

A society that tells its stories, holds on to its culture and documents history. As the world's youngest democracy, Bhutan is living through dramatic change – an experience that must be shared.

This publication is a collection of creative non-fiction stories that delve deep into the personal lives and experiences of people who are a part of a changing society and a nation in transformation. This form of non-fiction writing allows us to be an observer of and a participant in the environment that we live in. It brings alive our ideas, values, and beliefs.

The stories were written during two creative non-fiction writing workshops - in 2008 and 2010 – organized by the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy.

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PEOPLE

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PLACES

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EVENTS

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CREATIVE  
NON-FICTION  
WRITING



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NON-FICTION  
WRITING



BHUTAN CENTRE  
*for* MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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## CONTENTS

### Creative Nonfiction Writing, 2008

*Puran's Destiny 1*

- Achyut Bhandari

*Losing My First Job 3*

- Dendup Chopel

*Bhutanese Culture 4*

- Tshering Chopel

*My Son and I don't Speak to Each Other 6*

- Kunga T. Dorji

*Teaching in a Remote School 7*

- Sangay Dorji

*A Memoir 9*

- Dawa Lhamo

*Survival Trait 16*

- Kuenzang Lhadon

*Rafting the Pho Chhu 18*

- Sonam Pelden

*Lest We Forget our Teachers 19*

- Tshewang Peldon

*The Convocation Day 23*

- Dorji Rinchen

*Tenzin's Dismay 25*

- Rinzin Rinzin

*High Tea with the Rain Man 27*

- Tshering Tashi

*The Art of 'Bowing' 29*

- Lhawang Ugyel

*10,300 Km on the Road 31*

- Manju Wakhley

**Creative Nonfiction Writing, 2010**

*The House behind the Dzong 37*

- Tashi Choden

*A Journey to the Unknown 40*

- Sonam Dhendup

*Calcutta - The City That Most Impacted My Life 43*

- Yeshey Dorji

*My Opinion on Other's Opinions 45*

- Mongal Singh Gurung

*Ap Rangdol on the Eve of the First General Election in Bhutan 46*

- Lingchen

*A Gift of a Dog 49*

- Paimma Lhakden

*My Front Lawn 55*

- Pema Seden

*Ben Trashi Dragay: The sword of Jigme Namgyel 57*

- Tshering Tashi

*The Homecoming 60*

- Karma C. Tsering

*Man who lived with Time 62*

- Sonam Tshewang

*The Obstructing Wind of Fate 65*

- Kinley Wangchuk

*Women and Politics 70*

- Lily Wangchhuk

*The Cradle of Great Upbringing 77*

- Pema Wangchuk

*Bumthang – Sacred and Holy 82*

- Pema Wangda

# Why creative non-fiction?

## An introductory note

A society that tells its stories preserves its culture and documents its history. Bhutan is going through fascinating times and, as the world's youngest democracy, we are living through dramatic change – an experience that must be shared.

Today, cultures struggle to survive as global media create a world of infinite information. Bhutan's rich oral traditions are fast being lost as the all-pervasive audio-visual media takes a powerful toll on Bhutanese society. It is critical that we strengthen our literary traditions both in the national language, Dzongkha, and English - which is a working language in Bhutan.

This compilation of non-fiction stories is the result of two workshops on creative non-fiction writing in 2008 and 2010. They represent a delightful array of stories that bring alive events, people, and happenings in a society which is in rapid change.

Writing instructors tell us that factual writing doesn't always have to be dull and dreary pieces which you use for research or academic work. These short creative non-fiction pieces describe some elements of historic change as Bhutan takes on the challenge of becoming a democracy. While tourist brochures and coffee table books are getting more colourful and informative, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy would like to encourage literature that will help us understand ourselves and our changing society. Contemporary stories portray the evolution of our society and help preserve the values of the past as we move through the present into the future.

The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy thanks all the contributors for sharing these stories.



CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITING  
- 2008 -





# Puran's Destiny

**Achyut Bhandari**

Puran was miserable. All his expectations of the best school in Bhutan had turned sour. He could not think of staying any longer in the strange environment. He spent days trying to find a way to escape. He was helpless. One morning, before the students gathered for their morning study, he summoned the courage to speak to the Principal. Fr. Mackey, a Canadian Jesuit who was a strict disciplinarian. But he had a reputation of being a fine teacher who imparted the best education in Bhutan at that time.

Puran hesitated. The Principal quickly realized the uneasiness of his new student and tried to put him at ease. "What is the matter, Jyakpo?" He lovingly called every one Jyakpo which meant 'stout' in Tshangla, the local language. Not knowing how the Principal would react, Puran replied in a low voice, "Father, I don't like this place. I want to go home." This must have been just another case for Fr. Mackey to counsel a homesick student. He comforted Puran and assured him that he would soon get used to the new surroundings. He advised him to concentrate on studies as he saw great potential in the thin boy with dark glittering eyes.

With no options for escape, Puran succumbed to his fate. Being in a boarding school for the first time, he detested the routine – early morning wake-up, personal hygiene, morning study, breakfast, cleaning, assembly, classes, lunch, classes, evening study and bed. He could not sleep at night due to flea bites and the stench of poor hygiene of his fellow boarders. Sometimes, he would keep awake all night thinking of the comforts of his home. He hated the food that consisted of watery corn porridge for breakfast, rice or corn with a mixture of potato and radish broth for lunch, and flour porridge for dinner. It was inedible and caused him frequent diarrhoea. He could not understand how people lived on such food. But hunger gave way to quality and taste. At times he even longed for more of this tasteless meal like *Oliver Twist*.

After three months, Puran felt better. He got accustomed to the place, made new friends and began to understand and speak Tshangla. He no longer wrote those pathetic letters to his parents.

Puran remained in Tashigang High School till 1969 after which he went abroad for higher studies. He completed his graduation and worked for the government along with his friends from the old school. The work led him to peoples and places that he had never imagined. This enriched his experience and outlook.

Puran was 13 when he joined this school in eastern Bhutan. The Director of Education had selected him for Tashigang because of Puran's excellent grades in the village school. He had not gone out of his village before except for a short pilgrimage to India with his parents and relatives. His parents were poor, uneducated farmers. They had no money to spare for his trip. They hesitated whether they should send Puran to such a far and remote place. The neighbours advised them not to risk it. With much reflection and determination, Puran's father decided to escort his son to the new school. He knew that Puran was bent on continuing his studies. Despite his wish to keep his son home for his help, Puran had run away to the village school at the age of 11. He could not think of denying him this rare opportunity and the future that it promised.

The first glance of the town from the approaching bend shattered Puran. The town on the banks of the Mithidrang stream looked deserted with a few old shops, an animal husbandry outpost, a post office, and a watermill for grinding maize, the staple diet in the region. A small guest house stood on a ridge overlooking the Dzong (a fortress) that was perched strategically on another ridge across the stream, a rudimentary hospital next to the guest house, a telegraph office nearby, an army cantonment and his new school covered the hill slope above the town.

The main school building was an e-shaped block made of stone, mud and timber. The students sat cross-legged on the wooden floor with narrow writing desks in front. The building served as the boys' dormitory on top. Rough bamboo mats covered the floor of the long dormitory in which the boys would sleep in four parallel rows. It was more a hiding shelter for bedbugs and fleas than a place of rest for the young and the tender. The only toilet for the students was a shed with a row of wooden battens below which the roaming pigs would scavenge.

Today, Puran reminisces over his school days. The 13th of March 1966, had changed his life forever.

# Losing My First Job

**Dendup Chopel**

Six months after I finished my studies, I thought I was finally ready to take up my first job. With my background in English literature, I thought that apart from teaching, my best option was journalism. I never fancied my chances as a teacher. So, I interviewed for a job as a reporter. Fortunately because of my consistent academic performance over the last few years, I got through with more ease than I had hoped for.

But there ended my luck. Or so, I made it that way. Due to some rash driving I sprained my wrists and bruised myself so badly the day before I was supposed to join office. So on my big day, I went as if from a battle to my office. It was extremely painful dealing with the pain and the antibiotics sapped my energy. All day long I eagerly waited for the sun to go down so that I could go home. After waiting for an eternity, I did go home. But I hated the thought of having to come back again the next day.

I did some minor reporting for the sports page of the newspaper. The next day it helped to do some work. The satisfaction of seeing my first work published was good. I felt I was beginning to settle down. But that feeling didn't last.

After having to spend the most part of the last sixteen years attending endless classes, the six month break was so nice. I started feeling that I could do with an even longer break. The shock of falling headlong from a bike clocking only about 60 km/hr took time to recover. It was perhaps not the ideal time for someone to begin one's working career at such a time.

I started disliking my work and went without a story for two consecutive issues. The only thing that kept me from quitting was because my employees were nice to me and I didn't want to be grateful.

But by the end of the month I had enough of everything, reporting and all. I put in my resignation and was somehow glad to lose my first job at the end of the first month. And whatever misgivings I had from the decision, I worked it out in the gym.

# Bhutanese Culture

**Tshering Chopel**

I drove out the of the MoIC<sup>1</sup> gate wondering what my eyes could catch on to write about for this afternoon's assignment. I reminded myself to be slower. I must be extra careful while getting onto the highway. There are not only many cars in Bhutan now, but it is 1 p.m. and most of the people would be driving home for lunch.

I decided to go home to write my story. I passed across the faintly- coloured circle of a round-about point to get to the left road which will take me down-town along the long row of cement blocks. Until last year, I would reach my home in five minutes. Now, it takes ten minutes because I need five extra minutes in having to drive all the way till the U-turn in front the Chorten and then get home in the N.P.P.F residential colony.

The cement blocks arrived about a year ago along with the widening of that stretch of the highway. The municipal office has reasoned that it not only maintains safety, but also regulates smooth traffic since they separated the highway and introduced a one-way system. I remembered my uncle say that Thimphu used to be a piece of marshy land with thorny plants over it. The thought of growing into what it is today was not even dreamt of, that most people denied free plots of land offered to them to be settled in Thimphu. At this, I once again marveled at the continuous line of buildings that have mushroomed on both sides of the highway. They are not just huge buildings but more importantly structures depicting the unique Bhutanese architecture and colours. The smiles on the red lips radiating from the typical windows of these buildings certainly provide the gist of what our country is to any foreigner. Bhutan is, of course, a culturally rich country with people very sensitive to their age-old tradition and values.

The line of cement blocks running throughout the highway is, therefore, questioned by media. It is an eyesore because they run in total contrast to the beauty of the buildings. Development must not compromise our social values. Moreover, the issue of improving safety is not true. It rather risks

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Information and Communication

the school- going children jumping over it in the morning and evenings as they walk to and from their classes.

Two men are approaching the shop at the other side of the highway just after the U-turn towards my way. One is wearing a black gho and the other is looking equally presentable in Martha. Strangely, they both carry a school bag just like school-children, though they were not. As I stopped by the shop to take an ice-cream for my niece, I overheard two Bhutanese school drop-outs in jeans talking to these men. I then knew the two men are Japanese volunteers, probably coming out of the JICA office above the chorten for lunch as well.

The two Bhutanese boys were commenting on how the foreigners looked in the Bhutanese attire. Yes, indeed. They look exactly Bhutanese, except when you hear them talking to the boys. Perhaps, the foreigners loved and respected the concept of preserving Bhutanese culture because it is not something which is emphasized so much in their country. But, the two Bhutanese boys may be thinking that being in the latest fashion of jeans is development and modernization in Bhutan. That is why, we see Bhutanese more comfortable visiting such a highly revered historical monument as the Memorial Chorten when they are not made to do it in Ghos and Kiras.

## My Son and I don't Speak to Each Other

**Kunga T. Dorji**

When he was a baby, I'd put him to sleep by hugging his little, warm body against my chest and walking back and forth across the room with his chin resting on my shoulder.

In the day, I'd play some music on the stereo and go about the ritual. It didn't matter what I played, Norah Jones or Metallica, he fell asleep just the same. At night, I'd wake up to his cries and, almost as a reflex, pick him up, embrace him like I did a hundred times before, repetitively falsetto a two-line Tibetan lullaby that my mother has used on all her seven children, and pace about the room.

Let it be known that I am one who does not like sleep disturbed. But, when it came to my son, his sleep mattered more than mine.

This continued for a year and half. Then I got divorced.

I see my son every second weekend now. He's four years old. Still, in my presence, he will not talk and will rarely walk. Instead, we walk. Even if it is a matter of moving from one room to the other, he will face me and spread out his hands. I oblige. Arms around each other, his chin on my shoulder, we walk.

See, my son has grown up in a house where they speak a dialect I neither speak nor understand.

So, my son and I don't speak to each other. We may not understand each other but, in walking together, with my chest pressed against his belly and his warm breath on my shoulder, My thoughts travel back in time. In that moment, we accept each other completely, without complete understanding.

# Teaching in a Remote School

**Sangay Dorji**

There was a compulsory national service scheme for all university graduates in the past before taking up employment in the government, corporation or private firms. The main purpose for such a programme was to equip the graduates with the ground realities and acquaint them with socio- economic environment as a first step to the world of work culture. The period and nature of national service scheme varied in the rural areas and the national service programme was changed and it was switched over to a teaching programme and the duration was for a period of one academic session.

I passed out in 1985 from Punjab University, Chandigarh, India. Before joining the national service scheme there was a three-month long rigorous orientation and cultural programme for the graduates. At the end of the orientation and cultural programme the graduates dispersed for vacation. During this period I waited for the appointment and place of posting for my teaching service. My friends who got the appointment in northern schools proceeded for their place of posting while I waited for the schools to reopen in the southern schools after the summer vacation. Those days the schools in the southern belts or warm areas enjoy the summer vacation and resumed schools during winter.

I got my appointment order for teaching service in Kopchey Primary School, a few hours walk from Chengmari, Samtse Dzongkhag. I had mixed feelings about the place, people and the school in that Dzongkhag. As it was first time, I did not know where to go and whom to contact. With great difficulty I reached Chengmari. It was Saturday and luckily the teachers and students of Kopchey Primary School had come to market for groceries and vegetables and afterwards they escorted me to the school. I took accommodation in one of the teacher's quarters there.

My first teaching experience began with my introduction to teachers and the students in the school assembly. I was really honoured to be a teacher in that school. All the teachers and the students found a new light in me



as I was the only graduate teacher there. They had high expectations from me for the education of the children and the school. I started teaching all school subjects. Since there was shortage of Dzongkha teachers, I took the responsibility and started teaching Dzongkha as well. For this I earned an additional respect as those days university graduates were not proficient in Dzongkha language as they had studied outside the country. But I had the capability to teach it because of my good Dzongkha background.

