News from SSB
By Marianne Frei, President

General Assembly 2014
Photos by Markus Wild

Almost 70 members or guests attended this year’s General Assembly, which was held at the University of Teacher Education Zürich (PH Zürich) on March 15th. The interesting discussions, the possibility of meeting old and new friends and the attractive, centrally located venue helped to create a positive, lively and happy atmosphere.

The General Assembly approved the annual report, the annual accounts and the proposed budget.

The formal meeting was followed by an apéro and a lunch at the mensa.

The Chief guest H.E. Ambassador Daw Penjo was updating the audience on news from Bhutan.

Two new Board members were unanimously elected at the meeting. We are convinced that Ruth Schwitter and Hanspeter Bürgi with their personal resources and experiences can contribute a lot to the further development of our society. We are looking forward very much to have them as active Board members among us.

Ruth Schwitter-Allenspach (Malans)

Ruth Schwitter-Allenspach lived from 1987 to 1991 with her family in Bumthang and Punakha. She considers Bhutan as her second home and is happy to reinforce the relationship to Druk Yul through becoming an active SSB Board member. Besides her responsibilities for her family she is actively involved in social welfare work, and works as an executive officer in the government service. Ruth Schwitter was for five years a member of the community council of Malans and for a long time an accountant for Amnesty International Group Chur.

Ruth Schwitter
- Allenspach (Malans)

Hanspeter Bürgi, Prof.dipl. Architect ETH SIA FSU (Bern)

Hanspeter Bürgi is an architect and has his own studio Bürgi Schärer in Bern, which is specialized in sustainable construction and design. At the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts he is responsible for the focus architecture and energy in the master courses architecture. In 1991/92 and afterwards in 2001 and 2003 he had a chance to be involved in Helvetas projects in Bhutan at NRTI Lobesa and NIE Paro and Samtse. Between 2009 and 2012 he conducted a research project in the Himalayas (Bhutan) and the Alps on “Climate and Comfort: Location”.

Hanspeter Bürgi, Prof.dipl. Architect ETH SIA FSU (Bern)
Dr. Eberhard Fischer, Peter Fux and Christian Bader presented the Bhutan-Swiss Archaeology Project and opened our eyes for a new approach to understand the history of Bhutan.

We were honored to have six Bhutanese students attending the event. In the picture are Karma Tshering (University St. Gallen), Thongjay (University St. Gallen) and Jamyang Chopel (ETH Zurich).

Fundraising Activities 2014

Once more we are very much grateful for the member support in 2013 to help us trigger the school children support programme.

In 2014 the Board is now focusing on generating funds from foundations and other institutions to finance a wider range of activities and projects related to school infrastructure.

Through private donations the Society was already able to start a project called "piloting bread for schools", a project request which came from the Board of BSS and the Ministry of Education in Bhutan.

Member’s Contact List

As announced before, we will soon be publishing a member’s contact list for networking purposes among members of the Society. The list will be distributed among the members who gave us their permission to share their personal data with other members. If you would like to get a member’s list as well, or if you have missed to give us your permission, please let us know and we can add your name on the next release!

Documentary “Made in Bhutan”

The 32 minutes documentary film “Made in Bhutan” by Hirondelle Chatelard portrays the emergence of entrepreneurship in Bhutan. The documentary has recently been screened in U.S, London, Paris, Singapore and Brussels and is invited to the Himalayan Film Festival in the US again. Loden Foundation and the Society Switzerland-Bhutan are planning to hold another exclusive screening in Switzerland in October 2014 in presence of Dorji Tashi the Executive Director of the Loden Foundation who is at the moment pursuing his master in business administration in London. The screening of the short documentary will be followed by a discussion on topics like “current trends, challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurship”, “entrepreneurship and youth unemployment in Bhutan”, etc. Further details about date and venue will be published by mail and on our website as soon as possible.

