

A Brief History of Bhutan House in Kalimpong*

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Introduction

The Bhutan House in Kalimpong presently serves as the residence of Her Majesty, the Royal Grand Mother of Bhutan.¹ It is a significant historical structure of considerable political importance, representing the relationship between the British India and Bhutan from the late 17th to the early 20th century, which eventually evolved into the Indo-Bhutan friendship. Bhutan House was the residence of Gongzim Ugyen Dorji, a successful businessman and an accredited representative of the British India government. In the translation relating to the first meeting of Trongsa Penlop Gongsu Ugyen Wangchuck and Ugyen Dorji in Kurjey Lhakhang, Bumthang, the Zhabdung Jigme Chogyal recommended Ugyen Dorji to Mije² Ugyen Wangchuck, then the Trongsa Penlop, and he appointed him as Haa drungpa in 1898, and made him as his chief minister (Wangdi 1997: 3).

* This paper was written in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Centre of Bhutan Studies Internship Programme in April 2002.

While growing up, I would come across bits and pieces of conversations about Bhutan House from family and friends alike, but never attached much importance till a family friend, Michael Vinding, shared the advantage of being part of this family history and having the opportunity to record it. I would like to thank him for his guidance. I humbly dedicate my small effort to Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother, who inspired me to work on this project and hope a more elaborate book would come out in the future.

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¹ Kalimpong was a trading centre on the frontiers of Sikkim, Tibet, and Bhutan in the 1800s.

² Mije means the Lord.

Limited literature has been found on Bhutan House and a few books do refer to the house as the residence of the Dorji family. The British gifted the estate in Kalimpong (comprising 18 acres of land) to Ugyen Dorji in return for his services. Ugyen Dorji was born in 1855 to Pala Gyaltzen and a lady from Tsendong in the Paro Valley (Aris 1994: 84). Ugyen Wangchuk became fond of Ugyen Dorji who was his second cousin and perhaps it was because of a familial relationship (second cousins) that he entrusted him with many trades and commissions. During this period, Ugyen Dorji facilitated the negotiations between Ugyen Wangchuck and the British India.

In 1910, Ugyen Dorji received the title of 'Raja' from the British Viceroy as a personal distinction for the valuable service he had offered during the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa in 1903-1904 (Sinha: 2001: 28). At the same time, he was appointed 'The King's Chamberlain', taking the title of Gongzim,³ (Chamberlain to the Ruler), a hereditary position (Aris 1994: 102-103) which was equivalent to a senior minister.

In 1916, Gongzim Ugyen Dorji died in Kalimpong and his only son, Sonam Tobgye Dorji, took over his father's hereditary post as Gongzim and continued his required duties to the king. Due to his experience in assisting his father on many of his expeditions, the British also gave Sonam Tobgye the role of Bhutan Agent and inherited the British-India's 'Raja' title (Aris 1994:106).

In 1918, Sonam Tobgye Dorji married Rani Chuni Wangmo, the sister of the king of Sikkim. They have five children: his eldest son Jigme Palden who became Prime Minister of Bhutan; the second eldest, a daughter Tashi, who helped in the affairs of the Bhutan House; Kesang Choden, who

³ A title equivalent to a senior minister.

married the third King of Bhutan; Ugyen, a reincarnation of a high priest in Tibet; and Lhendup. His children were all born and brought up in Bhutan House and educated in the elite schools set up by the British within Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

The role the house played in its social and political environment correlates with the members involved in Bhutan House. This includes the workers, students, guests and family members who contributed to the symbolic structure that holds all sorts of meaning and history in each of their lives.

Different Names for Bhutan House

Bhutan House was bestowed several different names by the people who were associated with it. A letter written to Bhutan House His Holiness Thubten Gyatso (1876-1933) the 13th Dalai Lama states that he was invited to stay in Mi rgyur mngon par dg'a ba'i pho brang (The Place of Unchanging Supreme Joy) after spending three months in the newly-built house in 1912 as a guest of Ugyen Dorji and his sister Ayi⁴ Thubten Wangmo (Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Ashi Kezang Choden 2002:1). The locals in Kalimpong called it "Bhutan Durbar", meaning Bhutan Palace. However, in the 1960s the name was changed to "Bhutan House" to be politically correct for the environment and situation of that time. During the research, I discovered that there was a previous Bhutan House called 'Koti Homa', meaning "lower house" in Nepalese. The name was referred to as the "lower house", because it was located below the Gyongsar Gompa⁵ in Kalimpong where Ugyen Dorji's wife lived. It is believed that Ugyen Dorji's favourite white horse that saved his life on one

⁴ Ayi, lit., 'mother', is a honorific term for a lady.