As the summer came the school academic session ended for the vacation and my national service as a teacher came to an end. That was most momentous for me. I had a thrilling, wonderful, joyful and exciting experience as a teacher and wished to continue there. The teachers and students bid farewell to me. I left them with tears and bereft of one less teacher with my departure from the school forever. The last word they uttered was that “if you become a teacher please come back here, and if you do not, then we wish you good luck in the public service”.

# A Memoir

**Dawa Lhamo**

I reached Canada in the summer of 2001 and to me it was an entire new world. There was a contingent of Bhutanese students and I did not feel homesick at all. I was in the east coast for two months. I took two courses to get acquainted with the Canadian system of education and culture, before I went to my place of study in the mid west.

I particularly remember the first course I took in UNB in the summer. The project director had registered my name for a course in Action Research. The professor who taught the course was a visiting professor from the Michigan University, US. He looked quite old, and I could not understand his accent. Seriously, I can't remember what I learnt in that course. All I remember is that we used to meet at his place, which was 30 minutes away from the university. We used to have pot luck supper. In a way, he was quite encouraging, but I guess I never really understood the concept what action research really meant. I suppose I hadn't really grown out of spoon feeding because that is how I was taught. Here I was in an entirely different situation, and the professor encouraged freedom for of critical thinking, and I was so used to living in a box, my mind refused to think and react. Whenever the professor asked me my views and opinions on critical issues that evolved out of discussion in the class, my mind used to blank out. Did I feel stupid!!!

Later I realized that I was not the one who was stupid, but the system of education had handicapped me, intellectually crippled me. As a student I was not encouraged free and critical thinking. I am not sure if it is the culture itself that is crippling.

After two months in New Brunswick, I again boarded the plane to Calgary. It was a long flight. I thought everything would be a brand new world. I was not really prepared for any set back in Calgary. It never crossed my mind that I would become a walking shadow.

The minute my plane started descending at the Calgary international airport, I felt an immense wave of fear combined with melancholy. I was

filled with a terrible longing to go back home. I looked outside to see what the city looked like, but all I saw was brown landscape, gray steel buildings and a vast expanse of space. I was petrified at the thought of living in this unwelcoming city, all by myself. So many apprehensive thoughts cluttered my mind and I felt a shadow darkening my horizon of the new place, new people and new school. With a heavy heart I disembarked the plane. I could feel the fear balling up in the pit of my stomach. At that moment all I wanted was to run back to the folds of my family.

The first day at school was close to disaster. I had no idea where I was supposed to go? Although I had a guide sheet that would direct me to the Faculty of Humanities, and to the English Department. For a new comer all the trees looked the same, the grass brown and a little patch of green here and there, and the buildings steel, gray, and ominous. I was shy and scared. I went looking for the SS building. I had no clue what SS building meant. To me it was just another cold sign.

I found the building, got into the elevator and it speedily took me up to the eleventh floor. I would have liked to be delayed a little longer, to compose my thoughts, sooth my frayed nerves and slow the rate of my thumping heart. I got out of the elevator with a feeling of doom. I went into the general office with my knees knocking each other, and in a shivery voice I told them I was a new graduate student. Somebody told me go and meet the graduate secretary. I sent a thousand prayers to be met with a smiling face, but was I ever wrong! Who do I meet but a cold fish of a woman! I could see that she didn't have one friendly bone in her. She spoke to me in her steel voice: "How may I help you?" "The words she spoke were polite, with an implicit steely undertone that said, "I have no time to waste." I told her I am a new graduate student from Bhutan. Before I could finish it, she said, "Didn't you get the orientation program list and the guide sheet?" "Yes, I did. But I came to check if there is anything to be done before I came for the orientation" "No, nothing at all. Just come on the day of the orientation, there you will meet other fellow students and professors." That is how I was dismissed the first day.

On the day of the orientation, I saw around 40 odd students sitting in the lounge. I found an unoccupied chair and I sat down. I looked around the room, hoping to see a friendly face with whom I could strike up a rapport.

As I sat there, all I wanted to do was to disappear, wondering what craziness drove me to choose a place and a university far away from home. The head of the department came and introduced and then it was our turn to do likewise. The closer it got, the more nervous I became. When I looked around, all of them exuded self confidence, and they had a scholarly air around them. I felt out of place. Everybody started introducing themselves and their area of research interest. Some said postcolonial writings, some holocaust literature, and so on. I never heard of Postcolonial literature. Nothing, never even heard of it when I was in college. I heard the word holocaust on that day only. Then it was my turn. Somehow I managed to say 'early twentieth century British Literature'. However nerve-wrecking the atmosphere was, I made it and that was my first triumph.

After a four day orientation, there was a reception at the head of the department's place. I managed to get a ride from one of the students. People were a lot friendlier there, I guess the drink calmed their taut nerves and loosened their stiff tongues. At the reception, I met a fellow student, someone close to home. I guess it was something in our attitude that drew us together.

During the reception, I met several of my professors. They looked friendly and it lifted a huge dark cloud from my horizon. They said that if we come across any problem, we can drop in to talk to them. Ironically, the next day our regular classes were to commence. I got into the elevator and I saw a lady professor whom I had met the other evening. I smiled at her, expected her to do the same, but she looked right through me as though I was some sort of an invisible person and not worth taking note of; instead she turned her back on me and we continued in silence to the 11th floor. I calmed myself and thought that maybe she didn't recognize me, yet her attitude still lingered in my mind. Although I tried to push this encounter to the back of my mind, somehow it kept coming back. That was not the only one, some incidents made me confront where I come from. It made me realize that racism is silently prevalent. It is ironic to see the posters screaming at you, "Say No to Racism" everywhere.

The head of the department was no help either. Perhaps she saw in me, someone to dominate and throw her weight around. I thought what a pair the head and the secretary made, both lean and thin, prim, efficient and

cold, lacking basic human touch. Perhaps she saw in me this shy, quiet person, who wouldn't refute one word.

When I was in the second term of MA first year, the head of the department sent me a threatening email. She wrote saying that if I don't register for the second language courses in either French/Spanish/Italian/German; my access to online course registration for English will be blocked. I got so worried. I tried to talk to the head, but it was futile. She just refused to listen that English is my third language and Dzongkha is my second language. I went through a lot of stress and I had no one to share my fears and my doubts, or a friend who would comfort me and make me feel a little better. It was just unfortunate that the Delhi University had not reflected my Dzongkha marks in the official mark sheet. So I had to write a long explanation letter to the Faculty of Graduate Studies if they would allow me to take two courses in Tibetan rather than four courses in one of the European languages. Finally I got a positive response and so I went and did two courses in Tibetan. It was quite funny though, a Bhutanese studying Tibetan under a Japanese professor.

The university, the English department, the city became too oppressive. It was nothing more than a silent, lonely, insular world. It was hard to come to terms that the first world, the modern world, technologically advanced world is a world insulated with silence and loneliness, nothing more, especially for a foreign student. I felt as though I was enveloped in the dark silent world of alienation and displacement. The deafening silence and loneliness warps the thought, I heard someone say that a long time ago. I had no idea then that silence and loneliness would be a menacing shadow that followed me everywhere. I felt as though I was hung somewhere in space and would fall down any moment.

I remember the huge fights I had with my parents because I had wanted to move out of home, and my parents were against it. Almost the whole of my life was spent in the midst of so many brothers and sisters, cousins and all, never experienced a moment of privacy or quietness. Everyday would always be the same, loud music, fights, shouts, and so on. If somebody starts shouting, "give me a moment of peace" or "privacy." The quick response would be "go to the monastery if you want peace and privacy." That would be the end of it and nobody would say anything. Now, I had all the privacy

that I needed, but the novelty of living alone had faded; instead I wished to be back in the loud household, to be enveloped in the warmth of my family.

I often underwent bouts of sleeplessness. I was so worried about my studies, assignments and presentation and everything. I had this flat mate from Colombia. Maybe he saw in me all the fears and uncertainties that he had gone through as an immigrant. He told me outright that I need to see a counselor. The next day I went to see the counselor. After a half hour session with the counselor, I came out purged. I felt as though a gigantic murky shadow had been lifted off from my horizon.

One time, I saw an elephant in the zoo, caged up in a concrete building. My heart went out to him, pondering on his ill-suited place. This place was no more a home for him than it was for me. We were two aliens inhabiting a space in a foreign land. At least for me, in time, I can go home to my family, whereas for him, transported all the way from Africa, when can he go home? Never! I felt sad for him.

My life existed in a triangle—from the classroom to the library, and back to my burrow. Is this the life of a graduate student? Time spent with my nose buried in my books. My days, hours, minutes spent in pouring over numerous theories and theorists that made no sense to me at all—Foucault's Power and Knowledge, Derrida's Deconstruction, Post-structuralism, Homi Bhabha and Post colonialism and so on. I still speculate and question if I learnt anything at all. I suppose in a way, learning these theories have taught me how to deconstruct assumptions and notions that are existent in our society.

I had classes from Monday to Thursday. I used to dread the long weekend. If I had family, then that would have been an entirely different story. But I was all alone, and the long weekend was just another torture. How much work can a person put in! I did try to remain engaged, but somehow I could never bring myself to look forward to the weekend. Occasionally, I used to take a train downtown and walk to Eau Claire market to watch a movie. After the movie, I would walk around the mall to pass my time and then take the train up north, retrace my steps back to my lonely existence.

My whole perception of the 'foreign world' has reversed. I saw in it how empty and meaningless the existence is. I saw thousands of people, but I

was on my own. I heard the cars honking and the traffic lights turning red, orange to green, I saw people crossing the road, I was aware of the change of seasons, but it was a lonely life after all. There were lots of noises, but not a word to sooth my aching soul. I went out to eat, experimented with different cuisines, whatever it was there was something missing that I couldn't put it into words. Is a friend's company only limited to eating and drinking out? I did all that yet somehow I didn't get this feeling of attachment. I used to see the indomitable Rockies and the awesome landscape at a distance, and I was filled with nostalgia. Back in my apartment, loneliness and silence wrapped me like a shroud and there was this immense urge to tear through the wall of darkness. I wanted to cry and scream out my lungs, even for that I had no energy. The loneliness was slowly strangling me, filling my mind with unhealthy thoughts. Sometimes, I used to wonder if I was losing my mind.

In my last semester, I was house-sitting for a friend and preparing for my exams. One time I cooked a chilli dish with a little meat. It turned out good. I had finished eating, but my friend's dog wouldn't go away from the kitchen. The cat disappeared, but the dog wouldn't budge from the kitchen. So I gave it a little rice with gravy. I guess the dog was not used to spicy food, because the dog woke me up in the middle of the night, wanting to go out. When I looked out, it was dreadfully quiet and not a sound could be heard. I just let the dog out. The dog took quite some time to come back home. I guess the dog went to a neighbour's garden and did her business. I didn't tell this to a soul. Again the next morning, the dog came into my bedroom and started whining. I guess it wanted to go out. It was broad daylight and there were a lot of people, I couldn't let the dog out by itself. I put on my sweat pants and took the dog out and I had with me a small plastic bag to collect the poop. After this, whenever I cooked meat with chilli, I never fed the dog again.

When I look back, the intensity of misery and loneliness has faded, I look back with a certain fondness. On the bright side, I think my experience there was a whole new learning experience. I gained self confidence. I discovered who I really am. What I want out of life? I was thankful for the opportunity it gave me to gain new skills, make friends, and best of all I gained a clear perspective of my life. One of my friends told me that when she met me for the first time, I used to lean against the wall and walk, showing my

shyness and inhibitions, and a lack of self assurance. After a year, the same friend said that I have started walking in the middle of the corridor, exuding self confidence and assurance. My stay in Canada gave me a platform to discover my strengths and my weaknesses.

But then I was too distraught with misery and loneliness to see things from a positive angle. The 730 ½ days were like eons. I often comforted myself that the day would come when I could go home, back to the Himalayas, and feel the feathery touch of the cool crispy air, feast my eyes on the endless mountains, hear the birds sing in the morning, listen to the laughter and cries, back to the warm fold of my family again.



## Survival Trait

**Kuenzang Lhadon**

“Hi Chophel, going for lunch?” I asked. I was waiting at the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology gate for my friend to pick me up. We talked for a while. He was my classmate and now works in the Department of Information and Technology. I have lost touch with many of my high school friends. Once we get into jobs, we all get stuck and forget our friends.

There is another friend of mine who works in Bhutan Telecom. I thought that I will meet her too today. So I called her up. An appointment was made and here I am now. We are talking as I’m writing this. She agrees that we have not met for a long time and we should find time to meet more often. This afternoon was quite eventful.

I met two other friends. I met them last year. We were brought together by our common interest for writing. It is at such times that we forget the serious sides of life about earning a living or stiff competition that the world is in. We just sit together for a cup of coffee and create sheer laughter. It is not with all kinds of people that we can get along so well. One works in the police and other is a photographer. We planned to get together this evening for a cup of tea. It does nothing; but it helps us rekindle some kind of zest in life-even if it is a simple one as finding the will to live well.

We often drive ourselves so deep in work that we forget we can find more meanings in the simplicity of life. The stiffer the competition becomes, the harder we work because we think that we have to have a strong foothold for the survival. But this is not how it is sometimes. There are people who have much less but find more joys in life than those who have so much.

All my friends are now working and they are all earning well but I can see that this has robbed them of the other side of life. Even when I meet them once in a while, they almost always have no time to greet each other. This friend Chophel I met this afternoon- I guess I was seeing him after two

years. And we are both in Thimphu. I asked him how he was and he told me that he has been busy. That morning he went to the Ministry of Agriculture to discuss some work. He took half the day there.

I don't know if we should consider it a corruption to get work done faster by asking some friends we know. You know, for example, to get a police clearance certificate, we have to wait for one week. But if we have someone we know there, we can get it the same day. And my friend Lungten and I say that it is not corruption because they are unnecessarily delaying the work that they can actually do in a week.

This is how survival is even made tougher. There are many who do not know as many people as you and I do. They wait longer everyday to get work done. They work harder everyday to earn the same amount of money. But all we can think of is saving our own hunger. We all must live. We cannot think that the world is what it is. We must hope that we can change it. And if we believe, we can.

## Rafting the Pho Chhu

**Sonam Pelden**

“All forward!” The command from our guide Pema hit our ears. We paddled furiously, smacking into the first rapid, bucketfuls of water splashing our faces as we shrieked and laughed in a rush of adrenalin. We were ten of us, all clad in black wetsuits, off-white helmets and fastened orange life-jackets, rafting on the Pho Chhu in Punakha.

We glided downstream, leaning forward, slicing the dull green waters with our yellow oars and pushing the blue raft forward every time Pema yelled orders.