New SSB Members

By Julia Menk, Member of the Board

We are happy to announce that in the last six months 13 new members have joined the Society Switzerland-Bhutan. Our efforts and the many successful activities of the Society obviously increase the popularity of our friendship association. In the name of SSB we would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members:

- Birgit Kurz, Zürich
- Brigitte Ibing, Trostberg
- Carlo & Sonja Galmarmi-Lehmann, Zürich
- Christoph Durban, Zürich
- Corine Mauch, Zürich
- Daniel & Karin Aregger, Adliswil
- Iris Henseler Stierlin, Winterthur
- Juliana Müller, Zürich
- Roland & Regula Stähli, Gümligen
- Suzanne Steiner, Luzern

Tashi delek!
SSB Activities

Lama or monk? Religious semantic categories of Buddhism in Bhutan

By Fabienne Grossenbacher & Rosmarie Frey

On February 18th, the room was nearly too small to welcome the members and friends of the Society Switzerland-Bhutan and the students of the University of Berne. The evening was co-organized by the Society Switzerland-Bhutan together with Prof. Dr. George van Driem from the Berne Linguistics Institute.

Everybody was eager to listen to the lecture given by Dr. Françoise Pommaret on a topic rich in nuances: “is a monk a lama and is a lama a monk?” For our Westerner monotheist tradition, these two designations are most confusing. Our eminent scholar gave us the keys for a better understanding of all the different religious persons – women and men – in Bhutan. It was a brilliant talk with references to precise anthropological concepts and personal experience. The fundamental Buddhist concept of impermanence was also addressed.

The presentation was illustrated with unique images of prestigious Buddhist lamas – whose meaning is “teachers” - such as Guru Rinpoche, Phajo Drugom Shigpo (1208-1276), Pemalingpa (1450-1521) and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651).

As the lecture was being held at the University of Berne, many people came from the different regions of Switzerland. We were happy to welcome among others Prof. Dr. Cristina Anna Scherrer-Schaub and M. Gérald de Montmollin from the French speaking part. Two ladies of the Friendship Society Italy-Bhutan especially came from Mantua, adding to the event a multicultural flavour.

After the lecture reflecta ag offered farewell drinks and gave a chance to continue sharing and discussing among the audience. Thank you!

Activity by BSS and SSB

Support for Construction of Dining Hall at Kagtong School

By Namgyel Tshering, Secretary General BSS

The dining hall in Kagtong was constructed with financial support from the Society Switzerland-Bhutan and implemented by the Bhutan-Switzerland Society. The construction was made successful under the supervision of the Principal along with the supports from teachers, students and the parents.

The hall measuring 55’ x 19.6’ with a seating capacity of about 200 people was made possible within a budget of Nu. 360’000. (CHF 5000)
The dining hall, now serves as a multipurpose hall and is used for the following purposes:
1. Dining hall  
2. Assembly hall during rainy season  
3. Meeting hall  
4. Dormitory for boys  
5. For cultural programs

Inauguration of dining hall
The hall was inaugurated on May 14th, 2014. During the inauguration ceremonies and cultural shows were performed by the students and teachers to their parents and to the villagers at Kagtong.
The teachers, students and parents extend their appreciation to the Society for their generous contribution.

Visitors from Bhutan in Switzerland

Study Tour of a Bhutanese Parliamentarian Delegation
together with (Ms.) Lyonpo Dorji Choden, Minister, Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, Royal Government of Bhutan, on “Local Governance” in Switzerland

By E. Werner Külling, Member of the SSB Board

Again a Bhutanese Parliamentarian Delegation with 10 Members of the National Council and the National Assembly visited Switzerland to attend a conference of the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) which took place in Geneva from March 16th – 20th, 2014. Since Switzerland supports the Royal Government of Bhutan for a long time in projects of “Local Governance” and Rural Infrastructure, a relevant four days Study Tour was organised after the conference in the area of Zürich by Board Members of the SSB in collaboration with HELVETAS Swiss Intercoperation.

The Delegation was composed by:
- H.E. Dr. Sonam Kinga, Chairperson of National Council (Head of delegation)
- H.E. (Ms.) Lyonpo Dorji Choden, Minister for Works & Human Settlements
- Hon. Nima, National Council Member
- Hon. Jigme Wangchuk, National Council Member
- Hon. Dhan Bdr. Mongar, National Council Member
- Hon. Ugyen Wangdi, National Assembly Member
- Hon. Pema Drupka, National Assembly Member
- Mr. Tshewang Norbu, Secretary General, National Council
- Mr. Kinley, Research Officer (Delegation Secretary)
- Ms. Kezang Deki, Assistant to H.E. Lyonpo Dorji Choden (MoWHS)

The Study Tour started on March 21st / 22nd with a special programme organized for Lyonpo (Ms.) Dorji Choden, Minister of Works and Human Settlement - the first and only Lady Minister in the Royal Government of Bhutan since July 2013 – together with her Assistant, Ms. Kezang Deki, both of them Civil Engineers.