⁵ Gyongsar Gompa (Jangsay Gompa) the oldest Bhutanese monastery in Kalimpong founded in 1692 (1680) by Shabdung Jigme Dakpa.

of his excursions was buried in the Koti Homa compound. His Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama's first stay with the family was in Koti Homa during his visit to Kalimpong. Today people referred to the lower house as the "Old Bhutan House" in English. When talking about the Bhutan House or residence of Ugyen Dorji, people refer to the present Bhutan House.

Bhutan House and Its Functions

Gongzim Ugyen Dorji settled in Kalimpong, then the emerging trading mart in the British territory. His trading in India and Tibet during the end of the nineteenth century allowed him to make important connections with the British India. The British viceroy appointed Ugyen Dorji as Bhutan Agent and a year later, in 1898, he acted "as a go-between" with the Tibetans and the British as a part of their continuing efforts to secure trade concessions (Aris 1994: 86). The duties of Bhutan House were connected with the foreign relations between British and Bhutan. It was then, that Ugyen Dorji began his small projects to help the development of the country. One of his most successful projects and closest to his heart was the introduction of education in Bhutan. Bhutan House looked after the first batch of boys to be educated in Kalimpong. Bhutan House was probably the "best known address in town" as the house entertained many guests from all over because of its ideal location and due to the important political and social roles its members played in the community (Dr Wangyal).

Trading Centre

Kalimpong was a booming trade centre on the frontiers of Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan, before China took over Tibet. Gongzim Ugyen Dorji's business agendas were settled in the Kalimpong area, where his personal business of horse-trading was established. The old Bhutan House (Lower Koti) had beautiful stables called the "Raja Koti Stables". He supplied a

lot of animals to the British Army. The “mule trains” from Tibet to Kalimpong would pass by the road in front of Bhutan House (Dasho Paljor Dorji). It was a big business those days as mules and horses were the chief mode of transport.

Bhutan House held a significant role for the community in Kalimpong as “people in the community came daily from all over the district to call on my grandfather, [Sonam Tobgye], for justice, problems and business” (Paljor Dorji). Dr Wangyal’s article, titled “Raja Sonam Tobgay Dorji” relates how the majority of Kalimpong residents petitioned Sonam Tobgay Dorji to represent them in the elections leading to the Provincial Assembly of Bengal, which he politely declined (the “honour bestowed”) because of his nationality as a Bhutanese.

Sonam Tobgye Dorji, apart from being a businessman, was an active philanthropist. Evidence of his contributions are marked in Kalimpong, such as the popular “hatt bazaar” named after him and this owes much of its functioning existence to the Raja Sab. The Mela⁶ Ground, once a rugged, undersized field where hockey and football games took place, was levelled and increased in size by the collective efforts of Sonam Tobgye and Rai Saheb Bhimbahadur Pradhan. Sonam Tobgye was known to be an avid fan of football, always trying to promote sports and constantly bringing in outside teams, as well as sponsoring local teams to different areas in North Bengal, exposing them to new techniques and strategies of the game.

Bhutan House Administration

Due to the increasing number in southern Bhutan of Nepalese immigrants, the responsibility was given to the Bhutan House to monitor the situation in the south. The

⁶ Mela means fair in Hindi.

headquarters for the Southern Bhutanese administration was based in Bhutan House. All affairs that could not be solved by the “babus”⁷ in Southern Bhutan were referred to Kalimpong, for Sonam Tobgye to solve on behalf of His Majesty the Second King Jigme Wangchuck.

In 1935, during His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck’s trip to India, it was believed that Sonam Tobgye began a “systematic review of social conditions, administrative practices and judicial proceedings,” which brought about new reform in the Kingdom (Aris 1994: 135). Taxes were paid in various forms such as firewood, hay, rice, and woven cloth, depending on the district of which the Bhutan House collected for the Second King of Bhutan. This form of taxation soon ceased.

