Poudel said with a smile. “It connects us deeply to our roots and the land, almost spiritually.”

According to Poudel, the family only harvested 2.1 tonnes of rice last year. “We used to produce around 5 tonnes of rice a year,” he said. The loss of land due to landslides, roads, predators and the scarcity of raw materials had affected rice production. The fact that rice production has declined doesn’t seem to bother Poudel as much as the loss of the traditional way of life in the village. “Respect the land, take care of it like a child, and the land will give you everything you need,” said Poudel. There is wisdom in these words; it is not for nothing that Poudel is widely revered in the village. “I will continue to farm the land. It’s not just a livelihood, it’s a way of life, a sacred connection with nature,” said Poudel. ■

### What happens to rice cultivation?

*(ih) Source: Mahesh Ghimiray, Kuensel, 9 September 2023*

**W**e are basically an agricultural society, but recently agriculture in general and rice cultivation in particular have been losing their traditional importance. The exodus of farmers from

agriculture, especially rice farming, is accelerating. Due to the mountainous terrain and the small, isolated farms, rice cultivation is laborious, labour-intensive and not very lucrative. Agricultural labour is scarce and expensive, and the mechanisation of agriculture is limited by the geographical conditions. Roads, cities, hotels and resorts are replacing the rice fields. It is time to look for innovative approaches.

### Rice and wetland ecosystems for biodiversity

Rice plays a fundamental role in our culture, tradition and religion. No religious ritual is possible without rice. Our diet is dominated by rice, which provides over 55% of our daily calorie intake. Rice terraces contribute to the beauty and value of the environment. Rice and the wetland ecosystem are crucial for biodiversity:

- The wetlands of the Phobjikha Valley in Wangdue attract black-necked cranes that come to roost there in winter. The harvested rice fields in Bomdeling serve as a feeding ground for cranes.
- The rice landscapes promote tourism.
- Whoever has seen the golden panicles in autumn on the approach to Paro will remember them for a lifetime.



Let us first take a look at the many challenges facing rice cultivation. These include the limited area under rice cultivation, the lack of agricultural labour, inadequate irrigation, crop losses due to wild animals, inadequate policy measures and the extremely unfavourable economic conditions for production.

### **Investments in irrigation expansion were far from sufficient**

The average area under rice cultivation each year is around 25,000 acres (approx. 10,000 ha), which corresponds to only around 4% of the total agricultural area. The decreasing availability of labour for agriculture is a cause for concern. The farms are run by older people, with young people avoiding farming. Wild boars, deer, monkeys and elephants raid the rice fields and discourage the farmers. Due to climate change and extreme fluctuations in rainfall and temperature, rice cultivation is becoming increasingly unpredictable and difficult. Investments in the expansion of irrigation have been far from sufficient. Of the approximately 1192 irrigation systems in the country, most (82%) were built by farmers before 1961. The government has so far only built or renovated around 215 systems. More than half of the rice-growing area is still cultivated with rainwater.

There is no specific policy or legislation for rice cultivation, especially not for the protection of critical rice landscapes or ecosystems. Since 2007, rice-growing areas

are supposed to be protected and other forms of utilisation are prohibited. In fact, the government itself flouts this regulation by allowing the construction of roads, model towns, hospitals and schools on prime rice land.

### **Unfavourable production conditions lead to cheap imports**

Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture to promote rice cultivation, there is a lack of a holistic approach. Government support is limited to the promotion of traditional Green Revolution technologies to increase production and productivity. The provision and promotion of improved varieties and seeds as well as inorganic fertilisers were the focus of the measures. The development of irrigation and the mechanisation of agriculture were also promoted, albeit to a lesser extent. These efforts have paid off, as productivity has risen from 1.53 tonnes/ha in 1981 to over 4.20 tonnes/ha today. This increase is mainly due to improved technologies, but at the expense of a declining area under rice cultivation and a lower number of farming households.

### **What have other Asian countries done to preserve their rice cultivation systems?**

More worryingly, the lack of a holistic approach to rice research and development is already having a negative impact. Many important, critical rice land-



scapes and ecosystems have been destroyed by construction or fallow. What have other Asian countries done to preserve their rice farming systems? Measures range from simple production and market incentives to import restrictions, compensation payments for farmers, subsidies and the protection of rice landscapes through legal and political instruments.

Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand provide instructive examples. Japan imposes import restrictions through a tariff quota with a zero tariff rate within the authorised quota, but any import outside the quota is restricted by prohibitively high tariffs. To compensate for inflation, farmers are compensated when the market price falls through a rice farmer income stabilisation programme. In addition, Japan operates a system of redistributive payments where farmers are paid for growing non-rice crops to avoid overproduction and oversupply of rice on the market.

The Korean economy is referred to as the “rice economy” and rice policy is equated with food policy. The Korean government determines annual imports based on demand and supply. Prices are supported by the state. Korea has invested heavily in the expansion of irrigation, agricultural mechanisation and land consolidation.

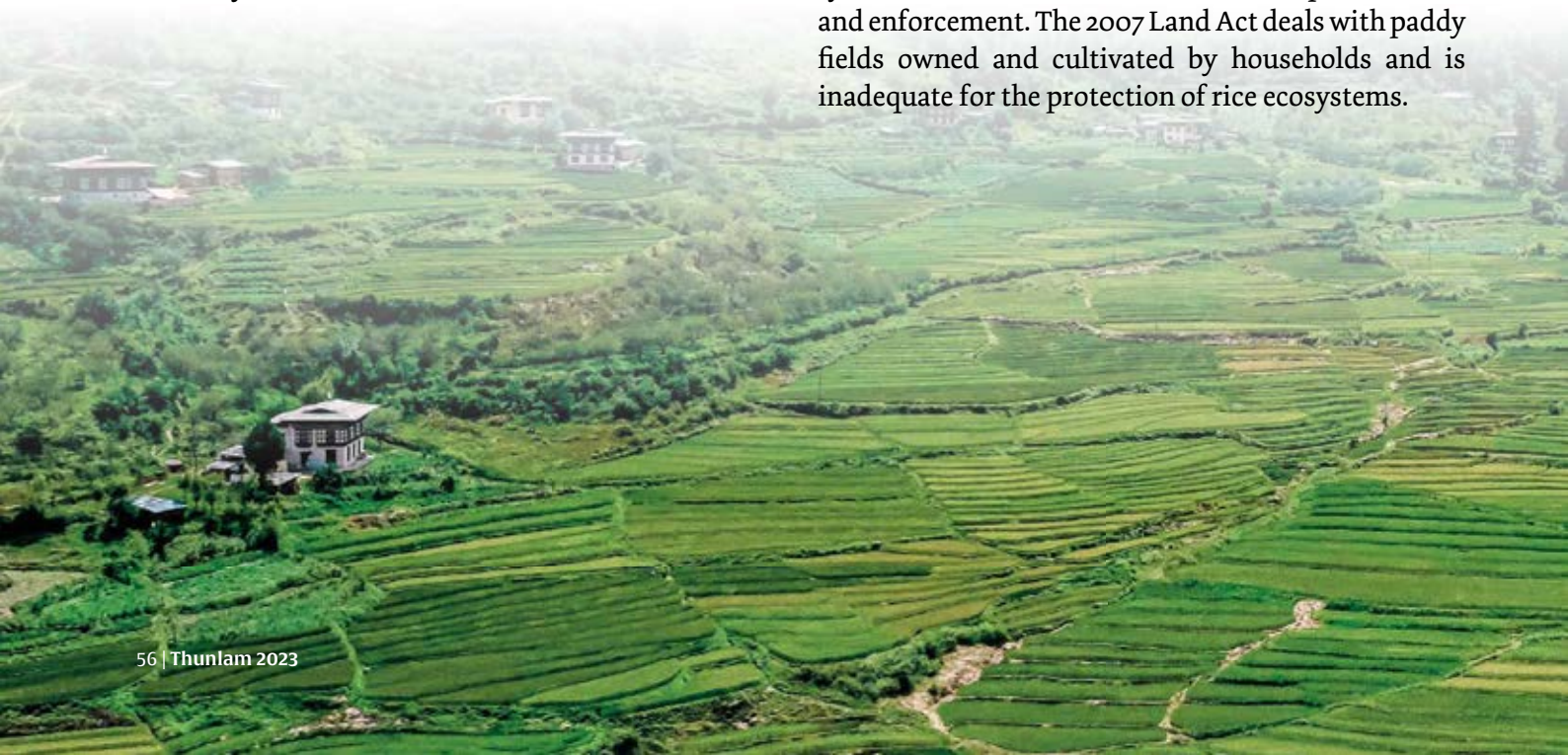
In China, the government promotes rice production by offering farmers attractive purchase prices. At the landscape level, China protects the entire rice ecosystem. For example, the cultural landscape of the Honghe Hani rice terraces in southern Yunnan is protected by law.

In the Philippines, landscape protection includes the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordillera (including Banaue), which were declared national treasures in 1973 and 1978. The terraces are protected as national cultural heritage. Some terraces are privately owned and are protected by ancestral rights, tribal laws and traditional practices.

### What needs to be done?

We need a comprehensive approach that involves several interest groups and takes political, legal, socio-economic and technological aspects into account. So far, we have focussed exclusively on technology. Creating appropriate incentives for rice farmers should be a priority. We can start by developing a national plan for rice, which should include the following:

- Engage all stakeholders across institutional boundaries, within and outside the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, to develop a holistic landscape approach to rice ecosystems.
- Identification of critical or threatened rice ecosystems, topographies and landscapes that are important for food production, tourism, recreation, local culture and tradition.
- Mapping and designation of such areas as national cultural property and heritage.
- Enact laws to protect nationally important rice ecosystems and establish mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. The 2007 Land Act deals with paddy fields owned and cultivated by households and is inadequate for the protection of rice ecosystems.