Mr. Carlo Galmarini, Consulting Civil Engineering Offices (he planned and designed the new wooden bridge at the Punakha-Dzong), presented them important projects in wood construction, first in his office, and after in Sargans, and the famous cupola of the new elephant compound of the Zürich-Zoo. Invited by the Security Minister of the Canton of Zürich, Mario Fehr, they got a presentation of a study done in Bhutan by the Cantonal Building Insurance Company about implementing modern fire prevention and projection. Afterwards, they visited different sites as relevant samples in the City of Zürich, guided by the “Brandschutz-Engineer“ Lars Mülli.

The following two days, March 23rd / 24th, were dedicated to institutional and organisational aspects of the direct democracy system on three levels: (1) “Local Governance” (Community Winkel/Bülach), (2) “Zürich Cantonal Governance” and (3) “Zürich City Government”.

The teachers, students and parents extend their appreciation to the Society for their generous contribution.
(1) The local Community Council of Winkel presented the delegation a well prepared insight in obligations, duties, responsibilities and competences of a local township and its departments including education and administration.

It was followed by a short visit in a cattle breeding and milk production farm and by a short cultural program.

(2) The next day the Bhutanese NC- and NA-members were guests of the Cantonal Parliament of Zürich (Zürcher Kantonsrat), where they were received by the Speaker and Bureau Members; after the visit they got a detailed information about the history, economy, the political institutions and their roles on the three levels of the Confederation of Switzerland, the Canton of Zürich and the Communities. Then, they got the chance to follow a debate on planning aspects of the Zurich Airport Kloten, and finally were offered a lunch in presence of Regierungsrat Mario Fehr representing the Government of the Canton of Zürich.

(3) In the afternoon, after a welcome address of Stadtrat Dr. André Odermatt, collaborators of the Hochbauamt and the Section of Stadtentwicklung presented planning elements of Zürich as the biggest City of Switzerland and finally the Masterplan of the Bumthang Valley in Bhutan which was carried out by them in collaboration with Bhutanese partners (see our NL December 2012, p. 9). Finally, after having been informed by the Deputy City Chancellor about the existing political institutions and those of the Civil Society, they were received by the Mayor of the City of Zürich, Stadtpräsidentin Corine Mauch. The farewell dinner for the Bhutanese guests was organised by HELVETAS Swiss Intercoperation as the longstanding Swiss development partner of Bhutan since 1975. The four days Study Tour was financed by SDC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

THE RED DOOR
Tashi Gyeltshen, a Bhutanese filmmaker visiting the International Fribourg Film Festival 2014
By Markus Wild

Tashi Gyeltshen is apparently proud to see his portrait and his film displayed among all the other filmmakers who were present with their films at the 28th International Film Festival de Fribourg in March. He has good reason to be proud since his short film “The Red Door” is one of only 18 international films that were selected from several hundred applicants to be part of this year’s short-film competition. And in January “The Red Door” was premièred at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam 2014.
“The Red Door” is a film about death and it is Tashi’s artistic reaction to the suicide of his 22-year-old nephew; he says, making this film was his way to console himself; but the film is also a reflection about life and death from a Buddhist perspective.

A man is carrying a red door walking through different landscapes of Bhutan and reaches a place in the mountains where he puts the door on the ground; after having walked on the other side of the door he lies down and says “Mother, I am home”. Tashi says: “If there is reincarnation, then death is birth.”

Tashi’s film is unique and also different from other Bhutanese films. There is quite a lively film production in Bhutan, mainly for a Bhutanese audience; almost all of these films are very much based on a Bollywood pattern.

Tashi, who is a self-taught filmmaker, has watched during an intensive learning process more than 600 international films. When asked about his most influential filmmakers he talks about Andrej Tarkowskij, Theo Angelopoulos and Ingmar Bergman.

Before coming to Fribourg, Tashi visited Swiss friends in Glarus and made a stop in Zurich where he also met SSB president Marianne Frei. For another two days Tashi was my guest in Luzern: besides visiting the old town and the “Hochschule für Design und Kunst” he had interactions with students and teachers at the Kantonsschule Alpenquai Luzern. With great interest the students asked him many questions about his country, his culture and his work; later on they sent him a thank-you letter stating that it was a great pleasure having met him and that with his explanations he “opened a door to a new world” to them.