We crossed two suspension bridges, a fragile wooden one with planks placed at uneven distances and so low that it almost touched the water near the Punakha dzong. The other bridge near Shengana, about 150 m long, hung suspended in the air over a section of the river that appeared shallow from up above.

“..Op” said Pema, the first sound of “St” lost in the roar of the rushing waters as we flowed into a much slower current. Our raft bobbed on the current, slowly taking us downstream as waves hit each other forming froth and the cold breeze created goose bumps on our wet skins.

“The water temperature may be about four to seven degrees,” said Anju, who sat at one end of the raft and poured water on others from his helmet.

A series of five rock-induced rapids run down the Pho Chhu. When rushing waves meet a rock they create a rapid. We were in the middle of the river and, as the Pho Chhu rhythmically flexed its muscles, our raft whooshed in and out as we hit each rapid, sending blood rushing through our veins. There was no sun and the water was freezing cold. Our feet had turned white and our toe tips wrinkled after being in water for so long.

After about four hours (including a pee break), our raft glides by the Punakha dzong, signaling the end of an exhilarating experience.

## Lest We Forget our Teachers

**Tshewang Peldon**

“Oh, it’s already 5:30,” says Thinley as she quickly silences the alarm clock on her bedside table. Every morning she goes into her small shrine where Lord Buddha’s statue sits. She makes offerings of fresh morning water in seven small neat copper bowls, lights three incense sticks and prays aloud, “May I be able to make a difference in the lives of my students.”

She then starts preparing the lessons that she has to teach for the day. First is a poem titled “Nothing Gold Can Stay” by Robert Frost. It is a difficult poem with many difficult vocabularies and connotative themes. She lies down to think how she could make the lesson as interesting as possible and in a way that her children could learn and appreciate better. When nothing comes out, she walks towards her improvised bookshelf to find anything that would give her inspiration. Fortunately she tumbles upon a little book *How to make Poetry interesting?* She goes through the contents and her eyes shine. She had read it while a trainee at the College of Education some years ago.

Thinley meticulously writes the meanings of all the difficult words. There are words which she does not know. So she uses her dictionary. “Oh, there is no end to learning,” she mumbles to herself. Then, she draws a sunflower on a chart paper and colours it well to make it as attractive as possible. Her principal routinely checks lesson plans to keep the teachers on their toes. She often feels like a student even after all these years of being a teacher herself.

It is 7:30 a.m. and she rushes to the kitchen to prepare herself a hot cup of tea to energize herself. She has a long day ahead. Like every day. She reaches the school at 8:20 a.m, a good ten minutes ahead of the school reporting time for the school. She goes to school early knowing full well that punctuality is an important value children must appreciate and emulate. She has learnt that it is better to practice and teach by example than to simply preach without oneself practicing. It is difficult to inculcate a sense of patriotism in children if one does not practice patriotism oneself. She too

understands that a hundred pairs of eyes are on her every moment. ‘Actions speak louder than words’ and this is very true in her case as children usually follow what she does better than what she says.

“Is there anything you want to discuss?” Thinley asks the class.

‘If madam could comment on my morning speech’, replies Kelden, a chubby little boy.

“What is the topic?”

‘How to be mindful of wastes we produce every day, madam’.

“Good, come and read that to me.”

It is 8:30 now and she walks to class VIIIB of which she is the class teacher. She makes sure that the classroom and its corridors are clean. Then, she quickly rushes to supervise the social work and critically takes a look at the flower garden. In less than a month, there would be inter-class flower garden competition, and Thinley wants her class to be second to none. Nurturing a sense of competition is required in this challenging age where hundreds of young people are competing for the same kind of job every day. It is the real survival of the fittest out there. You can only survive if you are better than the others. Just being good is not good enough now and she wants her students to understand this by building a sense of healthy competitiveness. She then goes around making sure that the whole school area is clean. She is the teacher-on-duty for the week and that’s one of the many responsibilities of a teacher-on-duty.

*Ting, ting* ....it is 8:40. “Children, let’s go to the assembly.” Thinley moves along the line counting one, two, three, ....., and forty. “Good, everyone is present”, says she as she pats Lekzang who is the tallest child in her class. Teachers and students ritualistically sing Lama dhang Goembo ...<sup>2</sup> Kelden and Kinley of class VIA, wearing their kabney<sup>3</sup> and rachu<sup>4</sup> come in front to make their prepared speeches. After their speeches, Thinley comes in front to acknowledge and comment on the speeches. Then, she makes the announcements which are mainly reminders of the day’s activities. Sonam Dorji, the school captain hoists the flag and the assembly sings to the rhythm of Druk Tshenden ....<sup>5</sup>

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2 Morning prayer chanted every morning in all schools of Bhutan

3 White scarf worn by ordinary men in Bhutan

4 Scarf worn by females in Bhutan

5 National Anthem of Bhutan

Thinley rushes to the staffroom. She removes her shoes to keep the place clean like everyone else. It is an elongated room with series of tables arranged in rows with two chairs on each side. She shares the table with her colleague Karma. There are forty others who share this place. She picks her lesson plan journal, the teaching aid which she had prepared that morning, and the textbook and a piece of chalk and dashes to her class. As she enters the classroom her students wish her good morning in unison. “Good morning, it’s nice to see you all. How are you? What good deed did you do? Did you help your parents? How did you help them? What big thing happened yesterday in our country? What big things happened in the world?” Her students take turns to respond to these questions almost every day.

“OK, now let’s do silent sitting for one minute before we actually start the class.

Thank you.” Thinley, then, begins her lesson.

“Do you know what we are going to study today?”

“Yes, madam. A poem – Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

“Good.”

As she writes the title on the board, she asks, “What do you think the poem is going to be about? Why? After listening to some of the responses, she asks a volunteer to recite the poem and the lesson continues.

*Ting tong..* The students in chorus thank her. She moves to her next class. 10:40–11:00 is break time. Thinley quickly walks back to the staffroom, sits on her chair and serves herself a hot cup of tea which she carried from home. Karma, her next seat colleague joins her and the rest of her colleagues arrive one by one. There is a lot of noise coming from all over the place. Teachers are never tired of talking.

*Ting, ting...* the bell rings and within no time the room is silent again. Thinley was going to enjoy her only off period. She looks at the pile of eighty notebooks that she had brought from her first two periods and begins to assess them. She finished only fifteen notebooks and the bell rings. Thinley picks her materials and leaves for her third class of the day.

12:40 Thinley is back in the staffroom for lunch. There are seven of them who eat together. No sooner did she open her lunch box than a boy shouts

through the door, 'Madam Thinley, two boys from your class are fighting.' She leaves her lunchbox open and rushes to her class.

"What happened? Why are you fighting?"

'He is calling me names, madam.'

"No, madam, he is asking me to give him my money and when I refused he beat me up."

'Is that true, Sonam?'

"No, madam, he is lying. I never asked for money."

'No, madam, I am not lying. He does that to many of us.'

By the time she settles the case, she has only five minutes before the next period. As she runs back to the staffroom thinking of her lunchbox, she meets a crying girl from class III bleeding from a fresh cut. What happened? A fall! Oh, why don't you look properly and walk. She takes the girl to the staffroom, gives her first aid and calls her parents from the office phone. And then the bell rings. She is indeed very hungry but cannot eat as she has to go to a class. "OK, my lunch can wait", she says to herself and consoles herself saying "service to humanity is service to God."

It is 4:00 o'clock. 'Aren't you going home, Thinley?' asks her colleagues. "No, I have called a parent to discuss his child. I will see you tomorrow, bye." She smiles to herself as the words of her principal resounds in her ears, "A candle loses nothing when it lights another". It is not just today that she has stayed back. It is cultural practices some times; at other times it is sports or remedial classes. She reaches home at 5:30 completely exhausted but she can't languish away her time at home, can she?

## The Convocation Day

**Dorji Rinchen**

Sherubtse college at Kanglung in eastern Bhutan was the premiere higher learning institute in Bhutan. Until 1982, the college had courses up to class XII. From 1983, the three year graduate courses were introduced in the college for the first time. The first lot of 35 students, all boys, had graduated from the college in 1986. I was one of them who had graduated in the same year.

It was convocation day. The day was so special for me. I had dressed in my best attire and wore a black convocation gown and cap. I was ready for the day. All the dignitaries, teachers and students were seated in the auditorium hall by 9:30 a.m. We were led into the auditorium in traditional Bhutanese precession and seated. The convocation convened with the Bhutanese traditional marchang ceremony. The chief guest, H.E. Lyonpo Sangay Penjore, the honourable Minister for Social Service addressed the august gathering and awarded the certificates.

I received my certificate. I was very happy. But there were no near and dear ones nearby to express my happiness. My parents were in the village and my eldest brother was at Trongsa. Yet I expressed it to my close friends. Later, we were congratulated by the principal, lecturers and friends and had photographic sessions with them.

Then we were led to the college ground to see the cultural programme performed by the college students. They performed Bhutanese dances, Nepali dances, mask dances, Bhutanese songs and English songs. I fully enjoyed the cultural programme. After the programme, we had a big feast in the college dining hall. There was never a feast tastier than this served in the college. I enjoyed it very much.

But that was not the end of the day. We organized a party in “Palas” place in the evening and invited our close friends to celebrate the special event. We celebrated by drinking, singing and dancing. Some friends had crossed their limits and were dead drunk. Though I was drunk too, I was still in sense. We had dinner and bid farewell.



After I reached the room, I lay in bed awake. I was beginning my life after graduating from the college. My parents and relatives had supported me financially till then, but no more. I had to stand on my own. So far I had not decided anything. What should I do next.....?

## Tenzin's Dismay

**Rinzin Rinzin**

"Deachenchholing! Deachenchholing!" calls Tenzin at the top of his voice, leaning lethargically against his old Maruti Suzuki Taxi parked dutifully at the Thimphu Taxi Parking lot. Karma, another taxi driver, a close business rival of his throws a swift jealous glance at him and repeats his call, almost bellowing like an angry bull. "There goes Karma again!" murmurs Tenzin aloud wishing his rival was a thousand miles away.

Incidentally a couple hurries towards Tenzin and inquires "Going to Deachenchholing?"

"Yes, please get in," ushers Tenzin sliding open the door to the passenger seat with a broad smile on his brown sweat-ridden face.

"I am afraid that we are not going to hire it. We'll pay only normal fare. So, how long will we have to wait?" asks the male passenger reluctant to get into his car.

"Won't be long, Sir. Just another 2-3 passengers and we are off," replies Tenzin bowing courteously.

Just then Karma interrupts to Tenzin's great dismay. "Sir! Ma'am! Please come here. I am off to Deachenchholing right away. Besides, mine is a brand new car fit for high class travelers like yourselves."

Tenzin murmurs a curse and looks on sheepishly as his would-be-prospective customers walk away and get into his rival's car. To add salt to his wound Karma shows off his new car to his customers (nay, to Tenzin, literarily speaking!). "See my car has air-conditioning too. What's a car without air-conditioning and heating facilities, and MP3 players these days! Customers like you deserve nothing but the best, right, Sir!," shouts Karma occasionally stealing a look at Tenzin through the corners of his eyes but making sure that his voice superimposes the disharmonious noise at the parking lot and that Tenzin hears it.

A few seconds later, Karma drives out of the parking lot, and as Tenzin watches Karma's car meandering a curve at a distance, he could hear

Karma's call for passengers slowly fading away to his great relief. But, his last worry seems to have faded away only to be taken over by even bigger worries. He calls for passengers a few more times, and then he is lost in his own thoughts. While he disliked Karma consistently trying and managing to lure away his prospective passengers, he agrees with Karma that his car is way too old and deprived of modern amenities to appeal to any customers. No wonder that he has been getting fewer and fewer customers over the last couple of weeks. Karma lets out a heavy sigh, and slowly shakes his head from side to side as if in disapproval of everything that was happening around him. "And, what with the fuel prices rocketing sky high!" he exclaims aloud. He knows that he can neither afford to buy a new car nor make do with the old one. He scratches his head like a dumb school boy in an examination hall trying to recollect the answer to a tricky mathematics question that he believes he had seen or heard of somewhere sometime. Then, suddenly he looks around with a startle, as if waking up to an urgent call from a deep irresponsible sleep, and continues to call for passengers with a magically renewed energy. His eyes wander all over the parking lot with the hope of sighting some passengers who might just make do with his old car. After all, he has got to do what he has got to do. He has a family of five to support.

## High Tea with the Rain Man

**Tshering Tashi**

“Meet Rain Man,” before I could greet him he dashed to the car parked outside the library of Princeton University. My friend Mei who works in this library had invited both of us for high tea to her house. It was a Friday evening in 2006. Sitting in the back of her car, this man sitting next to me muttered while staring at the ceiling, “I am Peter Blair Gueter.” The son of an U.S army general, Peter is known in Princeton as the Rain Man. He acquired this nick name after the Hollywood movie; “Rain Man” won four Oscars in 1989. My meeting with him is one of the most significant moments in my life.

In the movie, Dustin Hoffman plays the central role based on the life of Peter. Through this movie, the rare but amazing disorder called savant syndrome suffered by Peter is introduced to the people. Peter is an autistic and was born with this disease. However, adults may suffer from it after brain injury.

Peter is no ordinary person. While he finds it difficult to do simple things like holding a conversation, he can compute complicated mathematical problems with great swiftness and precision.

It was only after Mei prompting that I knew who Peter was. Having watched the mind blowing movie in Bhutan, I now listened to Peter with great interest. He had an amazing memory and was obsessed with numbers. During the 30 minute drive he fired a barrage of facts of airports and restaurants in the world. He knew the street number of the latest Italian restaurant that opened in New York. He recollected the details of all the air crashes in the year that I was born.

During the drive, when he learnt that I was from Bhutan, he fired away statistics like a machine gun. He even knew a lot of things on Bhutan that I didn't. With enough confidence he told me the age of my king and the symbolism of the dragon on my country's flag. He even knew the dates of the coronation of the first king.

Stunned by a man who lacked the patience and the social courtesy to even wait to be introduced I listened and observed with great interest. The next hour with him was the most enthralling moment. He told me how he travelled with Hoffman many times to Las Vegas to spend hours in casinos. He said, "Every year Hoffman still sends me a Christmas card."

When we arrived at Mei's house the sun was just dipping in the sky. As soon as the car stopped, Peter got out in great haste as if he was afraid of the darkness. He picked up a big bag overflowing with books and papers. While I helped Mei with the barbecue, Peter stayed at a safe distance away from the smell and the smoke reading a book. Occasionally he would put down the book to make notes in his diary.

Mei who worked with Peter for many years in the library knows his habits well. She said like in the movie Peter was obsessed with many things. He was highly organized and led a routine life. "He goes nuts if he cannot follow his routine." For the last two years, Peter had been coming to Mei's house on Friday evenings to eat barbecued sausages.

