

Generations in Transition: Roles of Retired Senior Public Servants

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Abstract

Wedged between two populous countries — China on the north and India on the south — the Kingdom of Bhutan, as a sovereign and independent country, has been enjoying peace and prosperity ever since the establishment of hereditary Monarchy in December 1907.

The Bhutanese use a metaphor to describe tranquility, stability and prosperity: *Gang-pa-nang-gyi-chhu-thung, trin-pa-nang-gyi-nyim-so* (drinking water from within the mountain and basking in the sun amidst clouds). However, the world around us is not peaceful.

The world is in peril, triggered by geopolitical wars and conflicts, climate change crisis, economic and trade wars between and amongst large economies, and formation of so-called economic blocks residualise the roles and functions of the United Nations. History is repeating the “might is right” phenomenon at the cost of human values and rights.

Is this validating the prophesy of Guru Padma Sambhawa – *dues-ngen-nyigma* (tough times or the age of darkness or dregs or degeneration)? According to accomplished Buddhist scholar and practitioner, Lopon Thekchok Rinpoche, “we are at the worst stage of the dark age (*dues-ngen-nyigma-thama*).”

The impact of the world described above is increasingly visible on our small but serene country and its peace-loving people. Can we avert such socio-economic and political problems facing the world?

I believe we can. We have numerous advantages – Dharma Kings, the small country and population, Bhutanese being religious by nature, the existence of religious bodies, and a rich cultural heritage that withstands the winds

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of changes brought about by technological advancement, including AI (artificial intelligence).

In fact, His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo has initiated the development of the unique Gelegphu Mindfulness City (GMC) to incorporate both aspects of spiritual and economic development in line with the development philosophy of Gross National Gross Happiness (GNH) declared by the fourth King.

The peace Bhutan enjoys is attributed to four factors:

- Historic Buddha visited ri-drag-chen-jong (Bhutan) before his departure for Maha Parinirvana, and prophesied that his dharma would flourish from this land (Lopon Thekchog Rinpoche²).
- During the eighth century, Guru Padma Sambhava visited twice and blessed the country.
- In the seventeenth century, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, a Buddhist scholar, saint and statesman believed to be a reincarnation of Avalokitesvara, spread the Buddha dharma, created the nationhood and introduced the dual system of governance.
- Ever since the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907, Bhutan has been enjoying unprecedented peace and prosperity.

Against this backdrop, I write this article to describe the roles of retired public servants, from my own experience and perspective.

Introduction

It is time for our elected governments, public servants (both in-service and retired), business people, and the entire population to unite and work together as members of one family, as declared by our King. There is a need to surmount the hesitance and reluctance, both on the part of retired public servants and in-service public servants, to tap the rich repertoire of wisdom of retired senior public servants.

2 His Eminence Kuenzang Thekchog Yeshe Dorji (popularly known as Lopon Thekchog Rinpoche), believed to be the 17th Yangsi of Muthri Tsenpo (son of King Thrisong Detsen), 2024 (personal communication), Kanjur-Duelwa-Kha-Pa, Paro, Bhutan.

Further, like in any other country, Bhutan is facing the challenge of falling fertility – “baby boom to baby bust”. The government and corporations could explore the recruitment of senior citizens on a part-time or volunteer basis.

Nyikem Gongzhu Tshogpa (NGT) or Association of Retired Red Scarf Officers, was established in 2011 under the Royal command of His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo. His Majesty had commanded the establishment of the Royal Society for Senior Citizens (RSSC) in the same year.

These entities, of which I am a member, cannot perform their functions as envisioned in the articles of associations and as aspired to by our King, due to a reluctance and hesitation shown by public servants, including corporations, schools and colleges, to tap the rich knowledge and experiences of senior citizens.

In Bhutan, the Buddha dharma has been the key instrument for the promotion of peace and prosperity because our cultural values, the unifying force or soul of the country, are based on Buddhist teachings and practice. *Tha-dam-tshig* (samaya, loyalty, vow, integrity, trust), *ley-ju-dre* (law of karma), loving kindness and compassion, are the values that Buddhists and the Bhutanese strive to uphold.

Inculcation of such values down the centuries has been one of the main two goals of education, termed as “leading a life” (character formation). The other purpose of education is commonly known as “living a life” (skills development, including Artificial Intelligence).

My take here is that the twofold purpose of education – leading a life and living life, or character formation and skills development — forms the two sides of a coin. Unfortunately, these days the focus is largely on “living a life”, in the pretext of relevance of education to the labour market, treating educational institutions like factories manufacturing nuts and bolts.

Thus, the roles of society, teachers, parents and, more importantly, religious bodies, have become imperative in this age of degeneration, and to the purpose of education, “leading a life” through debates and discourses on the core universal or Buddhist values.

There is a slow but steady erosion of such cultural and spiritual values, which are an indisputable unifying phenomenon in Bhutan. They form the fortified pillar on which sits the soul and sovereignty of our country.

