Lars Eklund report from Samtse College of Education in Bhutan

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During the period 5-12 May 2017, the NSAN editor Lars Eklund visited Bhutan on invitation from the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) and more specifically by its College of Education in Samtse (SCE). The planning for the visit originated in Lars meeting Swedish musicologist Johan Westman – with a degree from University of Bergen, Norway, in Kolkata in January 2017. Johan works since 2016 at SCE on contract as music teacher, being most appreciated by the management headed by the President (Rector) Dr. Dorji Thinley.

Samtse College of Education is one of eight Bhutanese colleges at different locations in the country, under the umbrella of RUB. It was established already in 1968 as the Teachers Training Institute, became part of RUB in 2003 and received its current name in 2005. It still focuses on teachers training, offering Bachelors and postgraduate diploma courses in Education, but also a Masters programme in Contemplative Counselling Psychology. Currently SCE plans for Masters programmes also in Science and Mathematics, and hopefully a PhD programme will be introduced before 2020.

Six research centres at SCE



SCE hosts seven centres, the Centre for Educational Innovation and Professional Practice (CEIPP); the Centre for Contemplative Counselling Education and Research (CCCER); the Centre for Innovation in Mathematics and IT Education (CIMITE); the Centre for Language Education and Research (CLER); the Centre for Innovation in Science Education and Research (CISER); the Centre for Social Science and Humanities Education and Research (CSSHER); and finally the Lu-Rig Centre for Music Education and Research - which is Johan Westman's work place.

Currently SCE has external linkages with a number of European, American and Australian universities, including TERI University in Delhi and Aalborg University in Denmark, but till now no Swedish universities.

Lars was invited to hold a seminar on Swedish research collaboration with South Asia, naturally with a special focus on Bhutan. The idea was to get an idea of which common research fields exist and with Lars expertise find out possible collaboration partners and institutions.

Arriving by flight from Delhi to Bagdogra airport near Siliguri in northern part of the Indian state of West Bengal, Lars was picked up by Johan Westman and Norbu Tshering, a student of his (*on photo*) in the late afternoon of Friday 5 May, and then travelled by car four hours, crossing the Teesta River and arriving at the Bhutanese border on the other side of is Samtse. A small picturesque town most well-known for being the home of Bhutan's fruit juice and marmelade industry, besides hosting the SCE Campus.



This was Lars' second visit to the extraordinarily beautiful Himalayan monarchy of Bhutan, but first time to Samtse. In 2005, Lars along with Professor Staffan Lindberg visited Thimphu and Paro on invitation from the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) as part of a contact journey to the northeastern part of South Asia for the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET). Read their detailed reports from that visit to Bhutan.

Possible research collaboration

After a quick installation at the excellent well-maintained SCE guest house, a welcome ceremony was prepared, the President Dorji Thinley and some of the faculty members had waited patiently for us even though our arrival was delayed. The President said that they looked forward that my visit should result in creating more Nordic connections besides the very fruitful collaboration already existing with Aalborg University.



Lars with SCE President Dorji Thinley



The following morning was time for my presentation. After being introduced by the Dean of Research Dr. Sonam Rinchen (*photo*), I gave an overview of important research fields common to Sweden and Bhutan, presented information about Nordic PhD theses and Swedish research projects related to Bhutan – mostly within natural and agricultural sciences, gave concrete suggestions regarding specific Swedish university institutions in the fields of social science and humanities that might be of interest for SCE, and finally listed all the Erasmus Mundus Asia Regional projects from 2008 till 2015 that have included Royal University of Bhutan. Among the approximately 10 such projects, one consortium was actually coordinated by Aalborg University, Denmark, and another by Mälardalen University in Västerås, Sweden. Other projects have included Uppsala University, Sweden, and Turku University, Finland as consortium members.

Appreciated presentation



The seminar was attended by approximately 15 professors and 40 students. The latter were mostly teachers training students having music classes with Johan, and as a surprise happening before Lars started his presentation, the students sang a Swedish song *"Vem kan segla förutan vind"* in Swedish language, accompanied by Johan and other students on violins and guitars.



The presentation was much appreciated and was followed by a Q&A session where the professors commented what they found to be interesting, but left concrete questions regarding proposed research projects to the number of meetings with the various centres that Johan had prepared for during Saturday afternoon plus in the following week on Monday and Tuesday, before Lars and Johan were supposed to travel to the capital Thimphu on Wednesday.



Swedish interest for Mathematics project



In the evening, a personal meeting was held with Johan and Dr. Purna Subba (*photo to the left*), professor in Mathematics at SCE. Purna had an interesting proposal for a project within the field of ethno-mathematics to present for Lars, a project that may also include researchers from universities in Thailand and Malaysia, and hopefully also a Swedish educational partner institution. Lars immediately suggested a suitable Swedish Mathematics department, contacted people he knew there and within few days got a positive response from a researcher there, who is herself working on ethno-mathematics, interested to join the project. Planning is already under way. More information will follow.
Dr. Subba also informed that his department is planning to introduce an MA programme from the fall 2017, and they would like to get consultancy from Sweden.

The following day, on Sunday, Dr. Subba organised a tour by car around Samtse, visiting the Sunday vegetabe market, and then up the mountain along a new road that later this year will connect Samtse with Thimphu and Paro in central Bhutan (till now travel from Samtse to Thimphu has to be done by crossing the border and drive on the Indian side to Jaigaon/Phuntsholing for another border crossing to Bhutan - which in turn means the need for double entry visa if one wishes to visit both Samtse and Thimphu).