External Affairs

Bhutan House was very much involved with the external affairs of the country because of the relations initiated between the British Raj and Bhutan through Ugyen Dorji and His Majesty the First Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck. His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck recognised the advantages of befriending the British in the terms of foreign policy and in turn acted as a mediator for the Tibetans and the British during Younghusband’s affairs in 1904 (Williamson 1986:17).

“The Druk Gyalpo, Sir Ugyen Wangchuck left the entire administration of the western Bhutan and Indo-Bhutanese relations in the able hands of his trusted ally, Ugyen Dorji” (Sinha 2001: 28). The “liaison” between the two governments were maintained through the political officer of Sikkim and Ugyen Dorji and his son Sonam Tobgye residing in Kalimpong. Because of these factors Bhutan and British India’s relations flourished in the late 1800s and even

⁷ All students who returned from studies in Kalimpong to their respective villages were jovially referred to as Babus as stated by Achu of Haa (aged 87).

developed stronger ties through the years. The fluency of the Dorjis in the English language was most advantageous for them to maintain relations with their neighbours (Rustomji 1987: 19). All communication and external political affairs were passed through the Bhutan House including the coordination of all visits made to Bhutan as well as those of Bhutanese dignitaries visiting India.

It was Sonam Tobgye who arranged the only trip that His Majesty the Second King ever made to India. In 1934, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck made a two-month visit to Calcutta. Sonam Tobgye prepared the accommodations for the king by renting a large property at 42, Chowringhee Road. In preparation for the visit, Rani Chuni and Margaret (political officer's wife) went down to Calcutta to buy furniture and fittings for the unfurnished house and Sonam Tobgye busied himself, building bungalows for the rest of the entourage of about 200 people accompanying the royal family (Williamson 1987: 175).

Sonam Tobgye's contacts in India became valuable during this time of transition in 1947, as the British were leaving India. The rulers of the princely states were advised to join their successor states of India and Pakistan. Wishing to avoid the fatality of becoming an Indian state, pressure on Bhutan escalated, as the small kingdom tried to maintain independence. In 1949, a treaty was signed at Darjeeling between the king of Bhutan and the Governor-General of India, securing a "quasi-international status" with India (Sinha 2001:78).

Social Roles

Although the Dorji family was immersed in a capitalistic environment where the family was involved in trade and investment, the men served as government's agents first for the British and then for its foreign relations with India. Bhutan House also held social importance in Kalimpong.

Therefore, women members of the family not only held familial roles but had to function to reinforce the status of the family and the positions of their husbands. They did this by attending and hosting social functions such as tea parties, picnics and dinners. One of the members of the family recalls having so many friends, family and important dignitaries passing through Kalimpong, that “every second day was a party”. Surprisingly, many of the Everest expeditions were flagged off from the Bhutan House premises organised by Dr Graham and Sonam Tobgye (Dr Wangyal).

After Ugyen Dorji’s death in 1916, Sonam Tobgye continued his post in Kalimpong and helped the king maintain his connections with the British by organizing a “steady flow of British guests (Aris 1994: 130). Sir Charles Bell⁸ mentions Bhutan House briefly in his book, *Portrait of a Dalai Lama*, mentioning his visit there with his wife to see off the 13th Dalai Lama, when he was leaving Kalimpong for Tibet. He writes the following:

My wife and I set out for the Bhutan Residency, which, the Agent for the government of Bhutan (Kazi Ugyen), himself a devout Buddhist, had placed at the Dalai’s disposal during these few months’ stay in Kalimpong [June, 1912] (Bell 1998:131).

Family members from the Sikkim Royal family would visit “for weekends”, as well as the children who studied in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling area. “We had functions galore!” states one of the members of the family who remembers some of the most memorable celebrations recorded in Kalimpong. The biggest one was when the crown prince of Bhutan was born. The wedding of Rani Chuni Dorji and Sonam Tobgye was a grand affair for the Bhutan House as the only son of Ugyen Dorji was getting married to the princess of Sikkim. The marriage of Jigme Palden the eldest son of Sonam Tobgye to a Tibetan aristocrat Tsering Yangzom (Tess-la) was also a

⁸ Political Officer of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet.

celebration to remember. Among all the events, the most happening was the annual Losar celebrations.