After an hour, Mei said that we had to drop Peter back to the library. I sat next to him again and then during the drive, he asked, "When is your birthday?" The minute I said the dates, he said you were born on a Thursday. I was shocked.

The next few weeks during my stay, I met him many times in the library. One time I met him in the staff room. He had with him the same big brown bag that overflowed filled with books. He removed his Tiffin from the bag, ate a banana and a sandwich while reading a book. He was not even aware that I was sitting at the same table. I saw him remove his note book and leaned closely to see what he was writing. In the A4 book, he had written many numbers in four neat columns. Just before I left the table, I said, "Hello Peter." He continued reading and then said, "Ah Tashi from Bhutan"

It has been two years since I had high tea with the Rain Man. Since then I have been intrigued.

## The Art of 'Bowing': A perspective to the Hierarchical Bhutanese Society

Lhawang Ugyel

“You have to be careful that you do the chaglen right,” warned our fellow participants as we waited for our turn to be interviewed by the panel of teachers at Sherubtse College. Although most of us had to do the chaglen (or bowing) at least twice or thrice before we got the act right, it did not affect our chances of getting admitted since the selection was based purely on academic merit.

However, little did we realize then that a simple act as ‘bowing’ would make a difference in our professional lives.

The highest code of Bhutanese ethics, Driglam Namzha, and the rich traditions prescribe a set of colourful scarves to distinguish ranks and positions of people. Within the administrative realm, the highest in the order is the colour yellow which is only adorned by His Majesty the King. Orange is the next in order worn by the Prime Minister and officials of Cabinet Minister rank (which include the Speaker, Opposition Leader and the National Council Chairperson). And the others follow: red scarves are worn by distinguished personalities recognized by the King; green by Judges of the Royal Court of Justice; blue by the Members of Parliament; white by ordinary citizens; red with white stripes by Dzongdags; and white with red stripes by Local Leaders.

These personalities warrant an equally complicated and distinguishing bow. With a ‘left-foot-forward right-foot-forward left-foot-backward right-foot-backward’ march, as one bows the tips of the hand should touch: the ground for the King and members of the Royal Family; the toes for those donning the orange scarves; the shin for those with red scarves; and the knees for the senior officials. For those on an equal level, a bow is not necessary, and for those with blue and green scarves, there isn’t any official bowing formula prescribed, but one would normally give them a similar bow to those with red scarves.

Amidst all the description of colorful scarves and ‘back-breaking’ (in my case at least) bowing, I must admit that my ‘knee-jerk’ reaction that I felt earlier in the morning was not as insightful as the reaction Newton had when the apple hit his head. However, there appears to be a commonality between Newton’s theory, i.e. “every action has an equal and opposite reaction,” and the theory highlighted by the Bhutanese bowing system, i.e. “the lower you bow the higher you rise.”

This theory is supported by the way the Bhutanese people seem to bow to different personalities not so much based on the ‘rank’ of a person but rather on a ‘needs’ basis. Therefore, if I am dependent on my immediate boss who dons a plain white scarf but is a vital link to earning a promotion, I will make sure that I bow as low as I possibly can. This deviation from the original Bhutanese code of ethics will ensure that in the ratings I will be given very high marks for thoroughly following Driglam Namzha and thereby categorizing me as a very prospective candidate for senior positions. Furthermore, how low one bows is also inversely proportional to interpretation of one’s loyalty: the lower I bow, the higher is my ‘supposed’ degree of loyalty.

There is also a corollary to this behavior: if, for instance, I am required to depend on a lowly sub-ordinate in the Bhutanese bureaucracy (who will obviously be wearing a white scarf) for a simple thing as processing an application, I will make sure that I call him “Dasho,” or the ‘distinguished’, a title earned by those wearing red scarves only. In Bhutan, apparently, it appears that you can ‘dash-o’ out of your way for every situation. For example, if I am having problems with a police constable at traffic, I call him “Dasho.” One will immediately notice a change in the constable’s outlook: he will puff his chest, deepen his voice, and taking on an authoritative demeanor, he will scold me for my mistake but will let me off very easily.

While I try to comprehend the complicated colorful hierarchies and its ego-related nuances prevalent in the Bhutanese society, I am only grateful that our traditions are not similar to that of the Thais, where they have to grovel on their knees in the presence of the royal family members. It can only be left to the imagination what a combination of the Thai tradition and the need-based Bhutanese traditions might concoct!

# 10,300 Km on the Road

**Manju Wakhley**

Can a single event occur while on the road for forty days? The car became a house, the road luring your places, your companions the only intimate faces and visions passing everywhere.

I was the instigator of the trip coaxing my friends to come visit the pristine Himalayas, and my south Indian Counterparts jumped at the idea. We hatched the idea sitting on the huge rock in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu and a road trip to Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (Tawang), the Indian border with China (Bumla) was anything but a dreamer, yet we were all dreamers and we shared a common dream. After a year of planning, on the day of my convocation, when all were sad to depart, me and a friend who were graduating were eager to get out our black cloaks to the back of a car, all set for an epic road trip. We were seven of us; my literature lecturer- our wisdom bank, a quality analyst- our comic character, a business minded friend for accounts, a vet who looked after tigers, a computer engineer – a driver who seldom spoke and never got fired, and two of us girls who had finished college and were jobless and happy. But there was something in common in all of us- the zest to travel, love for the road, music, literature, adventure, photography and fun. We were embarked on a map trip, seven squashed in a Scorpio, with a carrier weighing tons of luggages but a determination so strong that even we were amazed.

Thus began the trip, from Bangalore- Karnataka, south India, we traveled the route called “Golden Quadrilateral,” one of the finest highways in India; we entered Andhra Pradesh which was boiling at forty degrees. At one instance when the radiator of the car heated too much we had to stop to give our machine some rest and walked across the road to a lemonade man who was old, had a towel wrung over his shoulder and had creases and wrinkles on his face; we ordered our drink and he broke some ice out of a long sheet and hardly minutes after he put the ice in the glasses, the ice melted, such was the power of the perpetual sun there. In another incidence, we were faster than the rain, literally, we were speeding in the plains at a minimum of hundred km per hour and it was pouring heavily but after sometime, we



saw opening clouds in the sky and the sun peeped through and on the road the scene was, the place where the rain stopped there was a clear line and beyond which it was the sun's territory, so we got out and took photographs with a leg in the rain and one in the sun.

Then we reached Orissa, passing so close to the sea at times we could see beaches from the road, then entered Bengal, the bay of Bengal our only other companion and as we entered Kolkata, the ancient east India architecture and the ancient city always so vibrant greeted us. One of our mates was from Kolkata and we had a grand place to stay, an air conditioned room to breathe in and some good food. We were in the car for more than a week, stopping only for tea, pee and food. The only navigation tools we had was a commercial GPS and a map book. From Kolkata we encountered the worst roads which lead you to West Bengal and finally to the Bhutanese border.

We were elated to see the much awaited Himalayas welcoming us, and to see Phuentsholing was happiness unlimited. We then traveled to Thimphu where we halted for a few days, fixing the car and procuring handicrafts for my friends and then when we started missing the road, we were back to what we were good at, sleeping, eating, laughing, seeing and driving on the road. Paro, Punakha, Trongsa, Bumthang, Trashigang, Tashi Yangtse all went like a passing dream, mountains after mountains, trees uncountable, rivers so clean and pure, meadows so wild and beautiful, people so innocent and pure, all passed with the road. We then exited Bhutan via the southern gate, Samdrup Jongkhar from where we entered Assam to get permits for Arunachal.

Arunachal Pradesh is a military Zone where permits are difficult to obtain but a friend knew the commanding officer, a colonel there and we had a convoy to lead us to places where a common man, even Indians and Indian military are not allowed. I must be one of the few Bhutanese to travel to the Pious monastery of Tawang, considered to be sacred by the Buddhist after the Potala palace of Tibet and which is also the birth place of one of the Dalai Lamas. Tawang greeted us with two rainbows, an omen so beautiful. We traveled to Bumla, another restricted area which stands at a height of 15,500 ft above the sea level and we had started with the sea. The greater

Himalayas are a treat and stepping into China (Tibet) a dream so beautiful and I have never seen beauty of that form and level, truly a treat for the eye.

The travels were not so easy as it is made to sound in a page or two; car problems, weather mood swings, traffic jams for hours, windshield being broken by someone hitting a stone, sleeping under landslides, eating at places unimaginable, heat, rain, snow, all we met, plains, mountains, streams, falls, slides, people, all we saw but we never had a tyre puncture! When we went back to the place the dream had started, back to Kodikanal, it felt like we had just woken up, but we had done it, we had , and those forty days were the best learning days of my life so far.

The road is a teacher so great, if you surrender to it and be a disciple, it pays back with a lifetime of imagines and knowledge, you love the road, it loves you back but the irony is I cannot drive!



CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITING  
- 2010 -



## The House behind the Dzong

**Tashi Choden**

We were so free-spirited back in those days of our childhood. The sun always seemed to be shining with numerous sparrows chirping away happily, as they hovered around the willow trees in front of the cottage. The cool shade from the lush, green leaves on the trees felt refreshing, as we swung to and fro, up, up into the air, and backward and forward again.

Obsolete car tyres from our parent's old Ambassador car had been tied up with thick sturdy ropes on to the willow branches, which we found to be the most luxurious swings. I can still remember the invigorating feeling of being up in the air, looking up at the sky one second, and down at the Tashi Chhodzong the next, from quickly moving vantage points.

"Weeeeeeeee!!!!!!!" the kids screamed as they rolled all the way down the short stretch of road running parallel to the to the cottage, riding on a thick plank of wood fitted with four tiny "bearing" wheels. This homemade expanded version of a skateboard of sorts easily fitted three small kids, but the bigger boys didn't have the patience to let them use it again. Instead, the two older boys took it away to ride on it themselves, over and over.

Not ready to be left out of the thrill, I quickly pulled out an old pair of rollerskates and improvised. I handed one to my best friend, and used the other for myself. Putting my right foot in one boot, squatting down and balancing my left foot on to the right, I started rolling down the road. With her foot in the left boot, my friend rolled behind me in full throttle. It was great fun. I may have gotten a bloody nose, hitting a tree stump on the side of the road, but it was worth it.

The cottage itself was not all that fancy. As far as I remember, the mud walls had visible cracks on the outside. After the earthquake in 1988, the crack on one side facing the main road made the house look like it was being cut in half. Inside, the walls were dirty with years of housing so many people. It was a busy household after all.

Besides my dad's mom and two nephews who had lived with us ever since I can remember, we had frequent long visits from relatives and almost all

the other people from my dad's village in Paro Pangbisa. Many a times, they came for medical reasons and my mother spent a lot of time catering to their needs, in addition to going to work at her office in the Dzong. Angay (grandmother) helped to dress, feed and look after us. She was a third parent to us.

My elder brother, sister and I must have slept in every room of that house over the course of our time there. As we grew older, we moved from our parents bedroom into the dining room, and then into the Chhoshom (shrine room). I often slept with my grandmother, who shared a room with my two cousins. I was fascinated with the bunk bed that they used.

Living in this cottage at the RBG 3rd Company Camp right behind the Tashi Chhodzong sure had its advantages. On school days, we would all wait outside early in the morning for the humungous army truck called Shaktiman for a ride to school. Granted, it was always a struggle for me to climb up at the back, and I'd have to wait for a helping hand to either pull me from above, or push me up from below. But then the bumpy ride to school was always so lively with the chatter of all the kids, and the crisp freshness of morning air hit our faces as we were transported to school.

After school and on weekends, we would run around the whole compound, either playing war games with sticks, or daring each other to jump off the garage. We even dared to jump onto the boum koti (ammo dump) just a few meters away, and were not afraid to sing all kinds of songs interlaced with filthy words at the top of our voices ... learning such words was a sort of rite of passage for kids in the camp. At times it got really colourful, verbally, with regional insults being hurled at each other. Since families of the soldiers came from all over the country, we had a mini country of our own going on in the neighbourhood.

Occasionally, we'd get really scared at the sound of thundering drums late in the night. The monks from the Dzong would come wearing animal face masks and tiger skin costumes, throwing fire onto various spots and pretending to throw at people (sometimes even burning a few eyebrows). At those times, we would hide under our Angay's blanket and hold off going to the toilet, until the monks finished chasing off all the evil spirits from the house.

The garden that Angay and my mom worked so hard at was filled with chillis, asparagus, potatoes, beans and pumpkins. There was even a peach tree. Sometimes, we'd come across dusty, soft brown ball-like fruits of some unknown plant, and we believed these were drey gi tankhu (cigarettes of demons). At times, I would put my lunch into a dry coconut shell, walk through the garden and climb over the tsip (rock fence), and have a no-frills picnic right there on the golf course. We had the luxury of having the Royal Thimphu Golf Course as our own playground right in our backyard.

Yes, there was really no dearth of play or entertainment for us kids at the RBG 3rd Company camp. Life was simple but in all the simplicity, we found so much joy.

But then in 1994, when I was in boarding school in Paro in the 9th grade, my parents had moved house. The house was in a new location and was much bigger and fancier. But when I returned to Thimphu and entered the new house, I felt lost. It was not exactly a homecoming. I had been uprooted.

Over the years following the move, I went back to the old cottage several times, because I'd started having recurring dreams about the house and the place. This went on for many years and I didn't know how to deal with it. The dreams were getting more vivid and more disturbing.

Then two weeks ago, I went back for a final gesture of "peace making". I'd only recently learned that perhaps I should pay a visit to the local deity of the place. As I stepped out of the car on to the main road that we had used to roll our rollerskates over, the place was unrecognizable. Our cottage was gone; most of the other structures were also gone. Grass was growing wild all over, and there was no trace of the willow trees lining the front yard. The garden might as well have never been there. The path that used to lead down from the camp to the Dzong had been sealed off.

I felt a tear drop. Turning away from my husband, I wiped it off and then made my way to the Lhakhang (temple) that was still there. It housed the deity, Dorji Draktsen, to whom I made offerings and paid homage for the first time.



## A Journey to the Unknown

**Sonam Dhendup**

It was raining heavily as I waited for the porters to arrive from a place of my initial posting. In a brief moment I heard faint footsteps of mules and horses approaching hurriedly. I panicked as I was told by a stranger a moment ago that Kangpar is almost a day's walk from the transit camp where I stood.

At six in the morning on 2nd March the following day, along with the caretaker of the school and with running horses we began our journey; some of us had nothing to carry.

I asked the caretaker why the place we were heading to, was known as Kangpar; the caretaker said “kang means foot and par meaning –print.

As we by passed the thinly trod treacherous trails infested with leeches, I spotted mountains in the distance like that of a broken mirror, blurred and dead, engaged in nothing.