At a most beautiful viewpoint place along the road, on 1,350 metres height, we stopped for a picnic in the fresh air. Going down again to Samtse town we then visited a farm where biogas from cow dung is used to make the household independent of buying cooking gas. A smart easy solution for a sustainable future.

Monday meetings



First visit of the day was not very surprisingly to one of Johan Westman's classes with bachelors students in Education at the Lu-Rig Centre for Music Education and Research. The students, becoming teachers in Geography and English, sang Bhutanese folk songs accompanied by fellow students on traditional and modern instruments, and taught Lars to sing one Bhutanese Boedra song ("*Re la Rechung ma*").





Later in the week Johan also let his other student groups show their competence in folk dances and instumental music. Amazingly, Johan - a foreigner - knows all the songs and melodies by heart, and add to this the fact that he speaks the official Dzongkha language well, and knows how to make a simple conversation in many of the other 27 Tibeto-Burman and Indo-European languages prevalent in Bhutan! Johan is currently working his second year at Samtse College of Education, and he has done a lot of good work, procuring instruments from various places in Bhutan and abroad, built up a small library, and taught interested students to play the violin according to the Suzuki method.

In the afternoon, a meeting was held at the Art Centre, headed by Tshering Dorji . A couple of students turned up to show their pieces of art wheras Tshering Dorji spoke about the choice made by students either to paint in traditional Bhutanese style as found for example on monastery walls, or in modern western style. Later in the day, Johan proudly showed Lars the well-equipped Sports Centre and also the University Library.



Tuesday meetings

The following day was totally devoted to visiting three Centres, namely the Centre for Social Science and Humanities Education and Research (CSSHER); The Centre for Innovation in Science Education and Research (CISER); and the Centre for Language Education and Research (CLER), and in the evening a farewell party was organised for Lars at the Guest House.



Researchers at CSSHER.

At CSSHER, discussions focused on joint projects in History and Geography. Participants: Head of Centre: Bupen Gurung (Economics); and Dorji S. (History), Ramesh (History), Kuenzang Gyeltshen (Geography), and Tshering Dorji (Art).

During the visit to CISER, the researchers presented their projects, and after that a lively discussion took place on possible international projects. Present: Dr. Nandu Giri (Chemistry), Kesang Choden (Chemistry), Reeta Rai (Chemistry), Bal Bahadur Mongar (Biology), and Ugyen Pem (Physics)



Researchers at CISER.

Finally, a visit was made to the language centre, CLER, where the professors had prepared an interesting powerpoint presentation on the language situation in Bhutan. Participants: Dr. Tashi Gyeltsen (Centre Head); Dorji Letho (Dzongkha); Sonam Gyeltsen (Dzongkha); and Choeda (English).

At each Centre Lars was instrumental in proposing suitable Swedish institutions and departments to contact, or even names of individual researchers working in similar fields. The professors were advised to further communicate via e-mail to Lars, in turn promising to address all suggestions.

Farewell party and off for Thimphu



Several of the faculty turned up for the Farewell dinner at the College Guest House, bringing Bhutanese delicious food for a Potluck dinner. Lars turned up in Bhutanese folk dress, borrowed from Johan.



Next day, Lars and Johan travelled to Thimphu. Border crossings in Samtse, Chamarchi, Jaigaon and Phuntsholing, lunch in Phuntsholing and finally local bus to Thimphu. All in all a travel of 12 hours.

Meeting RUB Vice Chancellor

On Thursday 11 May, Lars and Johan were invited to visit the main administration building of Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in Thimphu, and a meeting with the RUB Vice Chancellor Dasho Nidup Dorji, a charismatic and well-spoken person with a background in the IT industry. With him a fruitful discussion lasted for 45 minutes, focusing on Bhutanese research needs and what Sweden can contribute with. *Photo from the meeting..*

Next day Lars travelled by flight from Paro Airport back to his Indian home in Kolkata.







Lars with Choeda (English), Dr. Tashi Gyeltshen (Centre Head), and Dorji Letho (Dzongkha) at Centre for Language Studies.



Dorji S. (History), and Bupen Gurung (Economy, Centre Head) at the Centre for Social Sciences



Tshering Dorji with two Art students.



Purna Subba, CIMER, Centre Head



Dance lesson with Class B.Ed. 1 Arts B



Demonstration of traditional instruments by Class B. Ed 1 Sci B











The Bhutan visit was made in connection with a reconnaissance tour to Varanasi and Mussoorie for INLANSO, read Lars' report from that tour.

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Lars och Johan till Thimphu. Gränspassager i Samtse, Chamarchi, Jaigaon och Phuntsholing.

Lunch i Phuntsholing och slutligen lokalbuss till Thimphu. En resa pa sammanlagt 12 timmar.









Thimphu 11 May 2017

12:00 PM: Visit to RUB. Meeting with RUB Vice Chancellor Dasho Nidup Dorji



2:00 PM. Lunch in Babesa Village Restaurant With artist Ugyen “Panday”
6:00 PM: Visit to Music Studio in Changbandro
Artist: Ugyen “Panday” Studio: Ganga Ram Upreti (guitarist in Ugyen Panday Band
8:00 PM: Stay in Hotel Horizon, Babesa

12th May (Friday)

08:00 AM: Travel to Paro. Breakfast in Bondey.
Druk Air flight to Kolkata



