

# Gyalsung - Towards a Productive Generation

*Siok Sian Pek-Dorji*

## Introduction

Bhutan's Gyalsung Programme (National Service) is scheduled to start in September 2024, marking the launch of the historic Royal initiative announced by His Majesty The King on National Day in 2019. His Majesty explained that Gyalsung is aimed at giving future Bhutanese citizens the opportunity and capability to take part in nation-building at a time when the path ahead looks formidable, and the times uncertain, with the world transforming at an accelerated pace.

His Majesty informed an elated Bhutanese population that the year-long programme would forge a shared national identity that transcends social, economic, regional, ethnic, and linguistic differences. It would help Bhutanese youth identify their own life-goals, enhance their capability and skills, foster their self-confidence and autonomy, and strengthen their emotional positivity and psychological maturity so that they not only realise their own aspirations but also serve the Tsa-wa-sum as capable citizens (Royal Address 2019).

The Gyalsung Act was passed by the Parliament on November 11, 2022.

## The Programme

Gyalsung, aimed at empowering Bhutanese youths to grow as “productive and worthy citizens”<sup>1</sup> is a mandatory training programme for 18-year-old Bhutanese youths<sup>2</sup>. While the 2024 programme is a pilot launch, the regular full-time Gyalsung programme is currently scheduled to begin in 2025. It is an annual residential programme, to be held in the same period every year in academies built across Bhutan.

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1 See [www.gyalsung.bt](http://www.gyalsung.bt) for background

2 See Gyalsung Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2022 accessed at: [https://gyalsung.bt/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/GyalsungActofKingdomofBhutan2022\\_06.12\\_.22\\_.pdf](https://gyalsung.bt/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/GyalsungActofKingdomofBhutan2022_06.12_.22_.pdf)

The Gyalsung is a unique combination of basic military training, exposure to life skills, and training in specific skills. Basic Military Training is three months, and the remaining time will focus on education and skills training. The programme is aimed at enabling all Bhutanese, including those residing abroad, to come together with time set aside to enable them to prepare for higher education or a job. After the training, the Gyalsups undergo a “voluntary duty” period and a reservist period until they reach the age of 45 years.

The Royal Bhutan Army will conduct military training that is expected to give youth some rigour, discipline, and responsibility through physical strengthening. The national education classes, led by experts, will cover aspects of history, Bhutanese identity, the overall goals of the country, national security, and foreign policy, among other topics, all aimed at fostering a sense of national identity. Training also covers life skills like swimming and financial and digital literacy.

The skills development courses will focus on four key areas:

- Home security - skilling in construction trades such as carpentry, crafts, shelter, and artisanship;
- Food Security - agriculture technology, protected agriculture, and drip agriculture, in which scarce resource usage will be taught;
- ICT Security - this is recognising the significance of future-based technology such as cyber security, data science and programming;
- Community security - first responder skills, training in first-aid, forest fire management, search and rescue, public order, and health management.

### **Addressing Current Needs**

The Gyalsung aims to groom citizens to take on Bhutan’s new challenges that include growing socio-economic disparity, increasing youth unemployment, and social ills (e.g. substance abuse) among the younger generation, and declining food self-reliance. The Gyalsung will give them the attributes, discipline, and skills to deal with these trends. “As a small nation with numerous challenges, on the cusp of embarking on ambitious transformation, the potential of every individual must be harnessed to enhance economic prosperity, collective wellbeing, and national security,” states the Gyalsung website.

## **Conditions and Stages of Application**

According to the current Gyalsung website, registration is compulsory for all citizens born in 2005 and become 18 years of age in 2023. Exemptions may be granted to persons who are deemed medically unfit through medical screening, and differently-abled persons. Persons enrolled in religious and monastic institutions, both inside and outside Bhutan, may qualify for exemption from the programme. Pregnant women and 18-year-old mothers are also eligible for exemption. Applications for exemption are to be made on the NS portal, to be reviewed by the Gyalsung office.

The Gyalsung Council has announced a one-time measure to allow persons wishing to undertake full-time education (continue full-time study) to apply for deferment to attend college. No such exemptions will be granted from 2025.

## **Towards Nation-building**

The objectives of the Gyalsung programme include giving youth the capabilities needed to “succeed academically and professionally” while making them more aware of the challenges Bhutan faces as a small country in a rapidly changing global environment.

On a practical level, the focus on volunteerism and service to the country and people will prepare the younger generation to take on “responsibilities of understanding national priorities like promoting unity, peace, security, and sovereignty of Bhutan”. Gyalsups are also expected to derive values such as respect for each other, discipline, learning to appreciate diversity in background and religion, and to be prompt and responsive to the needs of the nation.

In a world beset with ecological imbalances and ensuing conflict, and major social, political, and economic transformation, these are necessary objectives for a more engaged and committed Bhutanese generation.

## **What Gyalsung Means**

A news release from the Gyalsung programme described it as an important “rite of passage” for Bhutanese youth who make up half the population

of Bhutan. One could see it as a path to inspire more active civic life and professional careers for nation building.

Such a national endeavour will have ripple effects across communities because families, schools, employers, members of the armed forces and institutions (public, civil society and private) are also required to play their part in making the programme work, thereby triggering and upholding the importance of community and civic engagement.

After a year-long training, Gyalsups can be called up for voluntary and mandatory services until they reach 45 years of age. Employers, for example, are required to keep the jobs of the Gyalsups and give them the time off to undertake voluntary and mandatory work from the time of completion of the training until they complete their reservist period.