Celebrations

Losar⁹ was one of the biggest family celebrations for Bhutan House. The Royal Grandmother continues to spend her Losar in Bhutan House. Ashi Tashi remembers how her mother worked hard in preparation for the event as she organized the food and the arrangements and invitations. During this time, the people of the Darjeeling district would come and pay their respects to Sonam Tobgye and Rani Dorji.

The accounts of this event from the Royal Grandmother and Ashi Tashi reflect the diverse culture the family was exposed to. The Royal Grandmother recollects her fond memories of sharing her Losar experience at home: “In Bhutan House, in Kalimpong my parents would give grand Losar parties with lavish Chinese banquets, served in beautiful silverware. There were fantastic Chinese lawn dances¹⁰ to celebrate the New Year and sometimes Ashi Lhamo dances (Tibetan dances)” including spectacular fireworks, it was an occasion to remember. The whole of Kalimpong would come to watch the Bhutan House celebrations, especially all the classic dances that told tales of old legends.

Bhutan House Lhaxhang¹¹ held sacred annual pujas and Losar prayers for the flourishing of Buddhism. The official Nechung oracle¹² was held in Bhutan House, Lhaxhang during the stay of the 14th Dalai Lama. Many precious relics and gifts from both the 13th and 14th Dalai Lama still remain in Bhutan House. Rani Chuni, also known as “Anyola”, within

⁹ The celebration of the lunar calendar New Year.

¹⁰ The traditional Chinese mask and dragon dance.

¹¹ The alter room where religious prayers and pujas are preformed

¹² The official oracle of the Tibetan government.

the Bhutan House walls, was very religious and many of these sacred relics were placed in various temples around Bhutan.

Before his Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama left Bhutan House for Tibet he gifted his large, exquisite, gilded carved wooden Choeshom¹³ filled with the most precious and sacred status to Ugyen Dorji and his sister Ayi Thubten Wangmo. “He prayed deeply over each statue before placing them on the alter himself” (Her Majesty Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck, 2001:1).

For all its social and political roles, Bhutan House would always serve as the residence of the Dorji family. The left wing of Bhutan House was the office of Sonam Tobgye and his staff. The family and guests used the rest of the house.

Education

Ugyen Dorji had two very close friends, Dr Graham and Dr Sutherland, educationists and founders of the well-known Dr Graham’s Homes School in Kalimpong. Dr Graham and Dr Sutherland gave a lot of helpful advice on the education of our Bhutanese boys and so Ugyen Dorji even took them to meet with His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck in Bumthang.

In 1914, supported by His Majesty Ugyen Wanchuck, Ugyen Dorji took forty-six boys from Bhutan and admitted them in a Scottish mission school in Kalimpong called Dr Graham’s School.¹⁴ Ugyen Dorji supported most of them privately from his own personal resources. In the same year, he started a school in Haa. In 1915 a school was founded in the king’s palace in Bumthang.

¹³ Buddhist altar.

¹⁴ The majority of schools in India were set up by the British missionaries.

During Sonam Tobgye's time, the soldiers and the school children lived in the red L-shaped building within Bhutan House compound. The investment in education of these Bhutanese students brought about "teachers, sub-assistant surgeons, trainers, forest rangers, mining engineers, and vets" (Aris 1994: 104). The annual report of F.M. Bailey (1921-22), the former political officer of Sikkim, records the Maharaja's request to the Viceroy of India for financial assistance in training Bhutanese boys. In 1923, Rs 49,629 was granted for the education of the Bhutanese children (Sinha 2001:192). In the effort to inculcate the values of education in political leaders and local people, King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (the third king of Bhutan) moved on to introduce English medium schools in Bhutan. Bhutan House was a part of the education department for a short period of time between 1956-1957 due to its efforts to promote educational development in 1955 when the government of India decided to help educate 30 students from Bhutan in English medium schools in India.

The Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji, following His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck's vision concentrated on the development of education in Bhutan. In 1962 during one of his visits to Darjeeling, the Prime Minister met Father Mackey, a Jesuit Brother in St Joseph's School, who had been ordered to leave India and so he brought him to Bhutan to help establish the Kanglung School in Trashigang. Father Mackey became a significant "pillar" of the development of education in Bhutan (Sinha 2001: 193). The Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji also brought the Don Bosco Fathers to establish technical education in Bhutan.

Who was responsible for the Household?

