

Folk Heritage Museum of Bhutan (Phelchey Toenkhyim)

Dorji Wangchuk (Director, Folk Heritage Museum, Thimphu, Bhutan)

Nestled in the Himalayas between India and China, Bhutan is considered the only independent Mahayana Buddhist country in the world today. The rich and vibrant local customs, habits and traditions, crafts and artistic sensibilities, derived from Buddhist teachings and practices, give Bhutan a distinctive identity of its own. Bhutan has conscientiously safeguarded these rich religious and cultural traditions, both tangible and intangible, as being one of the pillars of realising the developmental philosophy of 'Gross National Happiness.'

The *Phelchey Toenkhyim* (Folk Heritage Museum of Bhutan) founded and established under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, was opened to visitors in July 2001, symbolising yet another endeavor to safeguard and strengthen the intangible cultural heritage and skills of this society. It has dedicated itself to connecting people to the Bhutanese rural past.

Phelchey Toenkhyim attempts to preserve traditional artifacts, skills and culture of Bhutan in efforts to make the daily lives of the Bhutanese people more widely known. These efforts were also made to reinforce the knowledge of their traditional lifestyle and culture before they disappear from everyday life and lose their practical value.

While progress cannot be stopped or everything of the past be protected, examples of all that could be found are preserved, lest such traditions get buried beneath the sands of time. Most importantly, skills that are an intrinsic part of the past are preserved, which may in turn become a necessary part of our future. The museum building which dates back to the mid 19th century, is in itself a testimony of how important traditional skills are, which have stood the test of time. Such buildings are rarely seen in urban areas nowadays.

A visit to the *Phelchey Toenkhyim* is a unique

experience because the activities offered by the museum follows a seasonal dynamic in the same pattern as how the management of a rural household is influenced by seasonal rhythm.

In order to present a more typical Bhutanese rural setting and flavor, paddy, wheat and millet fields, traditional watermill (with mill stones that date back more than 150 years), traditional kitchen gardens with vegetables that were grown and consumed for hundreds of years and the famous traditional hot stone bath all complement the museum building and the exhibitions within.

The exhibits are structured according to the way space is typically used in rural households of Bhutan. The first floor is used as a pen for livestock and houses a collection of items ranging from farming tools to equestrian equipment for riding, travel and transport. Among other purposes, the second floor is used as a family's granary. Grains are stored in containers of various types and sizes. The top floor is where the family

lives and houses religious artifacts as well as cooking ware.

Additionally, certain traditional knowledge and skills of domestic chores are demonstrated, for example: the natural extraction of oil, brewing *ara* (local beverage), pounding rice, roasting rice, et al. Pottery, an endangered profession, is given emphasis as training is passed on to interested youth, generating employment while preserving culture.

The museum also acts as a hub for village artisans to demonstrate their skills in craftsmanship as well as being used as an outlet for their products. Such programs provide opportunities for artisans to use their skills and instill enthusiasm in the minds of younger generations to learn contemporary trades. The museum has a particular appeal for younger generations in that it provides insight into the past while simultaneously demonstrating its relevance to the present and future.



Folk Heritage Museum of Bhutan (Photo by the Folk Heritage Museum, Bhutan)



Museum staffs
(Photo by the Folk Heritage Museum, Bhutan)



Demonstrating rice frying
(Photo by the Folk Heritage Museum, Bhutan)



Agricultural implements preserved in the museum
(Photo by the Folk Heritage Museum, Bhutan)