### **Broader Aspects of the Programme**

The full programme will provide career guidance and job application support for cadets who are considering further studies or starting small businesses. The Gyalsung headquarters (HQ) will connect cadets with available opportunities in tertiary education institutes both within Bhutan and abroad, and assist them with their applications during the training period. The HQ will work with the Education and Skills Development Ministry to assist persons wishing to pursue technical and vocational studies to find placements in what it describes as a “seamless transition” from the programme.

Persons applying for government scholarships can receive help in working with the relevant agencies to fulfil their requirements while undergoing training, and on-going campus sensitisation and recruitment processes will assist persons interested in getting into businesses or jobs.

The national service training programme continues with two phases of service, known as Gyalsup, (volunteers), and Gyalzur (reservists). Cadets graduate to become Gyalsups or National Service men and women. They enter a phase of “Gyalsung Duty” until they are 35 years of age. During this period, they can pursue higher education or vocational and specialised trainings, or seek employment. They will also have to report for mandatory or voluntary duty when needed during times of emergencies or natural

disasters, for example, when they may be mobilised for social and relief work.<sup>3</sup>

Upon reaching 35 years of age, they become “Gyalzur Reservists” and may be called to continue providing the same services or be mobilised during national emergencies. At 45 years, reservists may choose to become members of the voluntary corps, the De-suung programme.

## Reactions

Parents and teachers express their excitement about the programme.

“Our children don’t know their own strengths and what jobs there are in the market,” says Jigme Wangmo, a Thimphu high school principal. “They can pass academic examinations but they don’t have the skills nor exposure to be more responsible and mature. They are very laid back; some don’t even know what documents they need when they finish school. The Gyalsung programme will give our youth some direction in life.”

“Inspired by His Majesty’s vision for the future, we can only benefit from this programme,” says a taxi driver whose daughter has enlisted for the first batch. “The training will enable youth to discover their talents and skills and understand what the nation needs.”

Most youths say that they look forward to meeting different people, seeing different places, and getting new skills. Programme activities will build camaraderie through walks on sections of the Trans Bhutan Trail. An added dynamic is the coming together of youth from all sections of society, from diverse social, linguistic, and economic backgrounds.

“It’s going to be a new experience and I’ll learn a lot,” says Anushik from Sarpang who enlisted for the first batch. “I especially look forward to making new connections as well as swimming and other activities.” The 18-year-old believes he will improve his social skills and that young people will learn much needed discipline and become more self-aware. “As a small country, it’s important if we (youth) can be of help.” He learnt about the programme through social media.

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<sup>3</sup> From the Gyalsung website [www.gyalsung.bt](http://www.gyalsung.bt).

A few youths shared concerns about undergoing basic military training. Chophel, who has written in for exemption to go to college, said he was hesitant in signing up as he is not physically fit and is unsure he would be good at military training. However, he feels that the programme will help to build the character and equip them to take on challenges such as employment.

Another 18-year-old, Sonam, says: “I’m not fond of sports nor physical activities and I was initially pretty scared. But it’s good to challenge myself and learn about myself by going to the programme and making new friends.”

“It’s the first time and we’re the first batch, so I’m very excited,” says Dechen Pelmo from Lhuentse. She is, however, worried about the demands of the training: “A mile’s walk tires me out, but I guess I’ll be in better shape physically after the training. By attending and getting skills training, people my age can have more opportunity for jobs.”

### **Creating a Safe and Enabling Environment**

On concerns about the demands of military training, a core working group member explains that differences in abilities will be accommodated. Some cadets may have asthma, for example, or lack stamina in the beginning. This will be taken into consideration and a minimum standard set for differing levels of ability: “We want to motivate them to be the best they can be.”

Gyalsung facilities are built to ensure standards of safety and pastoral care. Many of the Gyalsung activities, facilities, and standards have been tested during the De-suung programme. There are standard operating procedures (SOPs) to maintain safety on the training grounds and residential facilities, cleanliness standards, and even consideration towards the rehydration of trainees in the warmer areas in the south for example.

### **Experience Elsewhere - a Shared Identity**

Many countries have linked national service to community service with good intention. The benefits of volunteerism have been documented through studies undertaken in countries in the West. Reports show a link between volunteerism and the health and well-being of the people who volunteer,

thus benefitting not just those who receive assistance through voluntary support. It also benefits the volunteers by expanding their experience and connection with their community, as studies elsewhere have shown.

Anecdotal evidence from Bhutan shows the camaraderie and the community spirit of De-Suups after training and volunteering. These outcomes are likely to be even stronger in a year-long Gyalsung programme that continues with voluntary service till 45 years of age. This longer term trajectory will give Gyalsups and Gyalzurs the space and time to strengthen the bonds of connection. Equally important is the experience citizens will gain in working with local communities, the government and the state in times of national need that could deepen their concern and commitment to the country.

National service programmes that focus on skills and volunteerism are known to be useful beyond physical and mental training and builds social connections. The programme gives exposure to training opportunities, and provides youths from diverse backgrounds a place where they can develop civic consciousness, thus contributing to and strengthening Bhutan's future.

The Gyalsung may contribute to building a sense of national identity that can be affirmed through research. A longitudinal study on the experience would provide useful information to understand how the experience enables Bhutanese youth to successfully transition from the national service programme onto education, employment, expanded social relationships and a stronger sense of citizenship.

### **A Vital Institution**

The Gyalsung programme is developing a tradition of building and passing on people's civic responsibility for nation-building from one generation to the next. This is a vital key to shaping active citizens and building a more resilient society and sovereign nation.

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