## Part of the income from tourism should be used for the conservation of rice landscapes

Rice landscapes in regions such as Paro, Punakha, Wangdue, Surey-Samkhara, Radhi and Nobji-Korfu can be designated as tourist attractions and linked to tourism. Part of the income from tourism should be used for the conservation of these rice landscapes. Rice cultivation is an integral part of our history, culture, religion and food system. Rice as food can be bought in the market, but the culture of rice cultivation, the unique rice terraces and rice landscapes cannot be restored once they are lost or destroyed.

We need to develop innovative approaches to maintain and promote rice cultivation in the country. The preservation and promotion of rice cultivation is crucial for a secure future.

## Acute water shortages and crop failures due to wild animals

Nima, the last farmer in Namkha aring, a former pastoralist community in Mongar, gave up rice cultivation on his one-hectare plot this year. Acute water shortages and crop failures due to wild animals have forced farmers in Namkha aring and neighbouring communities to give up farming. Nima is currently supporting his family by working on farms in other villages. He said it is disheartening when a year's hard work is destroyed in a single day by wild animals. "Wild boars, porcupines and monkeys are common pests in Namkha aring. I can never earn enough for my livelihood by working on my farm."

An old Rai couple in Zomlingthang in Sarpang, who grow millet, say that their land will soon lie fallow as their children have no interest in farming. Every night, the husband guards the harvest from elephants. "Our yield has gone down every year and there is not much we can do when elephants destroy our field."

In Bhutan, just under 100,000 hectares are used for agriculture, which is less than 3% of the country's land area. Last year, a pilot study by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock and the Secretariat of the National Land Commission identified labour shortages, a lack of water and irrigation facilities, conflicts between humans and wild animals and the (excessive) distance of the plots from settlements as the main reasons for the land lying fallow. ■

**Employment in the agricultural sector over the years**



Graphic: Labour force survey report

Photo: Pixabay

## 330 medical specialists resign from January to October 2023

(hm) Sources: *Business Bhutan, The Bhutanese, 10/2023*

According to Business Bhutan, the number of retirements is higher than stated in the last report of the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC). More than 150 medical employees have resigned from the National Medical Service (NMS) alone.

Numerous resignations have also been reported by other public organisations and healthcare facilities, affecting various areas of healthcare. Between Jan. and Oct. 2023, a total of 3,900 public sector employees submitted their resignations. The RCSC's Annual Report 22/23 shows an alarming decline, leading to significant gaps in various areas.

The Bhutanese reports that the National Medical Service recently introduced a scheme to delay the retirement of about 50 nurses by six months. This measure was intended to prevent a collapse in patient care and allow a smooth transition for experienced staff and trainees. Despite rising salaries, nurses are demanding better working conditions and salaries like those offered abroad. The result is a "brain drain", which already began in the 2000s when well-trained doctors left the country.

Now nurses are also leaving the country because they are suffering from an enormous workload, few holidays and a lack of recognition in state hospitals. Better pay is one of the main reasons for the exodus. The Ministry of Health and health managers need to find solutions to reduce the high turnover, e.g. through better working conditions, career opportunities and recognition. ■

## Stroke third most common cause of death in Bhutan

(hm) Source: *Kuensel, 8 December 2023*



Photo: Adobe Stock

Stroke is the third leading cause of death in Bhutan, due to the increasingly sedentary lifestyle of the population. The number of stroke patients has risen in recent years, with men being affected more often than women and even children aged 1 to 5 falling ill. The main causes are high blood pressure, heart disease, a high-salt diet, smoking, lack of exercise and alcohol consumption, as Professor Dr Tashi Tenzin, a specialist in general and neurosurgery, points out. Rapid treatment within four and a half hours can improve the chances of survival and minimise complications. In children, heart problems, problems with the blood vessels supplying the brain, blood clotting disorders and sickle cell anaemia can lead to a stroke.

The mortality rate for stroke patients is relatively low, but many suffer permanent disabilities. By controlling risk factors and providing appropriate stroke care, serious consequences such as disability can be reduced. Dr Tashi Tenzin emphasises the need for physician-led stroke care, specialised physiotherapy and well-trained nurses for optimal recovery. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of neurologists in the country and only a few hospitals offer basic care for stroke patients. In addition, the number of qualified stroke therapists and nurses is limited. ■

## Rubella eliminated in Bhutan

(hm) Sources: Kuensel, BBS und ANI, July 2023



Photo: Kuensel

**B**hutan has succeeded in eliminating rubella after almost two decades of fighting the disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) South East Asia Region announced on 21 July 2023 that Bhutan and Timor-Leste have eliminated rubella.

Rubella is a highly contagious disease that causes severe illness and irreversible birth defects in newborns of women infected during pregnancy and can be prevented by vaccination. To celebrate this milestone in Bhutan's health-care system, a ceremony was held at Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck Mother and Child Hospital in the presence of several high-ranking representatives from politics and the WHO. The WHO recommends shifting further efforts to a post-elimination plan through booster immunisation of infants.

A new goal is to eradicate other diseases that can be transmitted during pregnancy (HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B), with 99% of pregnant women already undergoing appropriate tests. The vaccination campaign against HPV as a cause of ovarian cancer has already been very successful (93%), so that elimination is also an imminent goal. ■

## All free-roaming dogs dogs sterilised

(hm) Source: BBS, October 2023



Photo: Pixabay

**A**s part of a nationwide dog population control and rabies control programme, all free-roaming dogs in the country have been sterilised. To celebrate this milestone, Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering presented a certificate of appreciation to all districts. Among other things, this success has reduced the rabies threat and the associated costs.

The Bhutanese Ministry of Agriculture has spent more than Nu 280 million on the programme. Over 60,000 dogs have been sterilised and vaccinated against rabies.

According to official figures, there are around 100,000 dogs in Bhutan, almost 70,000 of which are strays. The two-year project was initiated to minimise the risk of dog bites and eliminate human deaths from rabies by 2030. ■

# Dr Gottfried Riedel (1921–2014): Two medical premieres in Bhutan

(hm) Source: Kuensel, November 2023;  
Authors: Dr Bjorn Melgaard, Tshering Tashi

Photos: Ev. Kirchengemeinde Denkendorf

Photos: Ev. Kirche Denkendorf

*Leprosy has been a well-known disease in Bhutan for many years. However, the first hospital specialising in the treatment of leprosy patients was only established in the capital Thimphu in 1968.*

**I**n the early 1960s, at the beginning of public health in Bhutan, the fight against leprosy was high on the agenda. In 1964, the government invited the Leprosy Mission (TLM) to set up a leprosy service together with the government. Founded in Great Britain in 1874, the organisation set itself the goal of curing people suffering from leprosy all over the world and helping them to lead a dignified life.

## People suffered from untreated leprosy

In the 1950s and 60s, the disease was considered fatal and was highly stigmatising. The number of sufferers rose steadily. A three-person team from TLM, with experience of working with leprosy in India, visited Bhutan in 1964 to investigate the spread of leprosy there. During their stay in the country, the team saw

many people suffering from untreated leprosy and met with the Prime Minister and other government officials.

The team's report prompted the TLM's international office in London to send its first volunteer to work in Bhutan within a month. Dr Gottfried Riedel (1921–2014), an experienced German doctor, had been working for the leprosy mission since 1951 and supported Bhutan's national leprosy programme from 1966 to 1968. He worked in the hospital in Thimphu as a regular doctor and supported the health department in setting up a leprosy control programme. Plans were made to build the first leprosy hospital and the TLM expanded its work to other regions of Bhutan. The leprosy hospital was opened in Gidakom in August 1968 by Her Majesty Queen Kesang Choeden Wangchuck.

Dr Riedel worked there as a superintendent and had examined most of the known leprosy cases in the two years of his work. He left Bhutan after two years to return in 1982 and work there again until 1986.

### Bhutan's first caesarean section

Although he had no surgical experience, he also had to operate from time to time. In 1966, Dr Riedel made history when he performed Bhutan's first caesarean section, which he vividly described in his book "Mit Gott über Mauern springen" ("Jumping over walls with God"): one evening he was called to the hospital. A first-time labourer, whose baby was in a transverse position, had arrived. The only way to deliver the baby was by caesarean section. With no experience and only with the help of self-study in the hours before the procedure, as well as the support of the equally inexperienced staff, the caesarean section was performed on the woman suffering from high blood pressure. In his book, he describes how he placed the operation book on a stool next to the operating table and an assistant turned the pages. The operation began with a short prayer in the knowledge that a lot could go wrong. But everything went well and everyone involved was happy when a baby boy was born.



Dr Gottfried Riedel passed away in 2014 at the age of 93. Fascinated by missionary doctors such as Albert Schweizer, he studied medicine and, motivated by his Christian faith, became involved in the leprosy mission together with his wife and worked in India, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Tanzania. In addition to providing medical care for the sick, he was also concerned with the reintegration of the sick and healed into society. In 1969, he opened a practice in Esslingen, Baden-Württemberg. However, he was repeatedly drawn back to Bhutan. In 1982, he gave up his practice, returned to Bhutan for four years and set up comprehensive care in the country for the leprosy mission. ■

## The magnificent revitalisation of the Drukgyel Dzong

(ih) Source: Kuensel, 14 December 2023



Photo: Kuensel

**A**fter seven years of work, the once dilapidated Drukgyel Dzong is now a testament to patience, passion and outstanding restoration. Within the walls of the fortress are stories from the past that reflect the resilience and cultural pride of the people. The ambitious work began in 2016 in honour of the birth of His Royal Highness, Gyalsey (Crown Prince) Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck, to commemorate the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1616 AD and in honour of the birth anniversary of Guru Rinpoche.