But I still moved on until we came to a resting place, the journey seemed tedious, just half way, totally exasperating and never ending. I was exhausted and never wanted to be a teacher in such a far flung place.

But as we ascended the “Dipla” pass down the meandering river the sight of the fluttering prayer flags gave me the guts to go on though we didn't meet even a single soul.

As we walked and talked, climbing and descending the rugged cliffs became a routine, the area smelled like dead fish, dead and rotten, as if deprived to flower and flourish.

I blamed and cursed my fate for the deliverance and the picture of an arrogant- capricious HRO in the capital came to my mind and I wished I were a lady like my mates. I brooded and asked if the gender equality was existent in Bhutan. Yes there is certainly, my instinct answered it all.

Yet still I moved on with undeterred hope pathetic and hopeless.

The jersey that the school care taker wore read “You will never walk alone” and yes I also never walked alone that day while making transitions and adjustments walking up hill for the very first time in my life.

My blue shirt became almost feebly a dirty red, because of the drizzle and my shoes could no longer hold my feet, as they kept changing size occasionally. By ten in the evening we reached our destination just like a team of hungry hunters, sick and hopeless.

Even today the journey embarked some years back gives me a kick.

The very next day I was offered a small dingy classroom as my nesting place and laid my bed with only a cup and plate. The place was simply strange as it did not have any windows but had a roof half broken yet to be mended.

The school was perched on a small hillock and was dead and silent. On the premises were some old graffiti, a work of art by the naughty boys and girls.

Since then I realized that to teach children in such a remote hamlet would be challenging and brain killing. The school structure was simply dilapidated and needed immediate restoration.

The ministry of education must not really create room for unnecessary comments and strangle the morale of teachers. I thought that it was a total disparity.

In the mean time I taught and my tolerance was tested time and again sometimes by the earth quake, sometimes by landslides and storms. Thank you, you saved me to grow and mature.

In retrospect, I am now happy for I learnt a lot from my first place of posting. You taught me how to imbibe maize wine, thank you, for bangchang (juice extracted from maize) kept me going (fuelling) those three long years of my service to the nation.

## Creative Nonfiction Writing

You helped me bridge my innocence and helped me mature, for from hardships and difficulties a man grows to be a man.

Yes! You truly made a difference and I genuinely made an effort in the lives of the remote children.

I am proud you made a difference.

And happily return from the mystical land of .....

## Calcutta - The City That Most Impacted My Life

**Yeshey Dorji**

Calcutta, India has got to be the most significant place for me. It is in Calcutta, where I lived and worked for 7 years, that I finally came into myself. In a sense, I attained my manhood in this city of squalor and daily depredation.

Calcutta city is the most paradoxical place I know. But it is a place where the old and the new coexisted harmoniously. Its streets used to be living death traps - there were potholes on the road that would, once in a while, swallow up a car. Cars, goats, dogs, cats, bullock carts, rickshaw pullers, cows and people - would all jostle and vie for space and right of way. There were no traffic rules to follow - the one who could honk the loudest and screech the hardest would get right of way. Driving on the streets of Calcutta was not for the faint hearted. But unlike other Indian metros, in Calcutta there were no great distances to cover - everything and all the happening places were confined within an area that could be reached in less than half an hour. People were friendlier and well informed. The Bengalis were a proud lot - they knew exactly what they had - they weren't fearful that someone might take it all away from them. One had to be careful of only one thing - never to speak ill of Rabindranath Tagore and Subbash Chandra Bose. If you did, you were in serious trouble.

Calcutta was the place where I was initiated into my craft that finally lead to my emergence out of Khorwa (purgatory?). Calcutta assumes greater significance in my life because it is a place where I met a monumental man called Alope Moitra - a smooth talking Bengali who couldn't complete a sentence without being snide or sarcastic. He was a very amiable looking man whose principal strength was rubbing every one the wrong way. He was a man everyone loved to hate because a run in with him always left you feeling utterly inadequate and ill-informed. He was our Director - the head of the organization called - Export Division under the Ministry of Trade & Industries. That is where I worked in those days.

Most of the people who met Mr. Moitra hated him outright - from late Dasho Rimpochey who was irked no end because Mr. Moitra had the audacity to suggest a preposterous idea such as the de-monopolization of the petroleum business; to Maj. Pem Tshering who was then the Director of Trade whom he called a harmless soldier. He so infuriated Maj. Pem Tshering with his condescending tone and superior attitude that he sought the permission of the Trade Minister to strangle Mr. Moitra to death.

Mr. Moitra was a brilliant writer and could write, at a sitting, over 50 pages of notes, business plans, project proposals, minutes or tour reports - without ever making a spelling mistake or a wrong choice of word. When he was done writing, we always noted with amazement that there would not be a single page where he scratched out a line or re-wrote a word. He did not dictate his notes. Instead, he wrote all his notes in long hand - sheets and sheets of them, at one sitting, in flawless English of awe-inspiring clarity. He sat there at his desk, his knees flapping against each other, like the wings of the Cormorant.

Calcutta is also the place where, for the first time in my life, under the overbearing tutelage of Mr. Moitra, it dawned on me that you do not need compelling reasons to win an argument - but a persuasive manner in which you argue your points. You do not always win an argument because you have all the right reasons to win it or that you have truth on your side. You win because you can argue with greater eloquence than others.

This belief was further strengthened, two decades later, by Professor James Bettenger of Stanford University during the course of this workshop - when he argued that a truth is not a truth if it cannot be proven. He took that stand during a discussion I had initiated on the carpet bombing of Iraq by the US. He dismissed my contention that one of the reasons why America carpet bombed Iraq was to solve their problem of safe and economic disposal of a huge stockpile of bombs that the US needed to get rid of. I took the line of argument that carpet bombing Iraq achieved two goals - one, to bring to heel the bad boy called Saddam Hussein and, the other, to cheaply off-load a few million tons of bombs that would have otherwise cost the US government and the tax payers millions of dollars to dispose of. Professor James Bettenger declared; "it is a truth that cannot be proven".

## My Opinion on Other's Opinions

**Mongal Singh Gurung**

In my childhood days I have heard it, now I am hearing it and I know I will keep hearing people complaining and criticizing. Sometimes they take on places, sometimes on people, sometimes on changes and sometimes on non-changes. However, I am not saying they are wrong. I am also not saying that they do it every time and they never appreciate anything. In contrast, we must remember that if we don't do it we would be a less useful human being.

Everyone knows, people often say that the government is not good. Children sometimes grumble that the meal prepared by their mother is not yummy. Civil servants have been complaining about their low salary. Likewise almost everyone on earth will complain, protest, shout, gossip and criticize. But, every time one criticizes or complains one has to turn the focus 180 degree and ask oneself a question. If you are a student you must ask yourself 'Am I a good student?' A son must ask himself 'Am I a good son?' A neighbour must ask, 'Am I a good neighbour?' A citizen must ask himself/herself, 'Am I a good citizen?' Similarly, the ruling government must ask themselves, 'Are we making a good government?'

Further, we know that the doctors advise their patients to quit smoking. Teachers teach their students to be hardworking and good. Parents ask their children to behave well. Government wants its citizens to be loyal and faithful. We request our friends to be trustworthy. The list will go on. But does everyone practice what they preach? This is a very important question. All of us, therefore, must ask ourselves this question

Similarly everyone wants their city to be clean. Everyone wants others to behave well. Everyone wants others to be good, trustworthy, loyal, loving... caring. Again the list will go on. But do we volunteer to clean the street? Do we manage the wastes properly? Are we a loving, caring, good...trustworthy individual? The answer is everyone's guess.

We know that it is a very difficult task to change others but we can at least change ourselves. Yet, we want others to change but we hardly realize that there is a need to change ourselves. This particular fact reminds me of some golden words of Mahatma Ghandi-"Be the change you want to see in the world". So, my request to all fellow citizens of the world, including myself is let all of us judge our own actions and ourselves and bring the necessary changes we want and make this world a better place to live in.

## Ap Rangdol on the Eve of the First General Election in Bhutan

Lingchen

It was a cold winter afternoon in Bumthang and the beautiful valley was poised to vote for the much awaited first general election in Bhutan. In two days, the Bumthangpas and all their other Bhutanese friends would vote their government in either of the two contesting parties - 'The Druk Phunsum Tshogpa or the People's Democratic Party to run the world's youngest democracy. The atmosphere was tense.

Seventy-four year old Ap Rangdol, a short and gorsy looking man stood beside a blooming peach tree near his bus-stop restaurant when his neighbour, Ap Dochu, a bus service operator in his mid fifties, approached him. Ap Rangdol turned his face to avoid Ap Dochu who was a staunch PDP supporter and the party coordinator of the village.

Ap Dophu teased Ap Rangdol as usual.

"*Wai* Ap Rangdol, who are you voting for? The horse party or the crane party?"

Ap Rangdol had never bothered to answer any of his political questions ever since heated politics started in their village a year ago. Expecting the same silence from the old man, Ap Dochu smiled as usual and was about to leave the place when old Ap Rangdol broke his silence and surprised him. Ap Rangdol stopped Ap Dochu and said, "Look Ap Dochu. Listen to me if you are that interested to know my decision. Although we both know that this has to be something secret, since you've pestered me enough, let me tell you what and how I have made my decision - We humans are different. Those who live in the plains, in hot places, like to live in the plains only. Similarly, we highlanders prefer to live in the highlands only. Do you agree with me?"

Ap Dochu nodded, his face changing colour with a mix of anger and jealous blush. "I have something to tell you about what I think," Ap Rangdol continued. "You see, the cranes migrate to both the hot and cold places and so thrive in both the places in perfect harmony. Do you agree with me?" he asked again.

Ap Dochu nodded again, his face burning more with more hatred. But Ap Rangdol continued to speak. “So, don’t you think that to support the crane, the DPT, would mean to embrace harmony?” he asked again.

“Er-ahem,” Ap Dochu coughed trying to conceal the blush on his face.

“Fine, fine. You’ve spoken. I will see you in the meeting,” he said and strode in the direction of the town, muttering something unintelligibly.

Satisfied with his own answer, Ap Rangdol stepped inside his house. His apple-cheeked daughter brought him a cup of wine and said, “The villagers and business community have been summoned for a meeting in the town. Apa, should I go or you’ll go?”

“Hah! If its business let me handle it,” the old man said boastfully, finished his wine and plodded towards the town.

The meeting hall was packed with people, both peasants and businessmen. Ap Rangdol sat on the wooden floor in the corner and listened to his rival friend Ap Dochu who cleared his throat and said, “I know it sounds a bit uneasy for me to say that you must vote for PDP as the president comes from the Royal Family. Nonetheless, I would like to say that you will benefit if you side with the stronger and the richer party. I am only being practical here.”

Ap Rangdol listened attentively, his eyes moving outside the window, to the road and towards Ap Dochu’s Alto car that was given to him by the PDP’s office in Thimphu.

The meeting ended with a hustle and bustle of people discussing among themselves, apparently arguing over who they should vote for in the coming two days.

In the evening, Ap Dochu organized a grand feast for the people who attended the meeting. The peasants were delighted by the menu which included their common favourites - phaksha paa (pork slice) rice, norsha (beef) and ema datsi. At the end of the feast, Ap Dochu distributed the PDP logo to the gathering. Ap Rangdol was also among the crowd. He took one and went home, smiling.

Just as the old man was about to step into his house, his daughter was surprised by the poster she saw in her father’s hand.



“But Apa, you support the DPT. Are you supporting PDP now?” she asked, perplexed.

“Shut up!” the old man said angrily. “Don’t tell me whom I should vote for. This is none of your business.”

The daughter’s face ashened and she remained silent. Ap Rangdol smiled again and entered his house. He went straight to the kitchen, crumpled the poster in his bawdy hands and threw the photo into the oven. The roll caught flame, crinkled in the fire and within seconds, turned into black ashes.

## A Gift of a Dog

**Paimma Lhakden**

It was pitch dark. The car skidded several times before reaching the small monastery up the hill. At the little gate to the monastery, a thin monk was waiting with the door of the gate open in the drizzle. There was relief on the faces of the driver and the two passengers in the car. The monk closed the gate as soon as the car passed through. He ran towards the car which had stopped by now and the passengers were in the process of getting out. Once out, the monk used polite gestures to direct them to follow him. He led them towards the central main temple.

At the huge door he asked them to wait and disappeared inside. Just a minute later he gestured them to enter. The two passengers entered into a spacious hall with a beautiful Buddha overlooking it on their left. On the right end of the room, was a large low divan blanketed by brocades, and there sat the Lam.

The two visitors prostrated to the venerable lama. He was gesturing them not to prostrate and take their seats on the Tibetan rugs laid on the shining floor of the temple. After the three prostrations to the Lam, they prostrated to the Buddha on the altar.

Then they sat on the mats and the lam smiled at them. The thin monk appeared with large cups of steaming tea and edibles on a tray.

The lam spoke, "This afternoon there was rain and the road must be bad. How did you manage the drive up?"

The woman spoke, "I called the monk from the road up the hill, and he said he would open the gate."

At that, instant, the lama spoke directly to the monk, "How many times must I tell you to inform the visitors when the road is bad! It is risky to drive up after the rains. Someone could die driving on these bad roads in the wet times!"

Then he spoke to the guests, "Please have your tea, you must be cold after the rain."

While they were talking and having tea in the pleasant confines of the temple, the thin monk came in with a thin black dog. It had thick longish hair and lines of yellow hair over the eyes. Its eyes were black shining marbles inside the thick long black eye lashes. The lam spoke as if he was speaking of a human being, "Hope you two can manage to take him to your house in Thimphu and keep him," gesturing to the dog.

"He is a half breed between the yak dog and some other local dogs. We have about five to feed here and I thought, maybe you could take him for mutual benefit. He could be your house dog and you could feed him."

The guests were a little taken aback by this sudden turn of events but tried not to show it.

They had come to the temple to meet the Lam and offer him some money for the annual reading of 108 volumes of the teaching of the Buddha in the next month. But the dog gift, it was not in their plans!

It was impossible for them to refuse it either. They bowed their heads in agreement to what the Lam's proposal was, to take the dog to Thimphu and keep it with them for mutual benefit!

After the money offering and farewell to the lam, the monk came to see off the guests to the car and to load the dog in. The dog was put in the back seat with a little coaxing from the monk. It stood up on the passenger seat looking through the window at the monk with a pleading look of "Don't send me away," on its face. But the vehicle was already moving and it was helpless for the dog for any kind of pleading.

The vehicle moved slowly down the slippery slope till the main road. Then it sped up the main road by the air port. The dog was finding it difficult to keep balance with the movement of the car. It squatted on the passenger seat to keep from falling off. It was getting very tense. There was some raging sound in its head and it felt giddy. The jerking of the car whenever it slowed down to give way to other vehicles coming in the opposite direction made the giddiness worse.