Learning from the Swiss Hotelierie
Visit of Bhutanese Delegation in Switzerland in May 2014
by Urs Dürsteler

From left to right: Prof. Dr. Jacques Bischoff, Dean HWZ (University of Applied Sciences Zurich), Marianne Frei, President of SSB and Member BMMHP (Bhutan Middle Management Hotel Project), Tashi Rabgyel, Project Administrator BMMHP, Ugyen Dorji, Officializing Director RITH (Royal Institute for Tourism and Hospitality) and Director BMMHP, Prof. Dr. Urs Dürsteler, Deputy Dean HWZ/Chairman BMMHP.

A journey to Bhutan includes a number of different and for most of the visitors very memorable experiences. Such an exposure to a very special place is obviously highly dependent on the individual preferences combined with the person’s financial capability. During a visit in the «Land of the peaceful Dragon» every tourist passes various touch points which are finally saved in the long-term memory for passing on to family members and friends. Those memories make up the overall image of Bhutan, which is part of the branding strategy of the country. Beside the friendliness of the people in Bhutan many visitors enjoy the beauty of the country with its impressive biodiversity or the inspiring culture with a breathtaking abundance of religious sites and historic buildings, or the trekking through an untouched wilderness. However, every visitor has a story to tell about the good (or bad!) experiences while lodging in one of the more than hundred hotels around the country.

A valuable Swiss Diploma in Hospitality Education
The knowledge of these various touch points was the starting point of the Bhutan Middle Management Hotel Project (BMMHP) in 2008. Main focus of the project is to prepare young
Bhutanese students for a career in the hospitality sector and hence to become professional ambassadors for Bhutan and its tourism.

Two batches of fifty students already graduated after an eight month in-service training program in 2010 and 2012 with a «Diploma of Advanced Studies in Hospitality Management» issued by HWZ University of Applied Studies Zurich, as previously informed in this Newsletter (see NL December 2011, p. 8, and NL June 2013, p. 14). The diploma were additionally endorsed by the Royal Institute of Hospitality and Tourism (RITH). In January 2014, the third batch started with its „Course No. 1“ (out of four courses) with 25 students, whereof nine women, and is expected to complete the training in August 2015. This third phase is financed by the Lottery Fund of the Canton of Zurich, the Swiss Development Cooperation SDC, the Hotel Belvedere in Scuol GR and other sponsors. Bhutanese along with Swiss and other international lecturers provided their expertise in teaching of various classes of course no. 1, including topics such as learning and communication skills, leadership development, intercultural management, world of tourism, project and event management and many more.

**Experiencing best Practice in Scuol GR**

A key person behind the program in Bhutan is Ugyen Dorji, Program Director and Officiating Director of RITH. He is administratively supported by Tashi Rabgyel working as a Program Administrator. In early May 2014, the two Bhutanese were invited for a one week «crash course» to the educational system of Switzerland at HWZ in Zurich. During the first part of the program lots of fine tuning for the project were on the agenda. A three days internship for managerial skills and competences to the renown Hotel Belvedere in Scuol GR concluded the intensive program. After being introduced and exposed to different managerial tasks at the Belvedere Hotel, and asked about his observations of the hotel sector in Switzerland, Ugyen Dorji replied: “I am impressed by the high standard of Swiss hotellerie and by the care of details in providing the various hotel services!”. Kurt Baumgartner, owner of the Belvedere and host of the Swiss delegation, on the other hand praised their vivid interests: “They were very keen to learn from our experiences, and we were very happy to learn about the challenges in the hotel sector in Bhutan.”

The next two-month course in Thimphu for BMMHP students will start in July 2014. No doubt the various discussions and exposures here in Switzerland will be imparted into the project for the benefits of the future Bhutanese hotel managers and hence the visitors of Bhutan.
Activities of SSB Members

Bhutan – Project in the primary class 5c, Embrach/ Switzerland

By Christa Koestler, Teacher

Three pupils wrote about the two Bhutan-Project weeks:

Hi, we are in the 5th grade of primary-school in Embrach. During two weeks we heard a lot about Bhutan.

Our classroom was full of different things from Bhutan: instruments, fabrics, books, bantschungs, big and small wooden bowls, a Buddha statue, thangkas and many things more. It looked very nice!

Our chairs were standing in the corridor outside the classroom. We were sitting on the floor and worked there. It sometimes wasn’t comfortable to write for a longer time on the floor.