Within the household of Ugyen Dorji, a key figure of Bhutan House was Ayi Thubten Wangmo, sister of Ugyen Dorji, who looked after the household affairs of Bhutan House. "She was a very powerful member of the family in Bhutan House" and

ran the household like both the father and mother of the family and “before she died she handed over the entire keys of the house and everything with it to Rani Chuni Dorji”, passing responsibility to the next of kin. Rani Chuni had come as a bride, marrying into the family in 1918. Marriage into the household and the inheritance of keys by Rani Chuni gave her the responsibility to become the new household figure of Bhutan House.

Rani Chuni took charge of Bhutan house till her death in 1994, passing the keys on to her daughter Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck, which was most appropriate, as the late Prime Minister and his wife Tsering Yangzom (Tess-la) had moved into another house in Kalimpong called Tashiding.

Ashi Tashi, the eldest daughter, on the other hand took on the official responsibilities in her father’s office as his personal assistant and became involved in the political affairs of Bhutan, rather than taking on the household responsibilities. She became a custodian of knowledge for the affairs of the Bhutan House. Her participation in the office was due to her educational background that was somewhat more advanced than most of the educated workers in Bhutan.

Rani Chuni was most concerned, as a very religious person, of keeping the Lhakhang where the 13th Dalai Lama’s throne was placed. Therefore, she felt that the only person who could look after the Lhakhang was Ashi Kesang Choden, who most probably had the finances and background to support the house. It was a unanimous decision by all members of the family that the house would be passed down to Ashi Kesang Choden who is the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan.

Bhutan House Today

The inviting yellow gate with a well manicured driveway leads to the front of the Victorian architectural structure, Bhutan House. The property is on a large area of land in Kalimpong,

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with various kinds of subtropical trees, plants and indigenous Himalayan flowers occupy the property. Ayi Thubten Wangmo's ashes are kept in a small stupa enamoured by a pink rose bush at her cremation site.

Tucked away between the clusters of deep pink azalea bushes on the front lawn, stands a white chorten commemorating the late Rani Chuni.

At the doorstep, one is greeted by two adjoining wooden staircases made of dark wood leading to the first floor. On the left from the entrance is the sitting room where guests are usually entertained. The room has a bay window and seats furnished with chase *pangkhep*¹⁵ upholstery. On the walls hang old pictures of family, close friends and beautiful painted *thangkas*.¹⁶ An enclosed glass cabinet carries various porcelain objects d'art collected and gifted to the family. Family pictures were always taken in the other corner of the room with a seating area. Adjoining the main sitting room is the dinning room. Dasho Paljor Dorji, the eldest son of the late Jigme Palden Dorji, recalls that as a child, it was mandatory to eat every meal with the family in this dinning room. A picture of Ugyen Dorji and Sonam Tobgye hangs prominently above the dinning room window.

The upstairs rooms are the bedrooms and the family altar room in which the throne of the 13th Dalai Lama rests, along with a golden statue of him. Other precious relics of his are contained in this room with a beautiful *choesham* (the only other like it remains in the Dalai Lama's room in the Potala in Lhasa). Gifts of statues and other precious items from His Majesty the First King Ugyen Wangchuck remains in this room. But the most elaborate and fascinating room of all is the room of the late Rani Chuni, wife of Sonam Tobgye and

¹⁵ Old Bhutanese woven material.

¹⁶ Buddhist religious paintings.

sister of the late Chogyal of Sikkim. It contains a choesham from Tibet gifted by the 13th Dalai Lama. The room holds many pictures and various books and is furnished in traditional Bhutanese style, using beautiful carved *chodems*¹⁷ and woven material to decorate the room. The Bhutan House is a gold mine of artefacts that hold unique stories.

Conclusion

Bhutan House was a residence of the Dorjis, a quasi-liaison office for Bhutan's external relations, and the headquarters for the southern Bhutan administration. The house attracted many different people for various reasons ranging from students, family, friends, to political officers and rulers in the region and played many different roles through the years.

The residence belonged to Ugyen Dorji, and was passed down to Sonam Tobgye and Rani Chuni Wangmo and was finally bequeathed to Her Majesty Ashi Kesang Choden (The Royal Grandmother of Bhutan). There does not seem to be a distinct pattern or form of a relationship of passing down of the estate from one generation to another, but there has been a change of roles of Bhutan House, which has been determined by change in the political structure of the area.