It was dark all around and the head lights in front made the dog feel as if he was flying into some bottomless fiery abyss. However it tried, it could not stop the nausea it was feeling. At one time, it tried to put its head on its front paws and tried to close its eyes. But it was too afraid to keep its eyes closed; as if, if its eyes were closed something terrible was going to happen. Then it happened, its mouth started watering and ears started ringing. Next minute, it vomited on the seat between its paws. There was a gurgling sound. It made the front passenger switch the car door lights on and turn round to see what had happened. She cursed and asked the driver to stop.

The car stopped and the driver dragged the dog to the nearby stream. The dog could not even lick water, it was sick, afraid and disoriented. Its throat felt like it was on fire. It didn't know what was happening to it. The man pushed the dog's mouth into the running stream to make it drink some water but it just could not drink any water. It was afraid of the man's harsh words and strong hold on its collar.

The female passenger grabbed bunches of weeds and bushes and cleaned the seat of the vomit.

After minutes of commotion and cleaning up, the man asked the women if they should just leave the dog there on the road. The woman felt sorry for the dog and felt they should not do that.

Thimphu was just an hour's drive and then the dog would be fine. The man worried if the dog should vomit again. The woman pleaded she would wash the seat, car and everything once they reached home in Thimphu. On that, the dog was pushed once again into the car.

This time the man kept it on the floor of the car. It tried to feel some belonging out of fear and isolation. It pushed its head between the front seats and tried to feel these human beings for some comfort. It touched its nuzzle on the man's arms but the man nudged it away, "Dirty vomiting dog. Don't touch me!"

It then tried to touch the woman on the arms and she said, "Poor boy, don't be afraid. You are dirty but it doesn't matter. I will wash my hands

and clothes. I will wash you also. I am your friend. Poor boy!” murmuring affectionately, she held the dog’s head in her arms. It closed its eyes and let it be patted. It felt some comfort and was happy for the first time, after it felt so miserable leaving its familiar surrounding at the monastery.

It had been two weeks since its arrival at the new home. It remembered the night it reached Thimphu. The car stopped inside a garage. Before even the doors were opened, a brown coloured female dog with long thick whiskers like a male’s yelped and jumped at the door. It seemed to please the driver as he called out, “Simba, Simba..mmm.. how are you...mmm ..come on... now... let me open the door!”

The little brown dog ran round the back towards the passenger’s door and did the same thing. The woman called out, “Simba, you have a friend in the car. Look, who is there.”

She opened the back door and the black dog could not come out. It was too fearful of the barking little Simba. Simba barked in antagonism, loud and harsh at the back of the car. She didn’t seem to like the newcomer.

The two people coaxed, pushed and dragged the frightened dog out of the car down the steps to the premises of the house. Simba followed them, barking as if the sky was falling on its head.

Once outside the house, the two people left him on his own facing the furiously barking dog. He didn’t know whether he should fight back or run away. But where would he run? He could remember that he came down the steps. He ran up the steps and the barking dog followed suit. In the garage he saw the familiar sight of car he came in. He sat close to it, and faced Simba, the brown little dog with nowhere to run. Simba barked for quite some time from a little distance and finally got fed up and retreated down the steps to the house.

After a while, the people came out of the house to feed the dogs, Simba and the newly arrived dog. Only Simba was there waiting for its dinner and the people were wondering where the new one had disappeared. After searching around the premises for a while, the people came up the steps to

the garage. The dog didn't know it he should be happy or afraid for finding out. The search party saw it and dragged the dog down the steps once more.

Near the house, Simba was eating its meal snarling at him as it did so. He was dragged towards another container nearby. There was warm food with some bones and meat. The smell of the meat made his mouth water. He moved towards the food and started tasting the food. It was delicious! He felt hunger and relief and was lost in eating. He didn't even hear the other dog's continuous snarling.

"Good, eat it up Panda," said the man cheerfully, happy by the name he had chosen to call the newly arrived dog.

It is been three months since Panda's arrival to the new place. It ate the good food three times a day. It slept the rest of the time. It saw that when the owners of the house came home, Simba would go and receive them with yelps and jumps at the garage. When the owners left the house, Simba would follow them to the car and stand watching it till it was out of sight.

Panda learnt to go up to the garage like Simba to receive the owners when they came home. But it didn't jump or make any noise. It usually stood and watched as they got out of the car and followed them down the steps to the house. Simba would yelp, jump, and stand up in front of the people even as they walked to the house.

However, Panda could not be bothered to follow the owners when they left the house like Simba. It just watched them and Simba walk up the steps from the side of the house. Simba was young, cute and charming. Panda was much older than Simba. Its eyes didn't show any sort of intelligence. They were like marbles and nothing more. There seems to be a dearth of living sense in them.

One day, the woman wondered, "Why isn't Panda barking? It hasn't barked even once since its arrival here. Last time I waited for it to bark after a while. My sister told me, dogs' don't bark for a while in a new place. Now it's three months!"

The husband replied coolly, "It came from a gumpa, it's a meditator's dog. It must have been taught silence. Probably it is observing noble silence."

The woman was infuriated both by the dog not barking and the reply given by the man. She said, "This coming week, I am going all the way to Paro to return Panda to the meditator. Let him keep him for all his noble silence."

The man reasoned, "See, Panda is fine. It is not barking. It doesn't look like it is ever going to bark. Just being near the house and lying on the steps with its unfathomable steely eyes will scare intruders away. Why do you expect more? Enough barking for our ears to endure, is there from Simba. It is totally fine with me. I like the quiet dog. Wasteful speech was condoned by the Buddha himself."

It made some sense to the woman and she reflected, "All sorts of characters in the world. Acceptance was one kind act." She wanted to be kind and understanding. She wanted to perform good deeds, if only she knew how.

To this day, the black half breed Panda, has not barked even once. He had grown in size and his hair had become rich and longish. His eyes were bottomless dark pits. He lay daily on the steps leading up to the house. Visitors never dared enter within the premises of the gates, fearing the quiet huge black dog lying on the steps. Don't we believe silent dogs are dangerous biters? He could be the one!

# My Front Lawn

**Pema Seden**

In the beginning it was just mud and rocks and everything was just so bare. Our brand new house glistening in the sun like a shiny gem with its shiny white walls and silver railings of the front porch were the only things that were worth looking at. The construction company that had built our house had chopped down every single tree in the vicinity and the only beautiful sight other than our house was the view of Thimphu valley in the night. With everything else shrouded in darkness, the city was like a cluster of jewels.

The frenzied activity of gardening started as soon as we moved in. My mother being the avid gardener soon set to work with us – we were young teenagers then - also pitching in. We planted saplings around the edges of what would soon be our front lawn. We transplanted grass that would require minimal care and which would soon carpet the whole area by spreading out like wild vines. Flowers were designated their beds and we planted them in groups so that each season would see a different group in bloom.

I remember carrying stones and laying them to make our footpath which leads to the front porch. At the time they looked like pearls peering out of the chocolate mud.

A green carpet soon filled our front lawn and the flowers started to bloom. My favourite ones were the big red ones that looked like pom poms or a bright red wig! The whites, yellows, pinks.....a myriad of different coloured roses soon filled our garden and there was the accompanying sweet perfume in the air.

The hedges grew tall and housed the nests of a number of birds and in the early mornings and the evenings there was the cacophony of birds each singing their own song. It was on many of these evenings that I would sit on the lawn and look at Thimphu city...always glittering and glowing. Sometimes when I would return at dawn from a late night party, the lawn would be smoky with white clouds of fog enveloping it and I would imagine I was floating in the clouds.



Back then, I had helped to plant a pine tree right in front of the main door of the house on the east edge of our lawn. I remember jumping over it repeatedly saying that future when the tree is all grown, I can claim that I jumped over it!

I'd forgotten to make that claim, but now the tree is too tall for me to start doing it. It now provides wonderfully cool shade on hot summer days when mosquitoes and bugs also seem to compete for its shade when I sit there with my family.

We have indeed sat on the lawn many a time and it has been witness to us growing up and starting our own families. I sat on it while reading pregnancy books and basking in the sun. My parents and I sat there giving each other facial massages. My sister and I sat there many a time talking about our boyfriends, friends and life in general.

Now I sit there sometimes watching my children play with their balls and running and jumping and falling gleefully on the soft green grass. Sometimes my baby daughter attempts to eat a bug or two that she sees jumping around among the green blades.

Many weekend mornings I sit there with my husband and children leisurely reading the newspaper and eating a late breakfast. Sometimes I stretch and try to do yoga on the lawn, and as I inhale deeply I immerse myself in the fresh smell of the grass, feel the coolness on my bare feet, and listen to the songs of the birds and look up to appreciate the vastness of the clear blue sky...so crystal clear with sometimes an occasional cloud.

My front lawn has witnessed me growing and blossoming into a woman and mother, just as the flowers in their designated beds. It has seen many family gatherings captured in family portraits that also show how it (our lawn) itself has also grown and evolved. With each changing season and each cycle of the earth my family has grown. My parents now have grey hair in the family portraits taken on the lawn, our family of five is now a family of eleven. My front lawn has been witness to it all.

## Ben Trashhi Dragay: The sword of Jigme Namgyel

**Tshering Tashi**

‘Have you ever seen a Ben Trashhi Dragay Sword?’ my uncle asked me during my recent visit to Paro. When I said no, Lam Tenzing (73) invited me for a cup of tea and said, ‘I have one and will show it to you.’

So, immediately I asked for its history. ‘Didn’t you know, Jigme Namgyel (1825-1881) gave it to our family?’ Jigme Namgyel was the governor of Trongsa and is remembered for ending the civil strife in Bhutan. He is also the father of the first king.

My uncle seemed to be in no hurry. He insisted that we have tea first before he showed the sword to me. I gulped the hot cup of butter tea and waited for him to finish his. Then, we went downstairs to the treasure room. The sword was wrapped in a black cloth and hung in the corner of the room.

Lam Tenzing was quick to point out, “It is called Ben Trashhi Dragay [eight lucky signs]. Its name is derived from the engraving of the eight lucky signs on its silver scabbard.’ I noticed that the sword was shorter and lighter than the all the swords that I have. He explained, ‘This sword was worn by Jigme Namgyel himself.’ Curious, we measured the sword and the length of the blade was 25’ and the width 1.5”

Even to this day, many of the big farmhouses in Bhutan have treasure rooms. They are built usually on the ground floor and the first floor of the main house. They are fire proof and it is here where the family heirlooms are stored. The rooms have slit windows and thick mud walls and floors. Pointing at the half empty treasure room he recollected his grandfather’s story of how the governor’s soldiers ransacked it.

Written history records will tell you that in 1877, the Trongsa governor Jigme Namgyel was in Paro to reconquer Paro. However, we know very little of the details of this historic significant battle. Below is a recount of Lam Tenzing.

'If I die today, Jigme Namgyel has won,' The Paro Chamberlain, Tsentop Bjay Karp, said before he left his house. On that fateful day, the Chamberlain was getting ready to confront Jigme Namgyel. He had dressed in his finest gho and adorned his war regalia. As he mounted his horse, his fellow officers first tried to prevent him from making that trip. When they failed they cautioned him and suggested to postpone his confrontation stating that the day was inauspicious.

Despite all the warnings the chamberlain rode from his base to the village of Chang where his opponent lived. On the eve of this day, Jigme Namgyel had a dream. In his dream he saw the corpse of an ox. The skin had been removed, stretched and pinned on the ground. The limbs were hung and the intestines all removed. Zimpon Tsentop Bjay Karp was born in the year of the ox. For, Jigme Namgyel the dead ox in his dream was interpreted as signs of his victory over the chamberlain.

Part of the story now takes on a legendary path. It is not only fascinating but significant beyond its fascination. It is mixed with mythology. However, whatever view is taken of these stories, the fact is that Jigme Namgyel killed his opponent and ended civil strife in Bhutan.

Jigme Namgyel had a good team of spies. On that day, one of them informed him about the Paro Chamberlain's intention and hence could preempt the assault. He found that the Chamberlain was believed to be the son of the Charu Tsen. Charu is a small village north of Drugyel Dzong in Paro. North of the village, there was a cave and it is considered the residence of the Charu Tsen. Tsen's -protecting deities are believed to be super humans known for their strengths. People worship them and often strike deals with them to help them prosper in their lives. Although they have super natural strength, they can be quite unreliable, as the story will tell you.

Jigme Namgyel moved quickly and removed the Charu Bridge. The deity was too lazy to cross the river. The governor waited at the entrance of the village. He lodged himself on the second floor of a house called Jang Go Kha, (one of the few houses facing west and the main route). It is from here he fired his musket killing the chamberlain. Without the protecting deity, the chamberlain's chance of survival was reduced and he was killed

on the spot thus ending the long drawn out battle and securing his victory of Paro.

While Lam Tenzing does not remember the duration of Jigme Namgyel's stay in Paro, he knows for sure that his grandparents had to feed the army during his entire stay. Jigme Namgyel had given the family the Ben Trashi Dragay sword as a token for their warm hospitality. Just before I left, Lam Tenzing, said, "Trongsa Governor Jigme Namgyel stayed in my house till the end of this battle."

# The Homecoming

**Karma C. Tsering**

After endless months of dreaming about green mountains, fluttering prayer flags and clear gushing rivers, Tshering had finally made the journey home. It was by no means an easy journey for she had walked over countless mountains and crossed numerous streams. The journey back home, however, seemed to go faster than her departure with her steps easier and her heart lighter.

She lay in bed that first night, her feet covered with blisters and her body aching, and listened to the sound of the wind rattling against the wooden shutters and the occasional deep barking of the Bhutanese mastiff in the distance. The house was quiet except for the sporadic sounds of her family's heavy breathing. It was very dark - with not even the moon to illuminate the night. Cuddled under the heavy blankets with her sister, she felt cocooned into the safety of her home.

She thought back of the long journey that she had made from her school in Mussoorie, north western India— a journey that started by rail and road and concluded in a gruelling 7 days trek through deep valleys and high passes in Haa in western Bhutan. School now seemed a long way away – another world, another life time.

She remembered her tearful parting from her mother almost a year ago, her fears of the unknown, and her worries that things would never be the same again. That too seemed a long time ago and though she knew that she would have to go though it again, for the moment, in the dark, in a small village hidden in the mountains, she was content.

Early the next morning, she awoke to the sound of a rooster crowing in the courtyard. Used, instead, to the sounds of cars and horns on the roads, she blinked a few times and took in familiar sights and sounds of her childhood. She looked up at the thick heavy wooden beams stretched across the ceiling and watched the sunlight filter into the room through the small wooden window shutters. Through it she could hear the soft swishing sound of

*The Homecoming*

liquid filling a bucket. It was the sound she used to hear every morning at home – of her mother milking the cows in the courtyard below.