The budget of around Nu 500 million. (approx. 5.6 million euros) was not exceeded; on the contrary, project manager Namgay Dorji was able to save around Nu. 38 million (just under half a million euros). The project was also completed earlier than planned. Three watchtowers, two water towers, paved footpaths and old water wells were restored, and walls and roofs were repaired. Over 200 labourers worked on the project. Raw materials: Wood, clay and stones were procured in Paro and Haa. The project was supported by the Department of Cultural Sites and Archaeology of the Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development (DCDD). ■

# Saving the wall paintings from the 17th century in the Tango monastery

(ih) Source: Kuensel, 11 Dezember 2023, Samten Yeshey

*Gyelse Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696) described in detail the temple built in 1688-89, its structure, relics, murals and artists.*



Photo: Kuensel

**O**n 22 September 1968 – after four years of work – the UNESCO-led rescue measures for the Temple of Abu Simbel in Egypt were celebrated as an international pioneering project. Fifty-five years after this pioneering rescue operation of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a similar story will be told in the small kingdom of Bhutan on 6 December 2023.

## National cultural heritage for Bhutan

Her Majesty Queen Mother Tshering Yangdoen Wangchuck and His Royal Highness Gyalsey (Crown Prince) Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck inaugurated the completion of reconstruction work on the 17th century central tower of Tango Monastery,

the nation celebrated the rescue of an intricate mural of this monument.

Tango Choing Phodrang is a national heritage site for Bhutan. Built in 1688–89, the temple, its construction, relics, murals and artists are described in detail and recorded by Gyelse Tenzin Rabgye (1638–1696).

## Traditional Newar and Chinese painting traditions

The art of mural painting in the central tower of Tango is said to originate from the Menlug tradition and is attributed to the 15th century artist Menthangpa Menla Dondrup, whose style and painting tradition was widespread in Tibet during the reign of Phagdru. The speciality of this tradition is described as an artistic combination of the best features of traditional Newar and Chinese painting traditions. Characteristics of this tradition are bright colours, the lavish use of gold pigments, lively postures of the figures with rich ornamentation.

The mural is of central importance to the history of traditional painting in Bhutan. The Department of Culture and Dzongkha Developmenta has therefore initiated its restoration. International experts were consulted, but no concrete solutions were found because the murals were painted directly on the temple's wall plaster without using a canvas or wooden panel for the painting ground. In addition, the stone wall supporting the murals had to be dismantled for structural reconstruction. The International Consultants were not aware of any cases in which comparable murals had been saved.

Photo: Adobe Stock



### Unrivalled conservation methodology

Despite the adverse circumstances and without the support of international experts, a collective of restorers has succeeded in preserving the murals. Tashi Lhendup, technical director of the project from the Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development (DCDD), explains that the process involves a combination of traditional and modern methods. On the one hand, wooden cover plates – traditionally used to preserve historical writings – are used, but at the same time modern conservation techniques are also applied. It is therefore a cultural rescue project that has not only saved the national heritage in its original form, but, as we now know, is also an intellectual legacy in the form of a unique national conservation methodology, resulting from the combination of existing modern methods with local cultural knowledge. ■



Photo: Adobe Stock

# Bhutan's Soul. Tshechus – tradition, faith and community



Photo: Bassem Nimah

*Bhutan is a very pristine country where Vajrayana Buddhism, mixed with the spirit beliefs that once came to Bhutan from Tibet, is still lived. Numerous festivals and celebrations take place throughout the year, offering an opportunity to immerse yourself in the Buddhist tradition with colourful mask dances, blessings and impressive performances. (Text: Sven Kaun-Feederle)*

## **Buddhist festivals in the Kingdom of Bhutan**

**T**shechus are Buddhist festivals in honour of Guru Rinpoche. These annual festivals are a rich and joyous expression of ancient Buddhist culture and provide an opportunity for people to celebrate their faith, history and community. They are celebrated in every district or dzongkhag in the country. They are not only religious but also social occasions where Bhutanese people wear their finest clothes, enjoy

music and dance and strengthen their community. The name Tshechu literally means “tenth day”, as most festivals take place on the tenth day of each month of the Tibetan calendar. It is the birthday of Guru Rinpoche, who is considered the second Buddha. Guru Rinpoche was an Indian saint who came to Bhutan in the 8th century to spread Buddhism and defeat evil spirits. He is said to have performed many miracles and transformed himself into different forms to teach and bless people.



## Cham. Spectacular mask dances that tell stories of Guru Rinpoche.

The Tshechus consist of various rituals, prayers and most importantly, mask dances, the Cham. The Cham are spectacular performances that tell stories of the life and work of Guru Rinpoche and his eight manifestations, representing different aspects of his wisdom and compassion. The mask dances are inspired by enlightened beings of history, and Bhutanese believe that observing these mystical dances is essential for attaining enlightenment. The Cham are danced by monks or lay people in colourful costumes and masks representing various deities, demons or animals. The Cham are not only meant to entertain, but also to instruct and bless. As an expression of national identity, the tshechus were initiated as early as the 17th century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of a united Bhutan.

### Tshechus. Procedure and meaning.



Photo: Bhutan Tourism

Tshechus follow a fixed schedule prescribed by a sacred text. Tshechus usually last three to five days and are usually held in dzongs or monasteries. The dzongs are impressive fortresses that serve as both administrative and religious centres. The monasteries are sacred places where the monks live and pray. Tshechus often begin with an initiation or purification and end with a blessing or farewell ceremony.

## A highlight of the festival – the unveiling of the thangkas



Photo: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thongdrel

The highlight of most tshechus is the unveiling of a huge silk thangka or religious painting on the last day. The thangka depicts Guru Rinpoche or another important deity in all his glory. The thangka is hung on a wall of the dzong or monastery before sunrise and can only be seen for a few hours. People believe that viewing the thangkas brings good luck

### Pride and joy of the Bhutanese and attraction for tourists



Photo: Bhutan Tourism

The tshechus are an important source of pride and joy for the Bhutanese, who consider them part of their identity and heritage. The tshechus are a living expression of Buddhism that enriches people's lives and happiness. For the farmers, the tshechu is also a break from rural life. It is an opportunity to celebrate, receive blessings and pray for health and happiness.



Quelle: bhutanartandcraft.com

**Important part of a tshechu.  
The eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche.**

During the various events, Guru Rinpoche was believed to have taken on different manifestations. The finale of a tshechu is the dance of the eight manifestations, called Guru Tshen Gye.

**Guru Padmasambhava** (the one born on a lotus flower) is dressed in a monk’s robe of dark red and yellow, wears a white mask with a red “hat of the scholars” (pandita hat). Pema Jungne is the Tibetan translation of Padmasambhava.

**Guru Tshokye Dorje** (Born in a lake, diamond sceptre-like/unwavering). One of the characteristic features of this peaceful form of Guru Rinpoche is that he holds a vajra in his heart.

**Guru Shakya Sengye** (lion from the Shakya family) is dressed in a red and yellow monk’s robe, wears a mask similar to Buddha’s face with its 108 right-twisted locks of lapis lazuli hair and holds an almo-sen bowl in his hands. He was given this name after he renounced his kingdom and left it to meditate and study.

**Guru Loden Chogse** (Who aspires to the highest intelligence) with white mask, red brocade clothes, small hand drum and bowl.

**Guru Pema Gyalpo** (Lotus King) depicts Padma-sambhava as a young prince. Sitting on a lotus with his left leg bent and his right leg stretched out, he is ready to act at any time; with his right hand he plays the damaru and with his left hand he shows a mirror.

**Guru Sengye Dradrok** (The one with the voice of a lion) dressed in blue brocade; his blue mask, crowned with five skulls, is terrifying. Guru Rinpoche challenged five hundred proponents of wrong views in a debate in Bodh-gaya and defeated them. He reversed their magic with the help of a wrathful mantra given to him by the lion-faced dakini Marajita. Its name is “The Lion’s Roar.

**Guru Nyima Öser** (Sunbeam) wears a yellow mask with blue beard hair. He holds a trident in his hand and is dressed in yellow brocade. He was given the name He was given the name “Sunbeam” when he preached on the cremation ground, subduing evil spirits who then had to promise to protect the Buddhist teachings forever.

**Guru Dorje Drolo** (fierce wrathful diamond sceptre (vajra) with colourful brocade clothing and a fearsome red mask and skull necklace over his body. When depicted on thangkas, he stands in a lunge on a tigress, which according to some traditions represents the embodiment of his partner in Bhutan, Tashi Kyiudrön. He holds a ritual wick (kila) in his left hand, which he uses to remove obstacles.

**The clowns of Tshechus.  
Atsaras bring mischief and entertainment.**



Clowns or Atsaras are crucial to any Tshechu festival. Originally derived from Indian Buddhist masters,

Photo: Department of Tourism, Bhutan



their role was to suppress bad thoughts through humorous representations. Atsaras often carry a balloon symbolising the pig's bladder, which warded off disease, and a wooden phallus, representing the overcoming of desire. They are the only ones allowed to play jokes in this religious society and contribute to the amusement of visitors with their humorous performances. Modern Atsaras also use short skirts to spread messages about health and social awareness.