Thus, the onus mainly falls on the religious personalities, *choedey*, *gomdey* in general and Dratshang Lhentshog in particular, to explore means and ways by which the traditions and cultural aspects that unite the people in a country are preserved and promoted. Spiritual personalities and *choedeys* and *gomdeys* that indulge in commercialisation of dharma must be mindful of their roles as guardians of morality and honesty, and be role models in this dark age.

Senior citizens could play an important role in the promotion of our values, like *tha-dam-tshig* and *ley-ju-dre* which, I believe, serve as a string that goes through the beads of different generations in transition. People born in the 1950s and 1960s are known as baby boomers, because the decades of 1930s and 1940s saw the world wars I and II that engaged the productive men.

I belong to the generation of baby boomers. My generation in Bhutan may be considered the bridge between the older and younger generations, in terms of socio-economic and political development.

Roles of Retired Public Servants

What I describe here is my personal experience and perspective as a retired public servant. After serving the *tsawa-sum* as a public servant for 48 years, I retired at the age of 68. By then, my family had constructed a small two-storey house at the place called Lubding, close to Semtokha Dzong, Thimphu.

When I resigned from civil service in 2007 to join politics, my family had endured living in a private rented house in Motithang, after living in spacious government quarters for many years. Choesham (altar), sofa seats and personal effects were crammed into two rooms, making it difficult for family members to move around. A bitter lesson for a senior civil servant! Therefore, we ventured to construct the present house in 2013, on a plot which I bought in the year 2000.

Although I was interested in the study of Buddhist philosophical texts and treatises, and meditational practice, my responsibilities as a public servant constrained me from pursuing spiritual life.

Since retirement, I have embarked upon the pursuit of my spiritual practice, including the preliminary practice (*ngyendro*), which I completed in 2023. I also started writing books about education and leadership. I made use of data and information collected for my thesis for a Ph.D, which I had not been able to continue due to the change in my roles and responsibilities in the 1990s. At that time, our country was going through difficult times posed by anti-national problems and Indian militant insurgents camped in Bhutan's forests.

I commit to pursue these interests so long as my body and mind allow me to do so. I consider this part of work as my continuous service to *tsa-wa-sum*.

When I retired from active public service, I resigned from the political party Druk Phuensum Tshogpa and any political activity, to enable me to focus on my interest in dharma practice and writing. A board member of the Royal Society for Senior Citizens (RSSC) established under the royal command of His Majesty the King, persuaded me to join the Society.

One of the RSSC's major activities was the recent drafting of policy for active ageing of senior citizens, coordinated by the Ministry of Health. Being a member of the Social and Culture Committee of the National Assembly from 2013 to 2018, when I was a Member of Parliament, I was actively involved in the debates on the welfare of senior citizens, the number of which has been increasing by the year. Twelve recommendations were approved as resolutions to be implemented by relevant ministries and agencies.

I was one of four panelists from RSSC and a Youth Organisation to deliberate on generation gaps. According to literature, different generations have their own characteristics and, therefore, it is important to understand and acknowledge different sets of characteristics and things they value.

However, exploration of common ground or tools for bridging gaps between the older and younger generations was necessary. There is convergence

amongst intellectuals, including writers like Yuval Harari and management guru Peter Drucker, that human values are necessary in this age of artificial intelligence. One may be digitally skilled and doing well professionally and economically, but if one lacks qualities of life, the very purpose of life is defeated.

Youths look forward to talks by senior citizens on subjects like core values, providing empirical evidence or a body of hard justifications. This requires speakers to update themselves on the latest information easily accessible from different modes of social media.

In terms of the mismatch between sound policies and implementation on the ground, I once challenged lecturers and students of Gedu College as to whether they had read and analysed economic road maps of each dzongkhag and government policies on industrial and business development. Quite often, road maps were developed on desktops without any field research or seriousness.

I was also Chief Guest at Samtse College of Education on 29th May, 2025, for the celebration of its Foundation Day. Regional heads and CEOs of corporations attended the question and answer session. This is how senior citizens could share their experiences, as envisaged in the articles of RSSC and Nyikem Gongshu Tshogpa or the Association of Retired Red Scarf Officers.

I joined the Nyikem Gongzhu Tshogpa (NGT) in 2018. NGT was established in 2011 under the royal command of His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo. After serving three years as its Executive Committee member, I was elected to the post of chairperson. On January 1, 2026, I assumed the chairmanship of NGT along with Dasho Sangay Khandu (former DHI Chair) as Vice Chairman, Dasho Kuenzang Wangdi (former Chief Election Commissioner) as Secretary, Dasho Ugyen Chhewang (former Auditor General & DHI Chair) as Secretary and four Dashos as regional coordinators.

