

Birth of the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB) - the First Non-governmental Initiative

An Interview with Dasho Paljor J. Dorji, one of the pioneers of NYAB

The Druk Journal: How did the idea of starting the first non-governmental organisation, the National Youth Association of Bhutan (NYAB), come about?

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: We felt that the growing number of youth coming out of schools should have a representation. We have to get together and should know what each one is doing. So we said let's meet at the Swiss Bakery. We said let's organise this and my wife, Louise Dorji, she was to be the secretary. We asked Her Royal Highness Ashi Dechen Wangmo to be the President and Her Royal Highness agreed... It was just basically to get together - meet and have fun. So, you know, boys get to meet the girls also and otherwise. I am sure lot of marriages also happened because of the NYAB get together.

The Druk Journal: How difficult or easy was it to start NYAB, especially to get government support and volunteers?

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: There was no difficulty. I mean there was no government thing. It wasn't a registered thing. I don't think any of us even knew what an NGO meant that time. Today, of-course, this is a big deal, the CSO - civil society. We had just said let's form our own youth association. You know, like you form a football association or something like that. We decided to start a radio programme, Radio NYAB. That was Rongthung, Karma Tenzin, so it was his idea and we all agreed.

The owner of the Swiss Bakery, Turie Chirsten, he was a radio engineer and he'd come from Switzerland. His Majesty The Third King had given permission for him to live in Bhutan. And he offered to be our radio engineer to organise the whole thing. So the main thing was about getting permission from the government to use the wireless station, which was up in Taba. We went to Dasho Karma Letho who was the Communications secretary. The late Lyonpo Sangay Pejore was the deputy minister for Communications and we asked permission to use the wireless station on Sundays when it was shut. Just for one hour every Sunday. They were very kind and they gave us the permission.

We had a number of people who listened to the Voice of America and BBC. So

somebody would volunteer to put the news together. I was then requested to be the first newsreader, to read the news. At the appointed date we were at Taba, in the wireless station, waiting for these guys to come with the news. They were late because, you know, it takes time to listen to news and then write down the news. Being Sunday morning, of course, they may have been out Saturday night or something.

We had a small table with three chairs and one microphone... It was a very simple wireless station - 400-watt. And I started by saying the guys bringing the news haven't brought the news but we have to start the same appointed time since you all are listening. So let me start by saying something about the NYAB – why we started it. What were our aspirations – you know, to get the youth together so that we could know each other. Those were the early days of nation building.

Then I just happen to look at my watch – it was 3 o'clock. We followed Indian Standard Time those days. And I said well it's 3:30 Bhutan Standard Time and everybody moved their watch half hour forward. Amazing! That's when I realized how powerful the radio was... The next morning – the late Home Minister, Kidu Lyonpo Tamzhing Jagar, he went up to the home ministry and he looked at his watch and said, "This morning all you guys arrived early." And they said, "No la lyonpo, you are late, la." The lyonpo replied, "but it's only 9 o'clock." They replied again, "No la, it's 9:30." He then said, "Oh, yeah, since when?" And changed his watch to half hour forward.

His Majesty The King also put his watch half hour forward. And so we had Bhutan Standard Time.

When the news did come I looked at the news – it was all about war, disease, the Vietnam War was going on. I said, you know it's a beautiful Sunday and on a beautiful occasion like this why tell you about troubles in the world, which is only about war... war...war. Let's continue with our discussion about the good things. Look to the future of our country, Bhutan.

The Druk Journal: *Were there any rules guiding NYAB and how were you operating?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: Not that I know of. They continued with NYAB. The real NYAB actually continued functioning as the radio station and that was done by Louise Dorji. I must say, they did a fantastic job. Then one fine day, the government took over and regularised everybody in NYAB. It was the birth of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service.

The Druk Journal: *Looking back now, how successful do you think the idea of NGOs has been?*

Dashi Paljor J. Dorji: Well, I don't know. I mean when you talk about NGOs, you know it's so difficult to associate NYAB as an NGO. But, yeah, it did play a very

important role. We started many things - good things. What fun we used to have and we organised a lot of parties. Those days, Thimphu was a dead town – one horse town - and we did get things going.

The Druk Journal: *From just one CSO in 1973 to now over 50 such non-profit organisations, including the Public and Mutual Benefit Organisations... what does it indicate for the country at large?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: The next NGO, which has not been given enough credit, was the National Women’s Association of Bhutan. It was also started in those early days. Dasho Daw Dem was its head. Ashi Sonam Choden was the patroness. We all had to pay back. Do something for our country. The government could not do everything. I think this is the maturing of Bhutanese. As we grow up today I see a lot of the youth volunteering... a lot of the youth who want to give back to their country and help the needy who are less fortunate.