## Paro Tshechu as an example of the sequence of a tshechu



*As an example of the sequence of festivities, the Paro Tshechu is described in detail. With the exception of the religious chants, the dances and performances take place without words.*

### FIRST AND SECOND DAY

*The Paro Tshechu begins with a traditional opening dance for the god of the dead, Shinje Gap. This is an attempt to drive away demons and evil spirits.*

**The Shinje Yab & Yum Cham** is dedicated to the god of the dead. One monk represents the “Yab” in his

male form, another “Yum”, his female appearance. The monks are dressed in very old, precious brocade robes and wear animal masks.



Photo: Bhutan Tourism



**Durdag Cham of the cemetery guards.** In this dance, the monks wear white masks in the shape of skulls, short shirts and boots. The dancers represent the guardians of Buddhism.

Photo: Bhutan Tourism



**Zhana – dance of the Black Hats.** The dancers wear large black hats with fur boots and traditional, colourful robes made of brocade. The gestures that the dancers perform with their hands are sacred mystical signs for the believers, so-called mudras. The dancers symbolically destroy the demons with a dance step that resembles a thunderclap. This act is used as a ritual cleansing of the ground and consecrates temples and dzongs.

Photo: nowtravelsasia.com



**Dramitse Nga Cham – dance of the drums.** Here the monks are dressed in various animal masks and a knee-length yellow skirt. Large drums dominate this dance, which is performed in honour of Lama Kung Gyeltshen.



Photo: bhutan.virginia.edu/home

**Degye – dance of the eight holy spirits.** The dancers wear different animal masks and medium-length yellow skirts. This dance is about the rulers of the three worlds (heaven, earth, underworld). The eight spirits are the malevolent deities and cause great suffering. The god Yeshe Gampo rebels against them and brings them back under control so that balance and peace can be restored. This is expressed in a dance of joy.



Photo: flickr.com/photos/lindaevolder/

**Choeshey – religious chanting.** Religious chanting concludes the second day of Tshechus. The monks wear yellow shirts, a long black skirt, a brown cloak, round headdresses and a sword. The dance for this is performed in commemoration of the opening of the gate to the pilgrimage site of Tsari in Tibet by the founder of the Drukpa teachings, Tsangpa Jarey.

**COURSE OF A TSHECHU. THIRD DAY.**

*Opening with the Yab & Yum dance (like first day). Zhana Nga Cham – Dance of the Black Hats with drums.*

**Gingsum – dance of the three Gings** (Juging, Driging, Ngaging). In the dance with the sticks (Juging) the dancers wear animal masks.



**In the drum dance (Ngaging) and sword dance (Driging),** fearsome masks are worn. In the dance, the monks show how evil demons who want to get in the way of religion are defeated. The rulers of the cemeteries appear with a box containing the souls and bodies of the demon gods.

**The Driging Cham** cleanses the environment of all evil – a joyful dance with drums follows. Durdag – same dance as first and second day. Gingsum Cham: Driging & Ngaging Sword dance (driging) and drum dance (ngaging) from the dance of the three gings.



Dorji Drakpo. In doing so, he has saved the world and redeemed the demons forever



**Guan Drug Pawos – dance of the Adorned Heroes.** A pawo is a medium adorned with various small trinkets made of bones, small drums and bells. Through the sound of the instruments, they summon the assembly of gods and tantras and lead people trapped in the cycle of rebirth onto the path of freedom.



**Shawa Sachi – dance of the Deer and the Dog** (first part). The dance is like a play in two acts. The dance deals with the transformation of Buddhism by the hunter Gonpo Dorji. The first part of the dance is not very serious, the hunter’s servants joke with the Atsaras (clowns). A priest performs some rituals to help the hunter to his hunting luck. Durdag – the same dance as the first and second day.

**Tungam – dance of the fearsome deities.** This dance is deeply religious and has a symbolic meaning through the depiction of a sacrificial murder. The deities try to encircle the demons, who are then killed with a dagger by Guru Rinpoche in the form of



**Kyecham – dance of the noble ladies and gentlemen.** Here events from the life of King Norzang are depicted. The dance is rather fun and frolicsome. The performers are an elderly couple, a prince and two princesses. The prince has to leave,

leaving the princesses in the care of the elderly couple. The Atsaras (clowns) joke with the princesses and the elderly lady also gets caught up in the hilarious atmosphere. The prince returns and is shocked by the ladies' unworthy behaviour.

**Shawa Sachi – dance of the Deer and the Dog** (Part Two) Saint Milarepa, founder of the Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism, appears in a long white robe with a black hat and walking stick. He enchants the hunter with his dogs and the deer by his soft, gentle singing and they undergo a religious transformation

**COURSE OF A TSHECHU. FOURTH DAY.**

*On the penultimate day of the festival, the dances are high in drama and intensity. The fourth day opens with the opening dance.*

**Sha Cham – dance of the Four Stags.** The dancers wear antlers and masks. The evil spirit of the wind, who rides on a stag and brings much evil upon the world, is fought by Guru Rinpoche. As a sign of his victory, the Guru himself rides a stag.



Photo: youtube.be/GBiByjCneMA

**Raksha Mangcham – dance of judgement on the dead.** This dance is one of the highlights of the festival and is followed intensely by the elders who want to prepare for their own death. Shinje, the god of the dead, judges the good and bad deeds of the deceased at the gateway to paradise and holds court. The two- hour dance is meant to show the believers what happens if they do not live according to the Buddha's teachings.

**COURSE OF A TSHECHU. FIFTH DAY.**

*The last day is the climax of the festivities – the battle between good and evil comes to an end.*



Photo: bhutanstudies.org

**Unrolling of the Thongdroel.** In a solemn ceremony, the Thongdroel is unrolled from the balcony of the temple in the early hours of the morning. The scroll, which is about 30 m long and 20 m wide, depicts Guru Rinpoche in his eight manifestations. The Paro Dzong was once completely destroyed by fire, only this image remained intact – since then it has been considered especially sacred.



Photo: .itayloradventure.com/bhutan/

**Zhugdrel Ceremony.** The Zhugdrel Ceremony is an integral part of all tshechus in Bhutan. It commemorates the importance of the achievements of the holy Drukpa. The ceremony consists of three to five parts of the 'perfect elements': a perfect place, a master in his perfection, the perfection of the holy retinue and time, and the perfection for the gifts of the gods

**Pacham – heroic dance.** The Heroic Dance shows the arrival of Pema Lingpa, one of the most important masters of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. He meets Guru Rinpoche sitting in the middle of a



mandala of rainbow rays. The dance symbolises the meeting of the mortal believers with Guru Rinpoche.

**Ging dang Tsholing dance.** This dance is meant to intimidate demons and is a purifying ceremony to prepare for the arrival of Guru Rinpoche.

**Guru Tshen Gye – dance of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche.** Here the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche are depicted. The dance is again a scenic performance with music. First Dorji Drakpo appears in noble robe and mask. Then the eight appearances of Guru Rinpoche follow.



**Rigma Chudrug - dance of the Sixteen Fairies (Dakinis).** The sixteen fairies are different manifestations of one person. The dance is an expression of the bliss that comes to people who believe in Guru Rinpoche and his glorious deeds, soul, body and words. Choeshey – religious chanting and a dance conclude the tshechu.

*Immerse yourself in the magic of the tshechus on your next trip to Bhutan. Let us not forget that the diversity of the world's cultures is an inexhaustible source of inspiration and knowledge. ■*

## Cultural Highlights – selected celebrations and festivals in Bhutan

*Tshechus in Bhutan are a journey full of colours, sounds and deeply rooted traditions. Most of these festivals are dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, the saint who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the early 8th century. Mystical dances, captivating performances, daring fire shows, mysterious dances and much more make the tshechus in Bhutan an unforgettable experience. Rare silk paintings and/or ancient scrolls are also displayed at some of these festivals.*

### **FEBRUARY.**

#### **SPRING AND SUCCESSFUL DEFENCE.**



#### **Punakha Drubchen. A festival celebrating Bhutan's history and victory.**

In February, Bhutan holds several festivals that herald the arrival of spring. One of them is Punakha Drubchen, which takes place at Punakha Dzong. It commemorates a historical battle from the 17th century when Tibetan armies repeatedly invaded the kingdom of Bhutan. These were finally defeated under the rule of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, also known as the man who united Bhutan under one state and gave the Bhutanese their cultural identity. In commemoration of the historic event, the local vigilante group re-enacts the dramatic battle in colourful costumes, traditional armour and weapons.

Photo: Pema Gyamtsho



**Punakha Tshechu.**  
**Bhutan’s spiritual heritage comes alive.**

The Punakha Tshechu takes place directly after the Punakha Drubchen. It was established in 2005 at the request of the people to preserve the traditional teachings of Buddhism and to honour the noble deeds of Guru Rinpoche.

Photo: heavenlybhutan.com



**Tharpaling Thongdrol. Magical thangkas high above the Chumey Valley.**

The Tharpaling Thongdrol in Bumthang takes place at the Tharpaling Monastery, located on a hill overlooking the Chumey Valley. It is a one-day festival that focuses on the thangkas or thongdrols of Jowo Jampa and Kuenkhen Longchen Rabjam. The thongdrol is preceded by a prayer ceremony called Moelam Chenmo, performed by the monks of Tharpaling Lhakhang. Dances are not performed at this festival.