We had topics about houses in Bhutan, Dzongs, the letters of Dzongkha, farming and schools. We heard they have there a lot of fairy tales. We watched a film about the tale “Nan and Gar”, produced and filmed by Peter Leisinger.

We prepared four other tales to act out for our families and friends. In the beginning we read the stories. After that we worked in groups.

First we had to learn the text which we had to say in our play. Then we drew big pictures on the stage. Each group had other things on their pictures: houses, a Dzong, garden, landscape.

We made only a few rehearsals. And then, the evening with a lot of audience, 12th May! The visitors were pleased about our play.

Add-on by the class teacher Ch. Koestler:

It is very interesting to speak with the class about a country nobody ever heard of. Bhutan is a land with a similar nature as Switzerland, high mountains, valleys and rivers.

I was travelling two times in Bhutan, so I have a lot of pictures to show to my class about the people living there. Also I collected since a long time TV broadcasts about the Himalayan region.

We spoke about the differences of life in the two countries. In the lessons on “religion and culture” we got to know about Buddhism.

To learn a little bit about farming we planted spring wheat in our school-garden. We had to work hard until it was possible to seed the grains, and we are now very much looking forward to harvest the mature crops!

It was great that we could borrow a lot of things from Marianne Frei and Werner Külling for our project. Thanks a lot!
1st International Buddhist Nun’s Conference
by Silvia Hansel

Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF), established in 2009 by Dr. Tashi Zangmo, is dedicated to helping Bhutanese nuns improve their living standards and their general knowledge in order to become better agents of instruction and change for the society at large. (see Newsletter December 2012, p. 13, http://www.bhutan-switzerland.org/pages/newsletter.htm)

In December, 2013, BNF set up a big première by organizing the 1st International Buddhist Nun’s Conference. Set in the beautiful Zhiwa Ling Hotel in Paro, and under the august aegis of the Queen Mother, Her Majesty Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, the Conference brought together several illustrious names in female Buddhism as well as some 70 nuns from various nunneries in Bhutan.

The general theme of the conference was the role of Buddhist nuns in the larger society in the light of modern changes. With their society rapidly going through what could be called a cultural revolution, the traditional position of the nuns, whose life was often spent in retreat and prayer, is undergoing its own revolution. Among the international guests were Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo from Tashi Jong in India, the ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo from the University of San Diego, and Rinchen Khandro Chogyel from Dharamsala; more Korean, British and Bhutanese speakers provided interesting in-sight on monastic life and the interaction of the nunneries with the surrounding communities.

It soon became clear that two themes were going to focus everyone’s attention during the conference: The importance of education, both religious and secular, to enable Buddhist nuns to better serve their communities, and the full ordination of nuns. The latter was to cause much discussion, as the take on this particular point of doctrine - the existence of an unbroken lineage of nuns necessary for the ordination - varies between the different Buddhist schools of thought. The final speech given by Gangtey Tulku Rinpoche, founder of the Pema Choling nunnery in Bumthang, was supportive of the nuns’ ambitions and hopes.

For the nuns it was a momentous experience. Beside the understandable excitement of meeting Her Majesty, who is an active sponsor of the Foundation, and the panel speakers, it was for many the first occasion to get together with members of other nunneries and to engage in the discussion of such themes. Many of them had never before been so far away from their nunnery, nor had they ever stayed in a hotel of this kind. Their comments at the end of the three days reflect their enthusiasm and the pleasure they had.

It was not all work, however. The opening ceremony was underlined by a performance of the traditional 21 Tara Offering dance performed by nuns from Kunga Rabten nunnery, who had attended a special retreat to learn the dance and had made costumes and masks themselves. The emotional impact on the public was evident.
Each daily session was completed with general prayers, most remarkably the 'Chöd' prayer on the second day, held on the last floor of the hotel. Both Uma and Amankora hotels generously offered lunches on their premises, and Zhiwa Ling Hotel threw a dinner feast to honour Her Majesty's presence, with music and dances from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts. Teas and snacks were sponsored by several people and organizations, among them the SSB. Sightseeing was made possible by a number of buses and drivers supplied free of charge by Etho Metho and Norbu Travels.

On December 17, Bhutan’s National day, the remaining speakers and nuns attended His Majesty’s the Fifth King’s address in Changlimithang Stadium, followed by yet another lunch – the last. (The transcript of the 3-day conference is available on request.)