She listened for a while, a sense of comfort filling her. And as she watched the dust motes dancing in the soft morning light and felt the warmth of her sister next to her, she had a feeling that everything was right with the world again.

## Man Who lived with Time

Sonam Tshewang

He stands frail, weak, looks very sick and burned down. But he stands tall and confident of his living and life he has lived. He had seen the changes of time and space to the tuning of human need and desire. Yet he never submitted himself to the change rather he lived along with it. At times he radiates the glow that tells that “you don’t have to change to live with the time and be part of it.” His living is with a purpose that nobody could ever define nor would be remembered.

He was a born again Buddhist, as a reincarnate of a Buddhist teacher, somewhere in the far east of the country. It’s sheer karmic connection that he could remember about his past lives. Thus he always believed that he would become a monk and then a lama. But his father had a different perspective to life and livelihood; after all he was a courtier by birth. He and his grandparents insisted that he be sent to a monastery to be trained. His father turned a deaf ear to his appeals and his parents’.

The news of a wandering Tibetan teacher’s arrival in the valley brought much delight and hope to him. It was coincidence that his father should be away on his duty. His grandparents admitted him to be trained and groomed as a monk and then as a lama. At the tender age of five, he became a monk and studied under the renowned teacher. It would be the only education he would receive in his life time, for dreams were short lived as the destiny had its own course in store.

On the death of his mother, he had to shoulder the responsibilities of the family being the eldest son. It was another twist in his life that his father resigned to and he had to take over the responsibilities, as then it was a mandate in the culture of the palace. He was soon married to the daughter of well reputed courtier in the palace. His days of being a courtier were brief since the change in power brought change in culture of courtship. He was sent back to become a farmer and raise us.

On assuming farming responsibilities, he envisioned sustenance and a livelihood in cattle rearing, with trans-human migration, and farming. This

would later become the culture that breeds him into a man and us into men as well.

For several years, he endured crossing high mountains and deep valleys with cattle, for hundreds of times. But such mundane cycles made him more indefatigable and perseverant. In spite of seeing the changes and living with changes, he would not like to seek any means that made life easy. He had learned to respect and love what he had lived with. It amused others to think of and see him struggle with the same principles of life and livelihood. They showered empathy on him, which he hardly accepted and rather rebutted the notion of such sympathizers.

The most intriguing characteristic in him was that he remained as respected and reputed as ever in the community. He was an adviser, passionate storyteller, good physician, good orator, excellent judge, fine leader, pompous astrologer and indispensable historian. He was generous with the resources he had. He practiced religion and farming as equal arms of his body. He could mediate in his farming activities. The only quality that he lacked was accepting the change and new ideas. He would argue to the point where he would reject the new ideas.

I have seen on so many occasions that he keeps his distance from others, yet he could remain attached, though we resemble two different generations. Once the community broke into political groups and the power of politics became so strong that the whole community was divided into parties. The situation was hostile and talking with neighbours became dangerous. Everyone was involved and everyone had the share of such communal issues. It was during these times, he stood all by himself not being associated with any groups. It amazed everyone. Every party wanted him to be part of them, but he refused. He remained a lone figure in the community, nor did he allow his family to join any party. It was a quality I first saw in him as a father. He said that “such politics make men corrupt”, upon our inquiry why we had not associated with others. His unassuming character had taught many folk to be true to what they are and live with purpose. He would just refuse and resign to share anything that could mean harm to others.



More interestingly he never had a desire to become rich and powerful, which in fact we are not. He told stories to us of how education is wealth and power, and that's all we need. He had not failed to give the wealth and power of knowledge, which made us rich and powerful. As we grew and became more economically oriented, we suggested to him how to inject new ideas and changes to make life a lot easier for him. But he still refuses to accept. As we mentioned about buying a car, he told us, "you cannot desire what you cannot see", though we had the means.

He had lived his times with his principles and still he lives ours. He has become father of fine students and a scholar, and grandfather of budding generations, but he still lives with the same old principles.

(It is story of my father, who was born to be a reincarnate lama, became courtier, and farmer.)

## The Obstructing Wind of Fate

**Kinley Wangchuk**

The bus leaves at seven and I was late by five solid minutes and when I got out of the car, picked up my two heavily-packed bags and bade farewell to my wife who had come to see me off, the bus was about to leave the station. I signaled it to stop and the driver obliged with much reluctance writ all over his sun-burnt oval-shaped face covered with pimples like sparsely and unevenly grown gray dwarf bushes in the cold-bitten hills. The handy boy opened the door and I tucked in with two bags hanging from my shoulders. Warm air soaked in human smells, greeted me to my displeasure and I thought it would choke me to death. I took my seat (No. 3), opened the window for fresh outside air to dilute the warm smelly air inside and made myself comfortable in every possible way in the coaster bus' otherwise very uncomfortable seat. I was indifferent to other passengers as if the bus was empty, even to my seat mate. The bus roared past the station honking every now and then with an ear splitting sound for right of way, either from the pedestrians or uncared cows that used the road as a grazing ground and defecated randomly, we passed the College for Science & Education (CST) at Rinchhending and were climbing up the winding road of Sorchen & Jumja, cruising through Gedu and the awesome contours of the world's largest mountain range when I realized my seat mate was an old man.

I looked at him for the first time. He was shabbily dressed, his feet bare, his pony tail-like hairs long and dirty, and his whole body indelibly smelled like rotten dry fish and my tummy gurgled ready to explode anytime like an active volcano. He had used an old towel to drape his upper body and protect himself from the coldness that we were subjected to as the bus gained altitude from the low plains of Phuentsholing to the heights of Tsimasham and Chapcha and thereafter Chuzom (confluence – meeting point of Thimchu and Pachu) and Thimphu. To me it seemingly appeared that he had not taken a shower in ages. I wanted to start a conversation with him on anything, including weather, our ride in the bus, the serene natural beauty, the geographical contours, almost anything, but I didn't know how to start conversing with a stranger. So I nudged him with my elbow and he looked up instantly surprised and a bit irritated. He blinked at me and

looked straight through my eyes with his own wide open and I kept on looking at him neither saying something nor, at worst, even moving my lips. In all probability he looked familiar to me, but everything was very vague and indescribable. At last he asked in a very deep and manly voice that was again familiar but sounded like a faint cry from a distance in the darkness, “la Dasho?” I didn’t know what to say again and why he addressed me as Dasho. I was casually dressed in modern-fashion western-style cotton jeans, black shirt and black overcoat that were smuggled from Dhaka by a Bhutanese I had no knowledge of to evade tax payment. For my two uneven legs, I was wearing heavily-priced sneakers, again smuggled from Thailand by someone I never met. These could have caused the presumptions in him forcing him to address me as dasho, a title normally possessed by the novelty and those in position and power, either by authority of position in office or wealth. Even now I maintained my silence giving him every reason to doubt my sense of hearing. But for goodness’ sake, I am not hearing impaired. He volunteered to break the silence again and said “I am Tashi. You know we were in the high school together?” This time he neither prefixed nor suffixed the dasho title. Then I realized he was my school and college mate. He had aged presumably thrice before time and I was shocked beyond words.

It was in the year of 1986 when the winter was retreating and summer knocking at the door to announce its arrival and to remind that the rush hour had begun. Tashi and I were amongst hundreds of other students deputed from other far-flung remote schools from the four directions of the Country by education department to Samtse High School. We were in class – VI and I shared the section with fifty other students and Tashi. In fact, Tashi and I shared the same bench from day one and he became my very intimate friend like no other. I was an average student never gaining new heights either in academic performance or in other spheres of student’s life, but not my friend. He used to excel in studies, he was very good in games, both indoor and outdoor, and without any doubt he was teachers’ favourite and every year the school authority used to crown him "Best Student of the year". He won many debates for the school, his written articles were regularly published in the school magazine, He used to participate in other school activities and all the teachers and students used to marvel both at his performance and nature. He was everyone’s friend, and in times of need,

he used to be always the first to offer help to everyone, anyone. In short he was the apple of everyone's eye in the school and the girls used to dart their cupid's arrows mercilessly and in return he used to smile in humility. He maintained the same caliber, if not more, in Sherubtse College, Bhutan's only institute of higher learning then, after leaving Samtse High School with flying colours and as expected he was sent to Cambridge University for better schooling and to hone and sharpen his knowledge and wisdom on a government scholarship. He had topped class XII final examination with 95% aggregate marks. The last time I saw him was at the farewell party his friends arranged in his honour in the College canteen that was fraught with all purpose visitors' silent demand for cleanliness and varieties in cooking. His parting statement remained with me indelibly until I obtained a decent job in a public organization as marketing chief and I drowned myself in the sea of work never letting the sun of rest silhouette me. He had said, "time and tide may separate us but our friendship shall be eternal. I promise not to change the order of good friendship". Since then I neither heard from himself nor from other colleagues of either mine or his or ours. But I always wished him luck and thought he must be well positioned in his professional career carefully scaling higher up with only the sky as the limit.

"Kinley, you must be surprised to see me wandering in samsara-like state of life like a feather blown away by the careless wind in every unknown direction. But I had been wandering aimlessly with no desire from life for the last five years. Let me tell you how I was dragged in this cruel phase of life by the obstructing wind of my undeniably past conduct", he said. I looked at him with intent to know more and the yoke of surprise still weighing heavy. He sought my approval with imploring eyes and I could read the unbearable pain dressed in his face that used to be full of hope, strength and inspiration blooming like spring flowers. One tear drop fell from his eyes on the palm of my hand like the first drop of the rain on a rainbow-decorated sky in late afternoon. But I could neither console him nor say something to distract his train of thoughts, not even one of those coolest jokes we used to share while in high school and college and laugh aloud hitting each other with hands in enjoyment. I was a complete failure as an intimate friend in catching his second tear drop and stopping the third. He began to unfurl the flag of his painful story.

“I completed my studies from Cambridge University and returned to the Country filled to the brim by my desire to serve the tsa-wa-sum for all the good tsa-wa-sum had done to me in providing education, knowledge and wisdom. I was appointed as a first-class officer in the education department and was assigned with the important task of introducing and implementing wholesome education. I was duty-bound and I took up my assignment with sincerity and dedication. My superiors were initially fully satiated with my initiative and performance. But my obstructing wind of fate showed me the direction I was not prepared to even think, built the bridge across the deeper and wider sea of change and I came face to face with a faraway damsel that to me was in every possible measure an angel come from heaven. The damsel was beautiful in every possible way and when I saw her for the first time it was love at first sight and I cuckooed at her like the Alsatian dog begging its master for food, water and shelter. Then I took my chance, mustered my courage, approached her, and showered her with the flowers of my feelings even promising to stake my life for her willingly without her desire, command or even request. To my profound happiness I found out she felt about me in no lesser measure than the way I felt about her and thereafter it was heaven on earth for the two of us.

After almost two years of courtship we tied the silken knot, knitting the two souls as one and we vowed with three Buddhas as our witnesses to remain together in heart, soul and body until death separated us. In life, nothing is certain besides its uncertainty and everything undergoes change either now or later. The same occurred to my damsel, and my life like unpredictable weather. To my utter dismay and regret, all hell broke loose within a few years of our married life. She changed her colours and the devil in her awakened. She picked up fights with me on minor issues, left the house almost every third day for no faults of mine and coughed poison almost regularly – that I was her wrong choice from day one. Heart-broken and weakened physically, mentally and emotionally to face her deep anger, I took to drinking to find solace and hide sadness like crying in the rain to blanket tears and the drinking became habitual; and with daily drinking habit, my intake increased from small to large, quarter to half and finally to full bottle. The ceremonial bar-hopping affected my performance in my professional career and without any form of warning, my service was terminated by the head of department.

One night, I went home and was greeted by emptiness. The house was stripped of all household items. She had burgled the house and run away leaving the house cold and soulless. Thereafter I neither attempted to look for her, nor saw her, nor wished to meet her after all fate had come again, and this time it stood between us like an unbeatable Himalayan mountain”.

He paused for a long time and I kept on looking at him demanding more. After what seemed like a long pause to me he continued, “This had been my way of life for the last five years. I live one day at a time, I am carefree about it and I have no reason now to even think of the future, let alone plan for it. But what about you Kinley? I am sure you must be doing well in life. Did you find your petals of love? Consider marriage from deeper and broader perspectives if you are still single”. I didn’t know what to say and preferred to remain silent again. That was the best move I could make under such a difficult situation that I am in no control of.

I was thinking of my friend Tashi of some twenty years back and the same Tashi of now. I was not able to make any connection between his two contrast phases of life and sum up to anything logical and relevance when I heard someone ask me, “Sir, are you not leaving?”. I caught my sense, and looked around. We have reached Thimphu and all the passengers, including my very old and once intimate friend Tashi, had left, leaving the bus cold and soulless once more.

I was all alone in the bus.

## Women and Politics

Lily Wangchhuk

The experiences of the first parliamentary democratic elections in 2008, proved that when facilitated and mobilized women are effective and powerful as vote banks. With planned, shorter distances to polling booths and deep outreach to the remotest villages by political parties the results yielded were very positive. Some 53% women voted. Nonetheless, the fact that only 6 out of 47 National Assembly members are elected women MPs indicates certain drawbacks that did not work fully in favour of women. A historically male dominated public service/political arena, lower literacy rate of women, women's challenge with double work burden and the few qualified women more hesitant to resign from established positions in the civil service and private sector to join politics with no guarantee of winning from their constituency could have been among the many drawbacks.

While Bhutanese women enjoy equal opportunities and rights as men, wide gender gaps exists in all spheres and women are lagging behind in terms of access and meaningful participation in all spheres of life including politics. For instance, women are profoundly underrepresented in governance both at the local and national level. Currently there are only 10 women or 14% in a 72- member parliament. The gap is even wider at the local level with less than 1% as compared to 99.51% male participation.

Despite equal opportunities, women's participation in the political arena is dismally low, and their visibility in all key decision-making positions from which they can exercise power for socio-economic development is minimal. It is evident that women have not yet exploited optimally the opportunities and rights open to them so as to take on productive responsibilities for nation building effectively and on an equitable basis. Despite this established fact, a wide gender gap has never been considered an issue deserving attention. The under-representation of women in politics is often "explained" by the stereotype of their being uninterested in power and politics. The reality that is often overlooked is that the struggle by women to provide for themselves and their families on a day-to-day basis limits women's time and energy for political activism. The other reason that women are absent is because gender stereotypes establish leadership as a masculine activity.