**MARCH. SPLENDOR AND ELEGANCE.**

Photo: greenheartbhutan.com



**Magnificent Paro Tshechu.**  
**Sacred Thongdrol attracts devotees and visitors from all over the world.**

March sees some of the biggest and most spectacular festivals in Bhutan, such as the Paro Tshechu. The highlight of the festival is the unrolling of a giant thongdrol/thangka. It was woven by monks on silk and painted with watercolours. The thongdrol is considered so sacred among the faithful that one is absolved of all sins just by looking at it. The Paro Tshechu owes its popularity with foreign visitors to its easy accessibility – the Paro Dzong is only a few kilometres from the international airport.



youtu.be/S1xukf9xq8?feature=shared

**Talo Tshechu. Cultural extravaganza with Zhungdra music.**

Another festival in March is Talo Tshechu, held at Talo Monastery in Punakha. This festival is famous for its mask and Atsara dances and the beautiful surroundings with flowers and orchards. A popular attraction is the Zhungdra performed by the local dance troupe. It is the Bhutanese version of classical songs and music. The three songs of Muni Sum (Zhungdra) are performed at the end of each festival day. Samyi Sala (first day), Drukpa Dungey (second day) and Thowachi Gangi Tselay (third day) are the pride of the Talo community.

**APRIL. NATURE AND RELICS.**



Photo: bhutanxplore.com

**Rhododendron Festival at Lamperi Botanical.**

In April, there are several festivals that celebrate the beauty of nature, such as the Rhododendron Festival



at Lamperi Botanical Garden in Dochula, Thimphu. This festival showcases the variety of rhododendron flowers that bloom in different colours, as well as other flora and fauna of the park.

Photo: marvellousbhutan.com



### Domkhar Tshechu: Mystical dances and blessings in the heart of the Chumey Valley.:

The Domkhar Tshechu takes place at Domkar Lhundrup Choling Monastery in the Chumey Valley, Bumthang District. Domkhar was founded in the 16th century by Lama Kuenkhen Longchen Rabjam.

Photo: blessedbhutan.com



### Ura Yakchoe. Mysterious festival of a heritage.

In April, the Ura Yakchoe takes place at the Ura Lhakhang in Bumthang. The festival presents the Ura Yakchoe Cham, which is based on the legend of an old woman who was visited by a lama and received a valuable statue. This statue is presented to the public during the Tshechu.

### JUNE. COMPASSION AND HUMILITY.

Photo: neptuneholidaysbhutan.bt



### Tshechus in Nimalung and Kurjey. Resting place of the first three kings of Bhutan.

Several festivals are held in June to promote spiritual practice and compassion. Tshechus, for example, are held at Nimalung and Kurjey monasteries in Bumthang. The Kurjey festival is a tribute to Guru Rinpoche, who left his body prints on a rock at this place.

### SEPTEMBER. HUMOUR AND JOY.



Photo: Department of Tourism, Bhutan

### Thimphu Tshechu. A prestigious jewel.

Some of the most important festivals take place in September. The Thimphu Tshechu takes place in the courtyard of the Tashichho Dzong and is considered one of the most beautiful tshechus in western Bhutan. In the 1950s, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck added numerous boed chhams (masked dances performed by lay monks) to the festival to give it even more colour and variety without compromising its spiritual significance.



Photo: bhutanestours.com

### Wangdue Tshechu. Lozeys and cultural splendour.

Another festival in September is the Wangdue Tshechu, held at the Wangdue Phodrang Dzong in Wangdue Phodrang (unfortunately, the dzong burnt down in 2012 and will be rebuilt by 06/2023). It is famous for its "lozeys", a tradition of Bhutanese yak keepers. These are rhetorically polished speeches and anecdotes.

Photo: Bhutan Tourism



**Jomolhari Mountain Festival. Cultural festival and protection of snow leopards.**

The Jomolhari Mountain Festival, which took place for the first time in 2013, celebrates the culture of the communities along the Jomolhari Trek and the existence of the rare snow leopard for two days. The region is an important sanctuary for this endangered species. The festival emphasises the importance of nature conservation and promotes a sustainable life-style in harmony with the shy big cat.

Photo: yelhabhutantour.com



**Thangbi Mani. Unique dance of the four bulls.**

In September, the Thangbi Mani takes place at the Thangbi Lhakhang in Bum-thang. The festival features the unique dance of the four bulls (Dun Cham), which represent the cardinal points. The cultural heritage of the monastery, founded in 1470, is emphasised. The highlight is the fire blessing ceremony (Mewang), in which lay monks perform purification rituals and people jump over the flames to purify themselves.

**OKTOBER. DIVERSITY AND RICHNESS.**

Photo: de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki



**Jakar Tshechu. Bhutan’s historical treasures.**

In October, there are several festivals that showcase Bhutan’s cultural diversity and richness, such as the Jakar Tshechu, held at Jakar Dzong in Bumthang. It is one of the oldest festivals in Bhutan. The “Dzong of the White Bird” is perched on a hill overlooking the town of Chamkhar and the surrounding villages. Interestingly, behind the dzong is a water tower with four steps leading to a water reservoir from which water for the battles used to be drawn.



Photo: canon.com.au

**Jambay Lhakhang Drup. History, legends and sacred dances.**

The Jambay Lhakhang Drup Festival in Bumthang, Bhutan, was established in 659 AD to defeat a demon that was bringing disaster to the Himalayas. The Jambay Lhakhang temple, which was built to bind the demon’s left knee, is known today for its fascinating legend and the annual four-day festival. Various dances are performed during the festival, including the sacred Mewang (fire dance) in the evening and the Tercham (naked dance) at midnight. The Tercham is said to have its origins in the 8th century and is used to drive away demons.



Photo: Bhutan Tourism

**Royal Highland Festival. Pride and culture of the nomads in the mountains.**

The Royal Highland Festival, initiated by the current king of Bhutan, celebrates the way of life of the Nomades at an altitude of 3,800 metres. It showcases the culture of the highlanders and highlights the highlands as the pride of Bhutan.

the highlands as the pride of Bhutan. The festival includes competitions with highland animals such as yaks and horses and takes place in Laya. To get there, a two-day hike is required via the Laya-Gasa Trek, which offers the most pristine and unspoilt landscape in Bhutan.

## NOVEMBER: HOLINESS AN OVERCOMING.



Photo: oneintheorangejacket.com

### Black Necked Crane Festival. Visit of the Black Necked Cranes.

In Gangtey Goemba, an old Nyingmapa monastery on a hill above the Phobjikha Valley in Bhutan, the Black-necked Crane Festival takes place every year in November. Hundreds of black-necked cranes, a rare species and a sacred symbol in Bhutan, migrate to this valley every year. The cranes feed on dwarf bamboo in the alpine wetlands. The locals revere them as lucky charms for good harvests and prosperity. Bhutan has taken measures to protect the cranes, including an underground electricity network to ensure their migration.



Photo: youtube.be/w-9BQbMZ7g?features=shared

### Mongar Tshechu. Colourful in eastern Bhutan.

Mongar Tshechu in eastern Bhutan is mainly celebrated by the Tshanglas and Kurtoeps, the main inhabitants of Mongar, and is one of the most popular festivals in eastern Bhutan. The main inhabitants of this region speak different languages known as Tshanglakha and Kurtoepaikha. This region is famous for its

exquisite wood carvings. The new dzong in Mongar was built in 1953 on the initiative of the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.

## DEZEMBER. JOY AND PEACE.



Photo: dailybhutan.com

### Druk Wangyel Tshechu. Gratitude and honour.

Since 2011, the Druk Wangyel Tshechu in December celebrates the victory of His Majesty the IV Druk Gyalpo and his army over the Indian insurgents in 2003 and is unique in that it is not organised by monks or laymen, but by the Royal Bhutanese Army. The festival honours the leadership of the fourth king and the efforts of the royal army to protect the sovereignty and stability of the country. The venue at Dochula Pass offers a breathtaking panoramic view of the Himalayan mountain range and is ideal for visitors with limited time due to its proximity to Paro and Thimphu.



Photo: travelto bhutan.travel

### Trongsa Tshechu. Royal heritage and cultural splendour.

The Trongsa Tshechu takes place in December. Trongsa, the seat of the royal family in the centre of Bhutan, is home to the impressive dzong, which was built in 1648. This dzong is considered an architectural masterpiece with over 30 temples and serves as the traditional seat of the crown prince. The Trongsa Tshechu is one of the oldest in Bhutan and is believed to have influenced the spread of tshechus from the Trongsa Dzongkhag to other parts of Bhutan. ■



# Social media save dying languages

Photo: Pixabay, Unsplash

(ih) Source: Presstext Nachrichtenagentur GmbH; 16 November 2023

*WeChat & Co could promote the documentation and use of endangered dialects.*

**I**n Bhutan, social media could be a lifeline for endangered languages. Many of these languages have no script and are poorly documented. Voice messaging is now enabling a new use of local languages. Despite a population of less than 800,000 people and the late introduction of the internet and television, Bhutan has more than 20 regional languages, of which only Dzongkha is a written language.

## Dzongkha is slowly dying out

Although Dzongkha is promoted as the national language in Bhutan, it faces strong competition from English, especially in the cities where the elite predominantly speak English. Linguist Pema Wangdi from Central Queensland University warns that languages could become extinct. English is mainly taught in Bhutanese schools, Dzongkha only for grammar and literature. Wangdi emphasises that the preservation and promotion of local languages depends on their speakers and that the loss of a language can also mean a loss of national identity.

## Indigenous dialects are being lost

According to linguist Pema Wangdi, there are no

more speakers of the indigenous Olekha dialect from Rukha in Wangdue Phodrang today. Wangdi emphasises that with the loss of a language, songs, myths and poetry also disappear forever. Other languages such as Tshophu, Monpa and Gongdukha are also endangered and threatened with extinction.

