

Ogyen Choling Foundation: The picture of ancient Bhutan and family pride

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Ogyen Choling in Tang valley, Bumthang is one of the eight lings (places) founded by Longchen Rabjam (1308-1363), one of the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism.

Later Tertön Dorji Lingpa chose Ogyen Choling as one of his centres and a lineage was established, which continues still today. The Nagtshang in Ogyen Choling produced powerful leaders like Trongsa Penlop Tshokey Dorji and Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji.

Before 1950s, the family had no problems in preserving and maintaining the old manor and artifacts because people in the community has specific obligation to the nagtshang.

With the emancipation of serfs, family landholdings were brought down. “Both my parents died in 1960s and my two uncles had a very tough time. Even roofing became a problem,” said Kunzang Choden, a writer by profession and current generation of the nagtshang. “By late 80s we managed to roof the house.”

“It was quite a dilemma for the family. What to do with big structure like this? Just the sheer size of building and maintaining it was a big liability,” she said. “But my generation is very emotional as it is our ancestral home and we could not just abandon it.”

The family did not want to convert the nagtshang into a commercial centre like hotel. So, it became a civil society organisation called Ogyen Choling Foundation. It is a museum.

“There is so much work to do and very little income,” Kunzang Choden said.

The foundation

The heirs of Ogyen Choling formed a trust fund and conservation works were carried out through individual donations and commitments. The museum opened in 2001.

In 2014, Ogyen Choling foundation was registered as a CSO. Other economic opportunities were explored to sustain the project.

There is no individual ownership. The family moved out of the nagtshang and gave everything to foundation.

Revenue from the museum was not enough to sustain financially. Family homes were so converted into guesthouses.

The CSO’s aim is to make Ogyen Choling the centre for contemplation and Buddhist study. The museum has a huge collection of Buddhist scripts in its library to facilitate research and meditation for the scholars and practitioners.

The purpose of the CSO is to contribute to the preservation and promotion of Bhutan’s cultural heritage and, in doing so, support the social and economic wellbeing of the local community.

Since most of the renovation projects are complete, the foundation is looking for expansion of services whereby the whole community in Tang gets involved and benefitted. Stupas in the community are being renovated by the foundation.

For instance, the nagtshang is in itself a small community niche. The community sells their local produce to the visitor and tourists. In terms of employment, the foundation hopes to employ local youth. Even for the renovation, the foundation has hired local carpenters, masons and workers. Whenever the foundation hires expat workers from abroad, training is provided to the local workers.

The foundation provides scholarships to 12 children a year in the two schools in the community. In an effort to encourage children to excel in their studies, Ogyen Choling Foundation offers cash prizes to all the toppers from all the classes in the two schools.

The foundation has also ECCD centre for the children of the community.

A choeten next to the nagtshang is being renovated. The area will be made a children's park. "This is community revitalisation that the foundation is trying to achieve," Kunzang Choden said.

The foundation also facilitates guide course. Ogyen Choling is part of the course syllabus.

The foundation is also working in collaboration with CSO like Loden-Shejun, which has documented and photographed every item, text, mural painting and architecture in the manor.

"This is a sensible way for CSOs to work together," she said.

However, what worries the current Ugyen Choling family is who will continue this great project. "We are putting lot of passion, effort and money," Kunzang Choden said.

The museum has installed fire security, redone electrical wiring, installed fire pumps and CCTVs. The foundation will install the fire mitigation system in the community.

What is unique about the CSO is that both the office and the museum is open round the clock and even on holidays. Ogyen Choling Foundation is one of the few organizations located outside the capital. It shares the office space with the community forest.

Jigsel Dorji, 18-year-old trainee guide, said the museum has rich history. "This might be the only museum where you can photograph every item," he said, adding that it becomes easier for the guides to remember through photographs.

The trainer Phub Tshering said that most youth have never seen or realised how our ancestors lived. This museum gives a feel of the olden days. Tourists, he said, are exhausted visiting temples and dzongs right from Paro and back. Ogyen Choling has something different to offer.

Artifacts including grains, salts imported from Tibet, armors, utensils, carpentry equipment, weaving materials and textile, among many others, are still preserved in their best forms. Unlike other museums, artifacts in the Ogyen Choling are innately discovered. The four-storey manor has the real ambiance of rich Bhutanese culture, tradition and history.

Kunzang Choden, in her book *Ogyen Choling*, a manor in central Bhtuan, says the advantage of distance gave her the perspective to look at the ancestral home with more objectivity and pragmatism.

Tshering Dorji