Mountain Echoes Literary Fair – Thimphu, 22-24 May 2014
By Silvia Hansel

Visitors to Bhutan are often confronted with BST – “Bhutan Stretchable Time”, but there were no signs of this as this year’s fifth edition of the Himalayan Literary Festival wound along like clockwork, loftily shuffling literates, historians, diplomats, cooks, musicians and film makers from all over the subcontinent, and further. There was even a Swiss journalist and writer Bernard Imhasly married to the Indian author Rashna Imhasly Gandhy.

As a sideline, the new Textile Museum exhibited “Thagzo: The Textile Weaves of Bhutan”, dedicated to the weaving technique of that name, as used for royal garments. From Her Majesty’s heartfelt and candid memories of her father and her rural childhood, through novelists and actresses, to profound political, sociological and religious discussions, the themes were as varied as the sixty panel speakers who answered the festival’s invitation. In view of such an eclectic collection, it is not easy to single out one predominant theme for the event. Much emphasis was put on protecting and preserving traditional values. To quote the Indian novelist Ira Pande, “A country that loses its identity gives up first its dress code, then its language, then its cooking”. All three aspects of tradition were covered by the festival this year.

Mountain Echoes is sponsored by USHA, an Indian domestic appliances giant, the India Bhutan Foundation and Siyahi, a NGO, and India’s leading literary agency. This year’s directors, Namita Gokhale, Pramod Kumar KG, Ashi Kunzang Choden and Siok Sian Dorji, will be able to look back with pride on yet another successful edition of the festival.

See more on the internet:
All sessions: https://www.youtube.com/user/MountainEchoes

Mountain Echoes 2014 Day 2, May 23, 2014
Location: Taj Tashi, Thimphu
“Living on the edge” with Pek Dorji, Pasang Tshering, Marie Thesberg and Françoise Pommaret
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATosQ_OFMk4&feature=player_detailpage&v=ATosQ_OFMk4#t=7486

Mountain Echoes 2014 Day 3, May 24, 2014
Location: Taj Tashi, Thimphu
Kunzang Choden & Sangay Wangchuck on Animism
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTnkFw4uw

List of participants under www.mountainechoes.org.
Walter Roder & Christof Frei, eds.,
Five decades of Bhutanese-Swiss partnership in forestry development

This is the story of the partnership of two countries, Bhutan and Switzerland; it is the story of the people in this partnership and their commitment to develop, manage and sustain the forest resources in Bhutan. Different players in the collaboration have contributed their personal accounts using experiential narratives and photographs to recount events and experiences over five decades. Their accounts highlight the significance of personal contacts, through which the partnership became a viable reality. Bhutan follows a policy to have a forest cover of more than 60% of its area. While nurturing forest resources has always been important for the country, the Swiss partnership helped to realize Bhutan’s vision of instituting and maintaining a socially responsible system that helps Bhutan’s forests stay healthy.

Sixteen Swiss and Bhutanese authors – many of them long standing members of SSB – have contributed to the book, which is organized in eight chapters from a general overview of forestry in Bhutan and a comparison with Switzerland, followed by many personal accounts, attractively illustrated by photographs and informative tables, to the latest developments and plans for the future. An extensive and detailed bibliography and a tabulated summary of forestry projects assist the interested reader.

(The book can be ordered for CHF 20.– at HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Zurich)

Meeting Point

Interview
By Otto Stern (OST)
This interview – given on April 1, 2014 – presents
Jamyang Chophel (29), Master’s Degree Program in Engineering Geology at ETH Zurich
by Otto Stern

Jamyang: I’m from Zhabjethang, Choe-khor Gewog in Bumthang, that is north of Jakar, not far from Drapham Dzong (see Newsletter June 2011, p. 8). I’m living in Thimphu, I’m divorced and I have a son who is almost two years old. Back in the village, my family are farmers, and I’m the eldest of four children, one brother, two sisters. So, being the eldest I had to take responsibilities; I like doing farm-work, working in the fields, cutting firewood. We also have cows and horses; but now, with the road connection to the village, they don’t use horses any more. I used to help a lot when I was a small boy, and later during school vacation, and I still miss these activities now. It is always fun going back to the village!

OST: Where did you do your schooling?
Jamyang: I did it in my village, Zhabjethang, up to class 4. Then, from class 5 to 10, I was in Chumey Middle Secondary School; the school is located on the highway about 20km from Jakar Dzong towards Trongsa. There, in 2001-02, I was in the first batch of classes 9 and 10. For classes 11-12 I went east, to Gyalpozhing Higher Secondary School near Mongar. And from there I went to India to do my Bachelor’s degree in Arts & Sciences at Osmania University in Hyderabad.