Although Bhutan's constitution provides for the preservation and promotion of languages, there are no official efforts to save endangered languages. Wangdi is in favour of encouraging people to speak in their own language in order to pass on identity, ethnicity and cultural values to the younger generation. Social media could play an important role in this, including for language teaching via social media platforms.

If more people used local languages on social media, young people could develop an interest in them again and learn them. The scientist believes that documenting endangered languages via platforms such as WeChat would be easy. Many older people have a strong attachment to their local language and are keen to pass it on to the next generation. It would therefore make sense to meet on platforms that are familiar to young people. The research results were published in "The Conversation". ■

## Gold and silver for Bhutan at the Special Olympics World Games in Germany

(ih) Sources: Business Bhutan 03.07.2023, BBS, 23.06.2023

Special Olympics is the world's largest sports organisation for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, providing year-round training and activities for more than 5 million athletes in 172 countries worldwide.



Photo: Special Olympics

Two students from the Draktsho Vocational Training Centre have won two gold and one silver medal at the Special Olympics World Games in Germany. A seven-member delegation from Bhutan took part in the games, which were held in Berlin from 12 to 26 June 2023 and were supported by the Bhutan Olympic Committee, the Bhutan Football Association and private donors.



Photo: Kuensel

Nima Yoezer won two gold medals in the shot put and the 100 metre race (B youth). Dechen Peldon won silver in the shot put and was very close to winning the 100 metres, but fell in the last few metres. ■

## Students develop solar bamboo fans

(ih) Source: Kuensel, 30 December 2023



Photo: Kuensel

Sonamthang Central School in Panbang, Zhemgang, has developed an innovative solar bamboo fan project to help students in the scorching heat. Six students who took part in the Ministry of Education's Upshift programme are behind the idea. They have already made 10 portable bamboo solar fans that run on rechargeable batteries. Teacher Phub Lham emphasises the environmentally friendly aspects of the project and sees it as an example of innovation that brings both economic and environmental benefits to the community.

Solar bamboo fans are fully in line with His Majesty's vision to root the youth nationally and make them globally competent. The project helps to instil a sense of responsibility and belonging in students, promote team spirit and encourage volunteering to solve social problems.

In 2022, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNICEF Bhutan, the Youth Development Fund and the Loden Foundation, introduced the Upshift programme in 64 schools and 10 youth centres. This initiative aims to equip young people with 21st century skills, transferable skills and progressive thinking, thus contributing to the holistic development of Bhutanese youth. ■

# Australia tightens visa requirements for students and plans further measures

(ih) Source: *The Bhutanese*, 28 August 2023

*Australian government with package of measures to promote the integrity of the international education system and support international students.*



Photo: Adobe Stock

The Australian government explains that the new measures are designed to ensure that students who come to Australia to study can support themselves and are not at increased risk of exploitation. International students will be required to provide additional documentation to prevent fraud and from 1 October 2023, they will be required to provide proof of AUD 24,505 (approximately €15,000) in savings, a 17% increase. The government will also prevent double enrolment under the same visa.

## **Background: Study visas are misused as work permits**

The Australian Government's tightening of measures on student visas is based on the Department of Home Affairs' 190-page migration review report published in March 2023. The report points out that student visas are being misused as work permits.

The 1.8 million Temporary Permanent Migrants in Australia are a growing concern as the majority of

Australians do not want a 'guest worker culture' or such a large number of temporary migrants. While foreign students and graduates bring benefits, they put a strain on the local housing market and infrastructure and increase competition for jobs for local students, particularly for low-skilled part-time jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors.

The Genuine Temporary Entry (GTE) criterion for visas could be replaced by a new Genuine Student (GS) criterion, where the applicant's main purpose must be to study in Australia. The report also recommends raising the minimum requirement of 5.5 IELTS points for student visas to improve the quality of education and provide graduates with better opportunities in the labour market.

## **Canada is becoming more attractive – Cost of living is higher**

Many Bhutanese students choose Australia as their second choice due to the rising costs and challenges.

But Canada is also becoming more attractive. However, both the Canadian and Australian governments are looking into regulating the international education sector. The cost of living in Canada is higher, finding housing is more challenging and finding a job is increasingly difficult. In 2022, Canada recorded a 30% increase in the number of foreign students compared to the previous year.

### Provide students with a safe and enriching experience

The Canadian immigration authority IRCC is currently reviewing a new framework for trusted institutions, which could come into force by 2024. This is intended to significantly increase the requirements for Canadian educational institutions that accept international students. At its core, it will require schools, colleges and universities to demonstrate that they are trusted partners, identify genuine students, monitor compliance, report and provide a safe and enriching experience for their international students. ■

## The role of civil society organisations is becoming clearer

(ih) Source: *Bhutanimes*, 29 November 2023

Public awareness and understanding of civil society organisations (CSOs) has increased significantly. According to a study by Helvetas, almost all respondents in 2020 were able to clearly describe their role and function. The results of the study show increasing trust of donors and government authorities in civil society organisations.

CSOs can contribute to improved transparency through impartial and objective assessment. The challenges faced by CSOs include close cooperation with government agencies. ■

## Poverty mapping in Bhutan

(ih) Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, Bhutan; World Bank: *Poverty and Equity Global Practice*, December 2023

The Bhutan Living Standards Survey is the main source of poverty data in Bhutan. The most important results are:

1. High poverty in the mountainous regions along the Indian border and low poverty in the central part of the country and along the Chinese border.
2. Large differences in poverty rates between rural and urban areas within a district.
3. Most of the poor live in the districts of Zhemgang, Trongsa, Trashigang and Samtse. ■



**Poverty rate by district**

32.2 - 51.0	15.6 - 18.8	4.6 - 6.8
26.2 - 32.2	11.8 - 15.6	0.4 - 4.6
21.1 - 26.2	9.5 - 11.8	0.0 - 0.4
18.8 - 21.1	6.8 - 9.5	

# Bhutan's tourism transformation and its 50-year celebration

By Carissa Nimah, Chief Marketing Officer, Department of Tourism, Bhutan

As Bhutan opened its doors to tourism after the Covid 19 pandemic in September 2022, Bhutan launched its new national brand – reflecting a strong focus on the future, as well as the transformative journeys experienced by its guests. Bhutan Believe aims to capture the optimism and ambition of the kingdom as it opened its doors to guests once again, as well as communicating its promise and plans for its youth. At the same time, Bhutan has had a reset, and has unveiled a new tourism strategy, underpinned by transformations in three key areas: enhancements to its sustainable development policies, infrastructure upgrades, and the elevation of the guest experience. Inspired by the new brand, Bhutan has been making significant strides in its tourism sector, adopting new strategies and embracing sustainable practices. Bhutan endeavors to redefine its image on the global stage with an unwavering focus on sustainability, authenticity, and innovation.

## Revised tourism strategy

To enhance visitor's experience, Bhutan has implemented several changes to its tourism strategy. Ever since opening its doors to tourism in 1974, Bhutan has always required its guests to pay a daily Sustainable Development Fee (SDF), which is now USD 100 per person per night for adults. Children aged between 6 years and who have not yet turned 12 are eligible to pay USD 50 per night. Children who have not yet turned 6 years old do not have to pay any SDF. The SDF is collected by the national exchequer and funds are allocated to various projects that create long-term, sustainable opportunities for the Bhutanese people, through free healthcare, education and training, upskilling the tourism and hospitality industry, improved infrastructure, environmental preservation and conservation, cultural preservation programmes and initiatives that support local businesses and economies.



Photo: Unsplash

Visual: Department of Tourism, Bhutan





Furthermore, we have also made changes to the way people can visit Bhutan with the goal of making it easier and more accessible. In the past, all visitors needed to book their travel to and within Bhutan through an accredited tour operator. Any visitor traveling to Bhutan after reopening on September 23rd 2022 can now book all aspects of the journey independently. Still, we warmly recommend our many accredited tour operators for their expert knowledge and excellent service.

### **Local communities embrace homestays for sustainable living**

As we revamp tourism, we are also gearing towards sustainability, immersive experiences and responsible travel. With this goal in mind, to enhance the guest experience and allow our guests to have an immersive experience, Bhutan offers a wide range of accommodation facilities, from luxurious 5-star hotels to cozy homestays in traditional village settings.

At the same time, Bhutan is actively promoting homestays as a sustainable and culturally immersive way for guests to experience the country. The local communities are embracing the homestays for sustainable living while prioritizing the preservation of its rich cultural heritage and pristine environment. The promotion of homestays aligns with Bhutan's commitment to sustainable tourism, allowing visitors to engage with local communities, experience traditional Bhutanese hospitality,

and gain a deeper understanding of the country's unique way of life. This initiative also contributes to community development by providing additional income to local families.

Visitor's willing to experience the everyday lives of Bhutanese people, their religion, cultures, ceremonies and authentic food, staying in a local homestay with a Bhutanese family is the best way to do so. While homestays may not offer facilities like hotels and resorts, you can join the daily rituals of Bhutanese people living in villages and participate in cultivation and harvesting alongside other farmers, pick seasonal fruits and vegetables, and eat authentic Bhutanese dishes unspoiled by restaurant recipes.