The functions and responsibilities of NGT ExCom are articulated in the Articles of Association:

- Foster, encourage and promote the spirit of solidarity to help each other in times of need;

- Serve the *tsha-wa-sum* as and when called upon by His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo;
- Assist members to remain meaningfully engaged in peer counselling, medical advice, and religious pursuits;
- Utilise experience and wisdom for the betterment of the Bhutanese people;
- Promote harmony and peaceful co-existence within the families, neighborhoods and community at large;
- Help the nation in preserving and promoting the rich cultural, social and environmental heritage of the country;
- Promote the national development philosophy of Gross National Happiness at various national and international forums in collaboration with relevant agencies and organisations.

When I talk in my individual capacity, my theme is centred around the promotion of our rich cultural heritage. I have written books and articles on issues in public discussion. I participate in TikTok, Facebook and YouTube to express implicitly, if not explicitly, my views on issues of national importance. I am privileged to be interviewed occasionally by BBS reporters and other media.

A Case of How Retirees Can Contribute

I also participate in socially useful work. For example, I was chair of a committee called Lubding Support Service Committee (LSSC), which was initiated in 2017 to support the thromde administration in addressing pressing problems of safe drinking water, maintenance of roads, and planting of trees in the community.

A few of us had to go to Thada forested areas frequently by foot and by vehicles, and found that the contractor had not implemented work according to specifications or drawings and designs, including pipe alignment. No one was accountable, so the thromde had to do the work, securing a budget for construction of intake tanks, burial of pipes, and procurement of new pipes from the sources to the road end at Thada Lhakhang.

We participated in supervising and monitoring construction works along with thromde engineers, and gave our written comments for rectification and improvements. On the completion of work within five months, water supply improved markedly, although some miscreants, along with yaks and cattle, damaged pipes during the summer. Our caretaker and sometimes members of LSSC ExCom, accompany thromde plumbers and engineers for repair work, and provide them with refreshments.

The committee and thromde officials decided to appoint a man from the community as caretaker. We topped up the stipend paid by the thromde — Nu. 8000 ngultrums per month — thus incentivising and encouraging the caretaker to ensure smooth water supply.

Given the climate change that alters timely snowfall on the ridge of Thada mountains, the committee closely worked with the thromde administration to explore the source of drinking water supply for the residents of Lubding. The households there have increased from 30 in 2013 to 75 in 2023, creating an inadequacy of water tapped from the Thada area.

A series of meetings and interactions amongst thromde officials, Chang Gewog administration, the public of Yusipang Phakha and Lubding Support Service Committee were held that resulted in tapping water from the stream of Usipang Phakha. The thromde was able to secure funds for this project in 2023 and completed the project in June 2024 at the cost of 40 million ngultrums. This was the result of concerted efforts of stakeholders concerned.

The residents have amenably consented to collect Nu.3000 per pipeline per annum to pay an allowance to the caretaker, refreshment for volunteers, fuel allowance for caretakers or a volunteer for his movement to water sources.

Time for Spirituality and Family

Many retirees go on pilgrimage (*neykor*) mainly to India, Lhasa and Nepal. In 2023, my wife and I joined a group of pilgrims to Lhasa for three weeks to visit Samye and Chhimphur – constructed by Khen-Lop-Choey sum - Khenchen Bodhisattva, Lopon Pema Jungne and Choey Gyal Thrisung Detsen.

We also visited four important places of pilgrimage in the region pertaining to historical Buddha – *ney-chhen-zhi* namely Lumbini (birthplace), Bodhgaya (place of enlightenment), Varanasi (the first turning the wheel of dharma), and Kushinagar (departure for Maha Parinirvana).

Retirees also get time to reconnect with the people of one's village – visiting parents, relatives, attending annual *tshechu*, *rimdros*, and other social events in the villages.

Since retirement, I have been attending our village three-day *tshechu* and other community important events, travelling from Thimphu to Dungmin. Also, being Secretary General of the Dungmin Phendey Chholing Foundation (DPCF), which was founded in 2019, I have attended major religious activities or *kurim* or *rimdro*.

Summary: Constraints and Challenges

NGT is mandated to share experiences but there are few takers. One Minister said that he would organise discourses or talks by retired Red Scarf officers if there is an order – he did not spell the source of order.

There seems to be some reluctance to tap the rich experiences and wisdom of retired public servants – do they need an order like the Minister suggested, or is there a communication gap between NGT and institutions and agencies?

There is budgetary constraint facing both NGT and RSSC. There is no place or space for retirees to gather and interact.

There is also a lacklustre attitude on the part of senior citizens to be engaged in such activities, as they prefer to lead and live a peaceful life with their own family or intimate friends. Few of them live in places like Australia with their sons and daughters.

Recommendations

- The construction of a Club House would enable the NGT to work towards the fulfilment of the objectives mentioned above.

- While RSSC is registered as a Civil Society organisation under the CSOA, NGT is weighing the pros and cons of being registered as a CSO.
- There is a need for the government to issue executive orders to avail itself of the services of retired Red Scarf officers.
- The government and RCSC may explore the recruitment of senior citizens who are physically and mentally fit, and pay them token allowances or on a voluntary basis without any remuneration benefits.
- Agencies should invite senior citizens, depending upon backgrounds, to seminars, workshops and conferences.

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