In 2009, I joined the Bhutan Civil Service, and I worked there for 3½ years in the department of Geology and Mines as a Geologist deputy project manager for a hydropower project, the Glacier Lake Project. I also worked under the Seismology Division as a Geophysicist, and there I studied mostly the subsurface by using
 electrical resistivity survey. For this we use electrodes we put in the ground with a certain spacing and send the current inside the ground; then we record the signals with a laptop, and we receive the current back getting the resistivity, i.e. a specific electrical resistance. Every rock has its resistivity, and so, approximately within a range, we can say this could be a rock of a certain type, this could be water, this a fold, and this is a week zone, etc. So by analysing these data we come to know the quality of the ground.

Then, I also worked in the Earth Quake Hazards Project of the ETH together with my Department in Bhutan (see Newsletter June 2013, p. 11, http://www.bhutan-switzerland.org/pages/newsletter.htm, Mountains and earthquakes, On a seismology project in Bhutan, by György Hetényi, ETH Zürich). During that time I got to know Dr. György Hetényi from the Swiss Seismological Service (SED) at the ETH, with whom I was working in the project, and who helped me to get here into ETH.

From September 2012 I started studying here, and this is now my final semester.

Ost: And what are you studying at the ETH?

Jamyang: I’m doing a master’s degree in Engineering Geology; it’s more towards geotechnical engineering. It is not easy here in ETH, right from the beginning it was very challenging! The courses are very tough, and the ETH system is very different compared to where I came from. Of course, the ETH is one of the best universities of the world, so we should expect challenges!

In September 2012, the day after I reached here I started my studies, and it continued without any break till now; I studied almost twelve hours a day, and sometimes it was almost too much stress! There are compulsory modules with exams you have to pass; if you don’t pass you have only one more chance, and if you do not pass the second try, you must leave the ETH. In the Spring semester 2013 I was asked to do additional exams in Chemistry, because in Chemistry I was not at all at the ETH level. When they asked me to make up Chemistry, I couldn’t sleep the whole night, I was so stressed. Because Chemistry is on Bachelor level and it is in German! There where no resources in English, so I had to study everything from two thick books. So, if I hadn’t passed this exam, I had to leave. But I did it, even with a very god mark! Till now I did all my exams very well, and the grades I got are good; so I am very happy with what I did; and more than that: I learned a lot!

The subjects I’m studying are a mixture of civil engineering and geology; the geology I am doing is dealing with very practical topics, like if I we had to construct this house at this location, I have to know what are the conditions in the ground. If we construct a foundation, what type of material is good in the present conditions of the ground; so construction is always in focus. But the geology is also needed to know, where the material came from, what were the mechanisms of the formation of the ground materials, e.g. if there is clay, where did this clay come from, etc. Courses in structural geology teach about rock structures, how will this rock behave, when used in construction, and so on.

Ost: Do you also do practical studies in the field?

Jamyang: Yes, actually the first semester was full with exams, but in the second semester, we were in the field for almost three weeks, and I had to write field reports; I have already written 14 field reports of average 50 pages! I used to write reports till after midnight! And that’s how I learned to work on time, and how time is precious for us; this is something that I really came to know here only! My professor said: «Now, you should really work like an Engineering Geologist in a company, as they will ask you, “this report should be ready by tomorrow!”» In the ETH there is a very high standard on how to write technical reports, how to collect the data and how to present them in a paper. And, again, these reports are always graded! In the beginning this was very challenging for me, but with every new report I kept improving; and today, when I compare my first and my last report, I can see how much I learned!

Ost: After finishing your Master’s here at the ETH, will you go back to the same Department in Bhutan?

Jamyang: Yes, I’m planning to go back to this Department, or else I can even work in some hydropower projects; I feel I should not have any problem to find a job.

Ost: Let’s talk about your life here in Switzerland. You say that you are fully occupied by studying and learning and writing reports, but do you also have any free time?