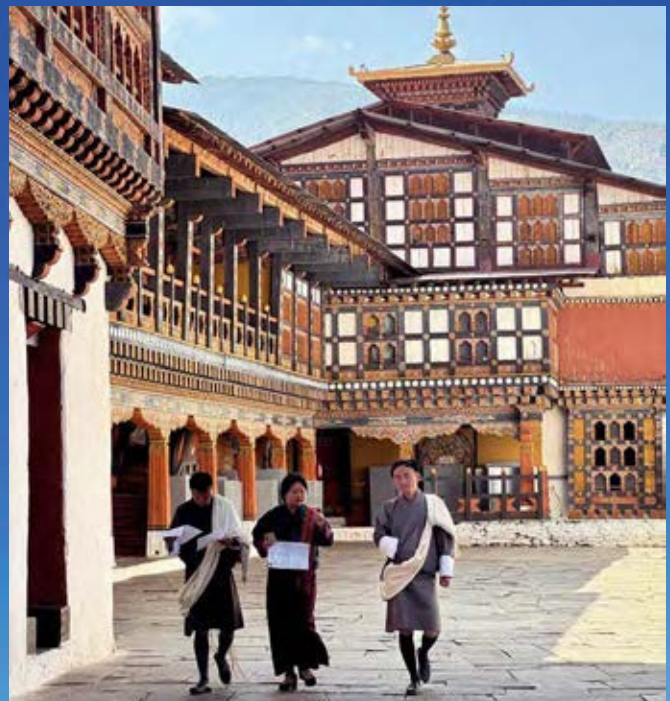


Photo: Chhukha Dzongkhag



### Jigmechu Ecotourism Campsite

Visitors seeking a unique homestay experience now have the chance to visit Jigmechu Ecotourism Campsite, recently honored with a tourism award. Just a four-hour drive from Thimphu, it features three campsites with tents. Currently, efforts are underway to construct ecolodges and certify

homestays in the region. Alternatively, visitors have the option to bring their own tents, creating a personalized camping experience where they can also prepare their meals.



Photo: Pexels

Visitors can expect to go for bird watching, as Jigmechu is identified as one of the birding hotspots in Bhutan. More than 300 species of birds are found in the area, including the endangered white-bellied heron, peacock, four types of hornbills, and different types of butterfly species. One can also spot barking deer in the area. Overall, visitors can experience homestays, birdwatching, local drinks, fly-fishing, bamboo fish, and an hour's hike to Ami Nye, the pilgrimage site of the local deity Aum Yangtham.



Photo: Pixabay

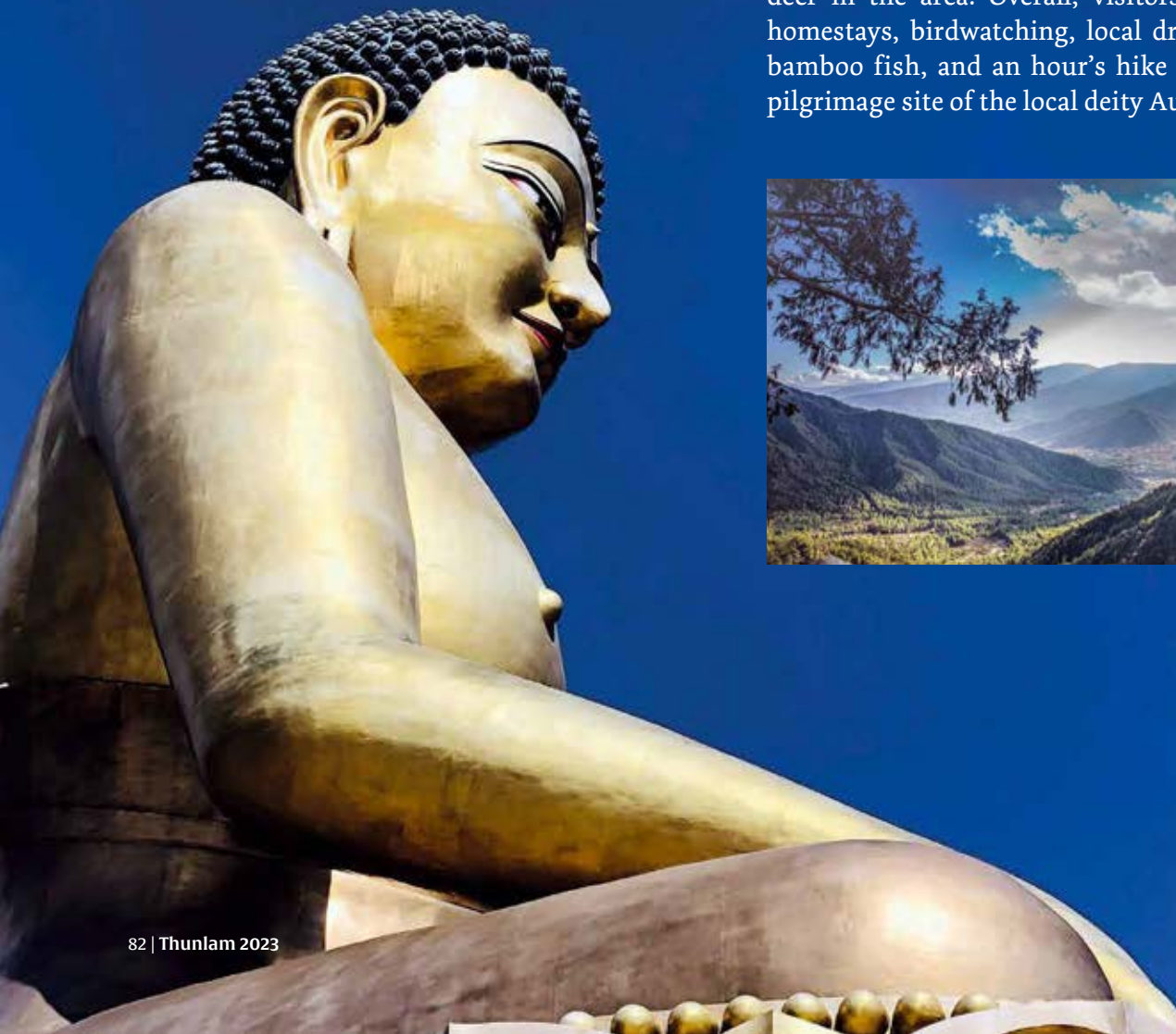


Photo: Unsplash



Zurich Trade Fair, from left to right: Claudio Zingg, Marianne Frei (both Society Switzerland-Bhutan), Ambassador Tenzin Rondel Wangchuk, Carissa Nimah, Sven Kaun-Feederle (German Bhutan Himalaya Society)

## Zurich trade show

As Bhutan actively encourages the adoption of local homestays and the promotion of Community Based Tourism (CBT), there is a concerted effort to showcase and support products that are made and cultivated within the country. In collaboration with various relevant agencies, the Department of Tourism took part in a European Roadshow from November 27th to 30th 2023. Eight entrepreneurs were sponsored to showcase their products, certified under the labels “Grown in Bhutan” and “Made in Bhutan”, during the roadshow events held in Zurich, Paris, and London.

The primary objective of the roadshow was to promote and position Bhutan as a distinctive destination for tourists, investors, and business collaborations in the European market. The inclusion of certified Brand Bhutan products and engaging presentations aimed to showcase the diverse offerings of the country and strengthen ties with European stakeholders. We are planning to organize a similar event in Germany in the future.

## Tourism award in the past 12 months

Bhutan has garnered significant global acclaim over the past 12 months, achieving a remarkable twelve prestigious awards for innovative strategies and commitment to sustainability. Recognized as the best emerging destination, favorite sustain-

able destination, and one of the world’s greatest places, Bhutan also received an award for the best new rebrand with Bhutan Believe, outstanding sustainability initiatives, and being among the best places to visit in 2023. This highlights the nation’s commitment to sustainable development, cultural preservation, and harmonious coexistence.

Bhutan continues to captivate travelers with its pristine landscapes and vibrant culture. The awards serve as a testament to Bhutan’s unwavering dedication to fostering a holistic and enriching experience for visitors, making it a beacon among emerging destinations worldwide.



2023 Luxury Travel Gold List Awards Australia for Best Sustainability Initiative of a Destination.

## 50 years of tourism in Bhutan

2024 marks the golden jubilee of tourism in Bhutan, celebrating 50 years since the kingdom cautiously opened its doors to the world. Bhutan opened to tourism in 1974 and it was founded on the principle of “High value, Low volume”, initiating responsible, sustainable and careful tourism. This milestone underscores Bhutan’s unique approach to tourism, prioritizing cultural preservation and sustainable development over mass influx. Over the past five decades, visitors have marveled at the country’s pristine landscapes, ancient monasteries, and vibrant traditions. Bhutan’s commitment to a limited, high-value tourism model exemplifies its dedication to preserving its rich heritage, fostering environmental stewardship, and ensuring a harmonious coexistence between the kingdom and its guests. ■

# Impressions of a Bhutanese of Germany and Japan – two industrial giants

**Dendup Chophel** holds a PhD in Anthropology from the Australian National University and is one of the few Bhutanese to have obtained a PhD in Anthropology. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Copenhagen.

He was a research fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies Erlangen (Friedrich-Alexander University), where he studied older female mediums (Nejoms) in the villages of Ketokha and Bongo in Bhutan and their relationship to institutionalised Buddhism. He was also a fellow of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Programme in Buddhist Studies, administered by the American Council of Learned Societies. Previously, he was a visiting scholar at the Institute of Developing Economies – JETRO in Japan.

He began his career as a researcher at the Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies (CBS) in Thimphu.



Photo: Dendup Chophel

After completing my PhD in Australia, a country where higher education is highly commercialised, it was difficult to find a postdoctoral position as research positions are hard to come by. So I continued my research in Japan and Germany, two countries that have been spared rampant military spending<sup>1</sup> in their modern history. They used their valuable resources to make higher education widely accessible and to fund advances in research and innovation. The consequences of a generous allocation of resources to research seem to mean that the deeply polarising and self-defeating debate about the hard sciences versus the humanities is not an issue in these countries.