I think that’s a wonderful spirit. NGOs generally stand for that. It’s not that the government is not doing things but sometimes government is restricted in everything it has to do. So the NGO steps in. Let me go back to the early days... when I started Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN). One of the reasons was we were being misrepresented in all the international conferences. Oh, this is what is happening in Bhutan and that is what is happening in Bhutan. And we had no say. We wanted to have a say and say - hey, that is not true. We know how to look after our nature. We have conservation. We have things going on. But then when the government said it, in those days, people really didn’t believe the government reports because they felt the governments cooked up their reports. So they wanted to hear independent opinions and that’s the NGO opinion.

Let’s talk about the other NGOs coming up... to name a few, Tarayana and the YDF, among others. Then there are those not so well to do. Maybe they do not have royal patronage and all, but they are doing some fantastic work. Especially I would like to mention Tashi Namgay of Kidney Foundation who is a kidney transplant recipient. He felt that this is what he experienced and he would like to make sure that people who suffer like him from diabetes and need kidney transplants can benefit from his experience. He has a wonderful heart. Here I would also like to mention Chablop Passu Tshering, who started Bhutan Toilet. You know, clean toilets can make a huge difference in a country’s reputation. Then there more marginalised ones like Lhaksam. You know, this is the trouble with us, Bhutanese – at face – generous, but when it comes to the crunch we say I don’t really think we can have you as a member of our gym because I might lose my other clients because they scared of getting infected with HIV AIDS. That stigma should not be there.

The Druk Journal: *How do you see the future of NGOs or Civil Society Organisations as it is known here in the long run?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: Well, one thing for sure is there are too many sprouting up. And definitely we have to be careful that we don't end up like Nepal. I think Nepal has around 28,000 NGOs. I mean there are one-man NGOs, husband and wife-NGOs. This is something we have to avoid here in Bhutan. I think, the NGO body, which looks into giving licenses to CSOs should be super strict.

The Druk Journal: *How have the roles and responsibilities of CSOs changed with change in our system of government from monarchy to a constitutional democracy?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: I have been not that involved with that. But definitely, the accountability has increased. One point I want to mention here is - individuals have started most of these CSOs. Now it's all wonderful to start for a greater cause with one man but then you must make sure that you are not a one-man NGO. You have to be able to have a board, be accountable to the board. There comes a time when you have to let go. You must have started something wonderful but you could also destroy it by becoming a dinosaur. As times change many do not know how to let go of the reins of power.

The Druk Journal: *Bhutan has always strived to build its strength as nation on volunteerism so what does it mean to have an increasing number of CSOs in the country?*

Dashi Paljor J. Dorji: I would like to see some CSOs come up, not in Thimphu. I should like them to be working in the field where the people are really in need of help. When you start a CSO, you should get up and start doing things. Don't expect rewards or thanks or anything. Just put your head down and do it. And when people come to help – you don't say I need a computer, I need a car, and all the goodies. The moment you put down all these goodies in your list, donors are going to look at you and say, now I don't like this guy. You should start by saying, I am going to do this and you have to put in a lot of effort. You have to show the passion and the dedication to the cause you are working for. The people will come and say, hey, I can help you to perform better.

The Druk Journal: *There has also been the general feeling even among the CSOs that 50 CSOs for a small country with population of around 700,000 is a lot... what do you think?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: I will not give or pass a judgment or opinion on this because I don't know who are the 50. But I am sure there are one or two bad eggs in that 50. And CSOs when we meet and gather around there should be an exchange of ideas and cooperation so that we try not to duplicate. We should support each other... compliment each other's efforts.

The Druk Journal: *How sustainable is the growing number of CSOs at a time when there is a drastic fall in philanthropic contributions across the world?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: We should not depend on philanthropic contributions around

the world. I mean we are doing things over here and we start a CSO to do something for our less fortunate people, not to just look for funds outside. First thing you have to do is – you have to try look within our own country. Why should we keep looking to foreigners to keep coming? Let me tell you one thing – if people think Bhutan needs money – there are lot of situations round the world which are so terrible that will make the Bhutanese cry and expect us to give to them. We are very lucky that we are in good situation. We do have people in need, but such needs should be met by our own people.

The Druk Journal: *Are Bhutanese people volunteers by nature?*

Dasho Paljor J. Dorji: I think there is this wonderful spirit. I think that Bhutanese are good volunteers. You see it in the everyday life. I think, that's one thing – it's inbuilt in our society - to volunteer to help each other. It's inbuilt in our agriculture system - when we have such small population and large land, everybody gets together. It's a communal system. I have no bad things to say about Bhutanese, I only have good things to say. As a people – as a group I think, the example is set at the top.

Their Majesties - they set the example and I think it's rubbed down all the way. And I think every Bhutanese has that. That's the wonderful spirit of the Bhutanese people.