The British moved out of India after independence in 1947. The political scenario of Bhutan was changing and the building of roads contributed to the shifting of the capital to its present location, Thimphu. The headquarters for external affairs were moved to Calcutta (now Kolkata) and by 1964 His Majesty King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck took over the administration of southern Bhutan, moving the office to Phuentsoling, which was an upcoming border town at the time.

¹⁷ Bhutanese/ Tibetan style tables.

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After the death of Rani Chuni Dorji in 1994, people stopped living there full time. Her Majesty, the Royal Grandmother Ashi Kesang Choden and other members of the family make annual visits here for *losar* and other significant occasions. Today, the house stands as the residential house of the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan.

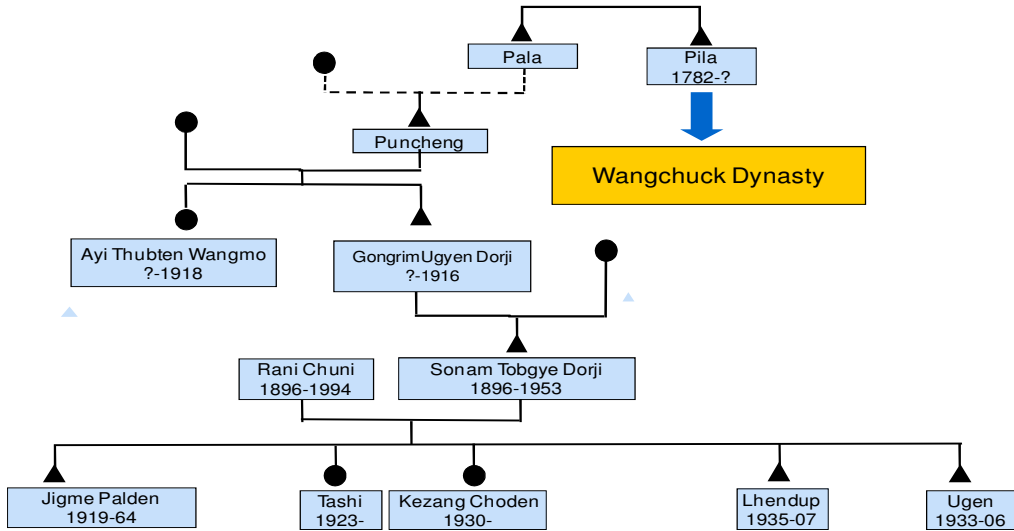
The Bhutan House is imbued with warmth and great beauty and serenity of the memories of the people who lived there. The lhakang is filled with the love and blessing bestowed by His Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama and our His Holiness Late Dilgo Kheyntse Rimpoche who came every year. My son, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck has advised that Bhutan House should be cherished in prosperity as a memorial to the Dorji Family (Ugyen Dorji, Ayi Thubten Wangmo, Sonam Tobgye and Rani Chuni). (Royal Grandmother, Ashi Keszang Choden Wangchuck, 2002).

My paper serves as a documentation to celebrate the efforts of Bhutan House and the people who worked and lived there, allowing their contributions to be remembered and recorded. Bhutan House was the place where support of education was born and where Bhutan was recognized as an independent nation with strong friendships being built with the British and independent India. Through its many phases, we must realize that the efforts of Bhutan House would have never have happened without the support of our benevolent kings and the people of Bhutan, His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck; His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck; His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck; and His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. It is through the collaboration and vision of our leaders that our place as a nation has been secured. The house represents a symbol of development and vision of our forefathers, and I hope that it is through the same efforts and spirit that we may be able to grow to meet our goal of Gross National Happiness.

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The Pala Lineage



Photographs



Photo 01: Gongzim Ugyen Dorji; Courtesy of Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck

Vulnerable Medicinal Plants and the Risk Factors



Photo 02: Gongzim Sonam Tobgye Dorji.



Photo 03: The 13th Dalai Lama. Courtesy of Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck.



Photo 04: The 13th Dalai Lama's throne in Bhutan House



Photo 05: The Statue of the 13th Dalai Lama in Bhutan House



Photo 06: The front view of Bhutan House



Photo 07: Aji Wangmo's cremation site.



Photo 08: Staircase.



Figure 09: Sitting room.



Figure 10: Sitting room



Figure 11: Porcelain cups in glass



Figure 12: Inside the altar room