## Humanities and social sciences must be promoted in the same way as STEM<sup>2</sup> subjects

Many countries are withdrawing the little support that the humanities and social sciences have traditionally received. After a guest stay in Japan, it was very gratifying to be part of a major project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg), which deals with the unity of art and science, scientism and spiritualism as well as esotericism and rationality from a global perspective.

As Bhutan undertakes major socio-economic reforms, including the rationalisation of its education system built on a strong STEM foundation, I hope it does not forget that the humanities and social sciences need equal support. Support does not necessarily mean a quantitative increase in the number of students and teaching positions. On the contrary, it is almost inevitable that the STEM subjects will be even more strongly favoured if resources become scarce. However, we should learn from countries like Germany and Japan how to foster a quantitatively limited but qualitatively excellent scientific community in the humanities and

social sciences. As the examples of Japan and Germany show, this is the true measure of national progress that is not exhausted in a mindless pursuit of economic prosperity that leaves large socio-economic inequalities and exploits the environment in an unsustainable way.

In Bavaria, I have observed that there is a Minister of State for Science and Art who standardises the public distribution of resources in these critical and inter-related areas. I wish all states had an authority that would properly and fairly take care of the ideal distribution of critical resources to these various activities that not only make our world prosperous, but also worth celebrating.

### **Not always welcoming for migrants and visitors from abroad**

But not everything is good in these countries. As robust as the system may be for citizens, it is not always welcoming for migrants and visitors from abroad. In Australia, where I lived, studied and worked, simplified procedures meant that I only needed a valid visa. From registering a rental flat with the relevant German municipality to getting a tax number or even ordering basic utilities like a SIM card for a mobile phone and a Wi-Fi connection, many things were overly cumbersome. There isn't even a call centre to get support from, and even making an appointment at the local bank takes ages. German customer service is known for its precision, but it can also be rude and nonchalant, in a country where there are strict labour laws that can sometimes lead to complacency. All of this seems to point to a system that is overwhelmed by the influx of people from abroad and the changes in society and the economy. However, counterintuitively, resistance to change and an inability to innovate are a common feature of both Japan and Germany, which have become global centres of excellence in innovation and manufacturing in their recent histories.

With an ageing population and insufficient public investment, the attempt to introduce a standardised citizen identification number received a lukewarm reception in Japan. Scholarships were paid out in cash and digitalisation was not a priority. But the fearlessness to be different is a common characteristic of Germany and Japan.

### **Good planning means creating unique development models**

The socio-economic and political conditions in the world are very different and give rise to bold and innovative solutions. In Erlangen and Nuremberg, the two cities in Bavaria where I lived, modern structural planning was carried out in medieval settlements. The planners did not raze the existing structures to the ground to make room for new amenities such as wide footpaths. Such pragmatic planning makes the best use of limited urban space, minimises opposition from property owners, allows the original character of the towns to be preserved and still meets futuristic demands. Good planning means being aware of the special circumstances and fearlessly creating bold development models. This example is a small but striking feature of the German (and Japanese) character. This spirit can also be seen in all facets of their social, economic and political organisation.

Bhutan is proud of its development model of Gross National Happiness, but we should not be swayed by unwanted foreign influences. By recognising our strengths and weaknesses, we can pave the way to a successful future, just as my two host countries have done in their modern development. ■



*Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany*



*Institute of Developing Economies Tokyo, Japan*

<sup>1</sup> This statement refers to the time before the Russian attack on Ukraine.  
<sup>2</sup> STEM subjects include mathematics, computer science, natural sciences and technology.

# My journey from a modest family to Europe

By Mathiyas Thatal

**M**y journey from a humble family in Bhutan to Europe was characterised by resilience, determination and seizing opportunities. In Lobesa, a small village in the Punakha district, my family struggled with financial difficulties while my mother worked hard to feed the five of us. Studying abroad seemed like an unattainable dream. The turning point came when I observed hard-working people building a hydropower plant in my home village. Their dedication and energy awakened in me the dream of becoming an engineer. Education became my hope to improve my living conditions, even in a city that offered few opportunities.

## Diploma in Civil Engineering

Determined to follow my dreams, I focused on subjects that would pave my way to engineering school. Despite some difficulties, I successfully completed my

civil engineering diploma successfully. I then found work in a private company and at the same time – searched online for scholarship opportunities. Through a Facebook advert, I discovered a scholarship for a bachelor's degree in civil engineering at Centurion University in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, for which I immediately applied.

## Civil Engineering at the Centurion University in Bhubaneswar

The chance to study abroad filled me with hope. The application process was successful and every step brought me closer to my dream of studying. During my three years in India, I learnt about the world outside my room. The Ambassador Scholarship from the Government of India supported my stay and piqued my curiosity about free education programmes abroad. After my return to Bhutan, a period of unemployment followed, accompanied by rejections that discouraged me. Then I discovered the Erasmus Mundus scholarships and determinedly applied for the MBUILD<sup>1</sup> Master's programme in Europe.

## Prestigious scholarship

One month later I received an e-mail with an invitation to a interview for scholarship by the university. There I gave a presentation about Bhutan and the challenges in the construction sector. The result was overwhelming: I was selected for the prestigious scholarship. Thus began my adventure in Europe as an MBUILD student. I immersed myself in sustainable design, construction and management and explored eleven different countries. My journey from rejection to the diverse landscapes of Europe shows the transformative power of seizing opportunities even when all doors seem to be closed. ■



Photo: Mathiyas Thatal

<sup>1</sup> MBUILD is a two-year Erasmus Mundus programme for sustainable design, construction and management of the built environment, run by UP Porto (Portugal), UC Santander (Spain) and THM Giessen (Germany). Students complete the first three semesters at the three universities and write their Master's thesis in the fourth semester in collaboration with companies.

## Film: The Monk & the Gun

Source: Kuensel, 7 September 2023:

“Another masterpiece by Pawo Choyning”



Photo: Trigon Film

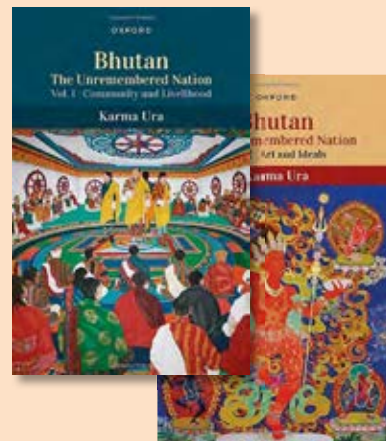
In an interview, Pawo Choyning expressed the hope that his new film would illustrate the uniqueness of Bhutan, especially to the younger generation. He emphasised Bhutan’s special place in history as the last country to connect to the internet and introduce television. Furthermore, Bhutan introduced democracy peacefully, without the upheavals that other countries have experienced.

Choyning wanted to capture the essence of change in Bhutan before the first elections in 2006 and described the film as a celebration of the innocence of the Bhutanese people and their culture. He lamented that in the modern world the lines between ignorance and innocence are often blurred and wanted to share the marvellous innocence of Bhutan with a global audience. He described his new work “The Monk and the Gun” as a simple story about home, happiness and belonging in the comedy/drama genre, in contrast to his earlier, more moving works. ■

### German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): Fact sheet Bhutan

Every year, the DAAD enables people from Germany to spend time in Bhutan and, vice versa, scholarship holders from Bhutan are given the opportunity to study, teach or conduct research in Germany. Further information can be found on the DAAD website: [www.daad.de/de/laenderinformationen/asien/bhutan/](http://www.daad.de/de/laenderinformationen/asien/bhutan/)

## Bhutan: The Unremembered Nation



Author:  
Karma Ura,  
Publisher:  
Oxford  
University Press  
Vol. 1 (2022),  
Vol. 2 (2023)

Photo: Oxford Press

The two-volume work by Dasho Karma Ura describes in detail the construction of a house, the procurement of materials, the furnishings and domestic relationships such as birth, death, education, marriage and disputes. Cattle rearing and trade in dairy products played a central role in prosperity. The narrative captures the everyday experiences of peasant life, including the traders’ journeys over snow and mountain passes. Volume 1 ends with the rural rhythm of life.

Volume 2 describes the construction of monastic castles (dzongs), which combined functional and aesthetic design principles. The frescoed walls were often lost when the dzongs fell into disrepair. Studies show changes in pigment composition and painting style, with the iconography supporting the meditative purpose. In addition to Buddhism, pre-Buddhist beliefs have also left their mark. Despite the challenges, the monastic castles maintained their routine and civilised life. Ulrike Roesler, Professor of Himalayan Studies at Oxford University, praises the two-volume work for its focus on human life in contrast to the usual studies of Himalayan countries, which concentrate on official history and famous personalities. ■

For more about the author Dasho Karma Ura, see page 6

# Your photos for the Bhutan Calendar 2025



We are once again planning a Bhutan wall calendar that will showcase the most fascinating facets of this country and the dates of its festivals and tsechus. We invite you to become part of this unique project by sending us your best photos from Bhutan.

We are looking for high-resolution images that embody the theme “Encounters in Bhutan”. Send your photo submissions (at least 3,000 x 5,000 pixels) by 31 July 2024 to: [info@bhutan-gesellschaft.de](mailto:info@bhutan-gesellschaft.de).

Discover Bhutan and its people with us: Bhutan’s many facets – from historical sites to majestic mountains. Together we will create an unforgettable calendar and bring the beauty and diversity of Bhutan to the world.

Your team of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society

## Impressum

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“Thunlam”  
(phonetic = mthun lam)  
means friendship,  
friendly relations,  
goodwill.



**German-Bhutan  
Himalaya Society**