Jamyang: Alright, in the first year I really had no free time; sometimes I had classes from morning 8 till evening 6, sometimes even without lunch break, and in the second semester I was mostly in the field sites; these sites are all over Switzerland, even in very remote villages; but still, these remote villages would be towns in Bhutan!
We travelled there always in a group by ETH vehicles or rented cars. For example in the Canton Ticino we stayed in Campo, Vallemaggia, to study landslides; we went also to Domodossola in northern Italy to study the formation of the Alps. So, for example, when you plan to carve a tunnel you have to know what type of rocks there are, and how these rocks behave. I also was in Brienz to study again about landslides at the Trachtbach. Then, in the Canton of Uri, above the road to the Gotthard tunnel, for studying rockfall in an ongoing project. So my work is not so much to sit in the office, but to go out to the site and really see and understand what is there. We have to write a detailed diary in a note book by using many instruments, then back in the camp, we put it in the computer and process it by specific software in order to produce a specific result.

OST: On these excursions, where do you stay over night?

Jamyang: These excursions are part of the courses, and everything – housing, transport – is organized by the ETH; sometimes we stay out for one or two weeks, then we hire a house in the village, where we can cook ourselves; we work during daytime and we write and study during nighttime, sometimes till midnight!

OST: How do you manage the costs of your stay here?

Jamyang: Dr. György Hetényi helped me to find some funding here in Switzerland, a scholarship from Oeuvre St-Justin, Fribourg, Switzerland (Justinus-Werk) covering all my expenses for the study; I even stay in their Student Hostel at Rigiblick, here in Zurich; I don’t get anything from Bhutan. Actually, without the generous and very competent help from György Hetényi I would never have managed to study here. And now I have also many good friends from the classes at ETH.

OST: What did you find particularly difficult here in Switzerland?

Jamyang: At the beginning I really didn’t find much difficulty in my new surroundings; I’m quite open to anything new and I feel that I’m also quite flexibel, I can adjust with any type of person; if somebody is very reserved I can be in that way also; and if somebody is open and wants to talk, I can also be this way. But once I went to the Migros shop near the Hostel looking for hair oil, and I couldn’t find it; because in Bhutan we find hair oil everywhere; but my friends here, told me that nobody uses hair oil. And, of course, at the Migros not all the staff speaks English, but then one employee told me that here it is very difficult to find hair oil, but if you really need it, you can get it at a pharmacy. And now, he is my best friend; every time I go to that Migros I meet him and we talk together.

So I can say that I didn’t face any challenges in my everyday life, but I faced big challenges in my studies! Sometimes I was so stressed, I couldn’t even sleep. If I would have failed in a course, they would have sent me back to Bhutan. And there is a story in Bhutan about one guy who failed and went back! At this time I’m the only one who is studying at the ETH, one of the best Universities in the world, and if I had to go back failing a subject, it would really be shame on my butt, I’d lose my face; and what would Bhutanese people think about me? This puts a big stress on you! Luckily I managed to pass all these difficulties, and now I feel quite relaxed. I told myself, if you work hard, if you believe in yourself, you can do it!

OST: How much time is left to finish your studies here?

Jamyang: I’ve now finished my third semester, so there is only one more. The Master’s Program lasts four semesters, and now I’m working on my Master’s thesis. The topic is on detection of landslides in Bhutan through seismic noise analyses and satellite images. Actually I’m using three approaches to assess one problem, i.e. to test how these three things combine: (1) through temporary seismic stations in Bhutan, that record the daily seismic events (noises) in Bhutan (see Newsletter June 2013, as mentioned above), and from these data we deduce e.g. whether something could be a landslide, on a particular day and time. Then (2) with these coordinates – using online the geological satellite survey for landslides from the U.S. – I look into the satellite images and process them for landslides to get confirmation or not of the prediction from the seismic noise. But this is not easy to see, there could have been clouds, or the landslide was very small. So (3) I have to go in the field and check the predictions. In mid April I will go to Bhutan for this field work of my thesis. With this method we can detect landslides in very remote places, disasters in a remote village, or a river that is blocked and building up dangerous floods.

OST: And what’s next, after finishing your thesis?

Jamyang: I’ll come back to Zurich in May, and I have to finish it by end of August. I will make a presentation of the thesis to my colleagues and friends. And after that, in September, I don’t know what’s going to happen!
And don’t forget!

Under the heading “Meeting Point” the SSB Newsletter regularly features interviews with Bhutanese and Swiss people working, studying and visiting in the respective host country. It will give insight in the experiences and activities of Bhutanese and Swiss people in contact.

Contributions to this rubric from members of SSB and BSS, as well as the circle of readers of the Newsletter are most welcome!