The informal practices that support traditional and cultural gender stereotypes and inequities within, remain strong and create significant barriers for women. These stereotypes influence the unequal sharing of power between women and men, whether in relation to work, income or responsibilities at home. This is made worse with gender-neutral approaches adopted by government and private sector resulting in the absence/inadequate availability of infrastructural facilities, support services, laws and policies that are needed to facilitate women's participation.

Illiteracy or lower literacy, women's double work burden, social and cultural prejudices, stereotypical attitude, financial dependence on men, limited exposure and access to information continue to impair their effective political participation. This is compounded by the gender-neutral laws, policies that have not created an enabling environment for political empowerment of women.

Thus, there are several social, economic, historical, geographical, political and cultural factors that impedes effective participation of women particularly in politics resulting in their minimal participation and even their exclusion. As such, women's role in all spheres particularly the political sphere, has so far been insignificant to have any kind of multiplier effect. Their numbers particularly in local governance have not increased over the years. The political climate as it exists today continues to be male dominated and is therefore perceived to be conducive to male participation. The following are a few thoughts on why we need to support and promote political participation of women:

1. Democracy requires parity of representation and women's participation in politics is a fundamental element in any functioning democratic system. The need for female political participation starts from the fact that men and women have different needs, interests and priorities arising from their specific roles and situations assigned to them by the society. It is reasonable to believe that women are more aware of their own needs, and thus their involvement could foster direct and tangible changes in policy outcomes that reflect the priorities, experiences and contributions of women, children and families. Even the most supportive men cannot be expected to attend to social issues such as drug abuse, child care,



women's health, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, violence against women etc. with the same zeal and understanding as women.

2. Women's needs, interests and concerns are therefore not just those of women themselves, but reflect their primary roles as mothers, wives and caregivers. Therefore, incorporating a woman's perspective in decision making could result in better decisions equipped to respond to the needs of all sectors of society and that more adequately reflect the needs and interests of children and families including men.
3. Incorporating a woman's perspective in decision making could result in better decisions equipped to respond to the needs of all sectors of society and that more adequately reflect the needs and interests of children and families including men. This is because women think differently from men on certain issues and as such women would bring a different perspective to policies. Besides, as an integral part of the family, workplace and community women can make a positive difference to the society.
4. A balanced participation by women and men in decision making would produce different ideas, values and styles of behavior suited to a fairer and more balanced world for all, both women and men. Also empowerment will help to liberate men from their rigid roles
5. The entry of more women into politics will broaden and redefine the political agenda, and transform the very nature of politics. One obvious effect would be normalization of feminine models of political power. As women are more likely to be seekers of consensus and bringers of harmony, more women in parliament would lead to a less confrontational style of politics with more consensus both within and between the parties.
6. Women's political participation is an essential element towards empowering women. Economic and social empowerment of women cannot be sustained unless women are active participants in the decision making process at all levels of governance. Women's participation in politics is essential to enable them to act upon their visions of a better

society and to make meaningful contributions to national and societal development.

7. Most issues dealt with at local government level directly affect women: health, education, shelter, water, sanitation, roads, markets, and general livelihood. Women are often more aware of these issues and, therefore, better placed to tackle them.
8. Women comprise half the potential talent and ability and their under-representation in decision-making is a loss for the society as a whole.
9. Democracy requires parity of representation and there cannot be true democracy if women are virtually excluded from positions of power. Also the validity of all-male decision-making comes under question in a democratic system. There cannot be equitable resource allocation without the participation of women in politics in representative numbers.
10. Than being defined in opposition to each other, are developed through relationships with others. Conflicts are resolved not by force or its threat but in non-violent interaction and mutual learning.
11. Women would bring a different set of values, experiences and expertise to politics, thereby enriching the political environment and contributing to the quality of decisions.
12. Women's political participation can provide the best possible opportunity to ensure their voices are heard, their concerns are addressed, and their potential contributions to GNH and democracy are maximized.
13. Women comprise half the population of the country and as such should be full and equal participants in the social, economic and political life of the community. Their input is not just desirable but absolutely necessary.

If the other half of the population is to be represented effectively in politics, policies must address the complex social, cultural, economic and financial obstacles faced by women. In order to enhance participation of women, it is essential to create the level playing field with their male

counterparts rather than widen the already existing gap. The following are a few strategies for change to have more women in public and political life. The situation cannot change overnight and we must be prepared for an incremental approach.

1. The first essential tool for change is the availability of statistics documenting the participation of men and women in public and political life. Statistics are an ideal way to illustrate women's unequal representation, whether in private companies, parliament, or other agencies. At the national level, government could make an inventory of public appointments, disaggregated by the gender and the appointing authority, so that it can be clearly seen in which areas the shortfalls lie.
2. While we cannot just catapult women into politics straight away, we need to go into an intermediate step of putting women into positions of power in public life and once we have a critical number of women in these positions, then the transition into political roles will be much easier.
3. Efforts are also required towards changing the reality by changing mentality through gender sensitization, where media has an important role to play, dissemination of information and training of young and aspiring women in taking leadership to generate interests, confidence and competence.
4. An attitudinal change is needed to eliminate the acceptance of gender discrimination and low participation of women in governance.
5. Awareness on the need and importance of women's political participation need to be brought about by long-term educational processes in the forms of schools, workshops and seminars.
6. More cabinet portfolios need to be provided for women representatives who can influence policy decisions of the government. They should be made responsible for important ministries and issues like economic planning and social legislation.
7. Political parties to provide adequate party tickets to women
8. Institution such as NCWC to provide the necessary support systems backed by the government.
9. More affirmative actions are needed to enhance quality and quantum of women's participation. Planning mechanisms such as quotas or reserved seats could also be considered as a short-term strategy to hasten the

natural but slow evolution of women into power and to level the playing field. Experience in other countries indicates that the proportion of women in political institutions will not increase unless targeted measures such as special campaigns and gender quotas are employed. Quotas have been viewed as one of the most effective affirmative actions in increasing women's political participation and have led to dramatic changes in women taking up political roles throughout the world. Special temporary measures are currently required to change the attitude towards women in politics and allow adequate numbers of women to attain desirable goals. These temporary measures can be removed when a desirable balance is achieved at local governance level. There are approximately 100 countries around the world that have some kind of constitutional, electoral or political party quotas for women.

10. Special temporary measures will require supportive activities to strengthen its understanding as an integral part of efforts to achieve gender equality and democratic governance. Educated men and women are mostly likely to argue against these measures as they are likely to think that under-qualified women will be elevated to power and undermine those who are qualified. Among the educated there are likely to be fears that the introduction of a women's quota will prompt other ethnic groups and minorities to demand their own quotas. However women must not be equated with other groups. The quota system is required when women do not have the capabilities and the power to choose, which is the case in rural Bhutan. They are important mechanisms for increasing women's representation, as it will ensure that women constitute a specific number or percentage of the members of a governance body or committees. Presence of women in leadership positions also function as role models for other women. In many countries, adopting such measures has become a successful tool to promote women in politics and has become a first step toward creating gender equality in politics.

To promote genuine democracy, will require gender-sensitive laws and policies and stronger commitment and partnership at all political levels. Particularly, in today's context of a democratic Bhutan, the need to overcome gender stereotypes and counter overt and subtle forms of discrimination is essential, imperative and urgent. It is clear that positive change will not occur without the will of state. Top-down action on the part of the government

and other stakeholders is justifiable both to increase the number of women in politics and to ensure that positive gender-oriented policies are developed and meaningfully implemented. Without one form of affirmative action or the other to demonstrate strong clear political will, change will not be significant despite best efforts. It will only be with strong political will and concerted efforts towards addressing the gender gap in governance, the other half of the population will be able to contribute productively and meaningfully in all spheres of development including politics.

# The Cradle of Great Upbringing

**Pema Wangchuk**

There is no place like home on earth. Well said. There is no denying it. What may sound to you as obsolete for the age may not be the same for all. I have great faith in the old wisdom of the wise man who said it. The meaning it implied then is the same now. It doesn't define the time length of its relevancy. This is surely based on the well-found principle of life. The time relevancy, therefore, is not a reigning factor here.

His upbringing in the great company of his parents must have been unmistakably remarkable. Home, the parents build for their children is the great cradle of upbringing. Its architecture modelled after the heaven is founded on an unshakable foundation. The beauty of the parental love is simply matchless and unconditional. No bed gives the comfort so great as sleeping on the lap of our caring parents. Needless to say of its greatness in stature in terms of accommodation. No world is as big as our home our parents build for us. Although bigger the physical world may appear to us in stature, but it has a tendency to shrivel up. It accommodates less and less of us. Heaven built by our parents is the most beautiful and spacious of all.

It should mean no place on earth can ever take the place of our home. It is the epitome of an inexhaustible source of great comfort and perennial love. Hearth of warmth burns forever. Even the cat covets its warmth. This is the permanent cradle of great upbringing amassing the great wealth of love and comfort.

My upbringing in a faraway village of Pema Gatshel is no different from the man in my story. I was brought up under similar conditions in the native home where I was born.

Although out of reach of the modern conveyance, Chham Phel Reer never suffered from the onslaught of modern-day activities. Situated on the face of sloping terrain, it is a home to thirty four households. The scattered settlements dominate the entire landscape against the backdrop of the surrounding mountains. It's a distance of several blocks away from each

other with the tapestry of old native architectural style, which lends great beauty to its great surrounding landscape.

Agriculture and livestock is the mainstay of our economy. We still practise the old methods of labour intensive farming. Maize, millet, buckwheat, paddy are among the crops we grow for our home consumption. Subtropical fruits like mandarin, grow in abundance, which is our source of cash income. We export them to Bangladesh and India. Our village is also well-known for its sucrose productions prepared out of sugarcane. A conventional crusher is employed driven by men or a pair of oxen. Climate is favourable for all kinds of cultivation. It's also a great haven for farmers' produce.

In olden days, our village was a favourite sojourn of the visiting civil officials including our first three kings. Our past three kings trod the path that goes through our village to Dungsum, the present day Pema Gatshel, and then to the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar. According to our grandparents, Khommang Ray used to be their favorite campsite for the night. The campsite is where the Tshatshi Primary School stands today. For them to cover the entire distance from Trashigang to Samdrup Jongkhar via Dungsum, took them almost a month. On the account of this Royal entourage expedition, our village enjoys a pride of great historical importance. This is, of course, now a forgotten past.

Tshatshi another name for my village is also a home to legendary tales. A popular tale of the great struggle between the lake mermaid and the Mithun is the all-time bed-time favourite story for the children. The mermaid of the lake is believed to have lost to Mithun in the fight. The trace of their great struggle is still part of our landscape with a lake at its source.

There was a time in our history where only the men of high nobility took the civil positions in the court of any governor across the Kingdom. It was on this account that some of the men from our village enjoyed the place in the civil position in the court of Trashigang governor. Our village was then under the jurisdiction of the Trashigang governor. While serving in the court of governor, they were directly accountable to the people. They were responsible for collecting the government's tax from the people. The

tax was paid in the form of cloth made out of silk and cotton. The same was carried on horseback by the people to their respective Provinces.

People paid the tax by growing lots of cotton and raising silkworms. They cultivated in a large piece of land and the same was reaped and went through the whole process of manufacturing into ready-made garments. The same was the case with the silk cloth. The silkworms were raised and killed to get the silk threads to make into cloth. Of course, it's no longer part of our practice today. The old tradition of weaving our own cloth is lost completely if not extinct. The machine-woven ready-made garments have superseded the old practice.

The people here follow all kinds of religious beliefs. Although Buddhist by faith, the animistic superstition is very much part of our living culture except for the sacrifice of animals. It's seamlessly bounded together to make a distinction between the Buddhist way of life from the religious practice of animistic shamanism. We believe in all kinds of spirits, who are believed to have the power to take possession of our life force.

These religious rituals are mostly performed either to appease the spirits or ward off the evil influence and have its root in the animistic shamanism. The animistic shamanism was then prevalent in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism. The same became the dominant force in Bhutan. This, however, is the remnant of the old belief, which is even to this day practised.

Our village folk after a day's hard work retire to settle in for a cup of locally brewed wine. The wine is served on all occasions. It's generally an observed custom that new visitors be served with wine to welcome them. Every household brews the wine. It acts as a glue to bind the social relationship. Without wine, society does not function well. Wine serves lots of other social purposes; during the bereavement times, on delivery, during rituals, and also during celebrations. The wine is the indispensable part of our custom.

We also have occasions for social gatherings both religious and secular known as Tshechu and Losar respectively. This is the only occasion where family, kith and kin, and next to kin comes together. These are moments



of great jocular events. Decked in their fineries, people partake of special delicacies, especially reserved for such occasions, lavishing themselves with wine, Playing archery is a also important.

Against this backdrop of such social setting and cultural background, I was raised in the great cradle of upbringing. With parents and my brother around, life then was a bed of roses. I had everything a child could possibly ask for in life. It was, indeed, a fun world for me.

Until I attained the tender age of 5, I had the luxury of spending quality time to myself experimenting with the new-found toys of life. When my parents went out to work in the field, I went out to play with other children of my age. Everything that came my way became my tools for great learning.

Little did I realize then, that my life was about to take a new course I soon found myself in the company of other children in school in studies.

Wamrong Middle Secondary School where I had my first schooling is some 7 hours arduous on-foot walk from my village. You can well imagine the difficulty having to traverse paths infested with blood-sucking leeches, passing high mountain passes and crossing several torrential rivers before we hit the road terminal to reach our school.

The living conditions then in school were terribly harsh. With parents not around, my thoughts constantly drifted away from my studies. Pining for home, I spent many sleepless night.

I soon learnt the art of adaptation in a hostile environment. My life became all too adventurous once again. Soon the tragic follows.

I went hungry. I was on a constant hunt for food. The food they serve was barely enough to fill my tummy. The ghosts of hunger kept troubling me. I never excelled in my studies because I was very busy gathering food in the form of wild fruits. I spent most of my days among the wild fruit trees. I was happy as long as I had my fill. This, indeed, became my mission in school.

By the dint of luck, my eighth grade ended well. I got admission in a new school. My journey of life begins to the west now. Punakha Higher Secondary School used to be the best and the most prestigious high school among others. My relatives including teachers lauded me for this piece of luck!

While in school I got into wrong company. Yet, another adventure. I picked up the habit of smoking. My name came in the lists among other bad company. Assembly used to be the ground for the punishment. This didn't deter me from doing it. I found myself taking leave without permission for which I always got punished. I never had a penny to spend on it. The butts of cigarettes left out by the other smokers used to be my ready source. I didn't mind smoking it as long as I had no money to buy it.

Classroom used to be the great place for adventure. I found myself falling in love over and over again. Infatuated with love I hankered after the apple of my eyes until that time she was ready to take me for a lover. This went on throughout my school days. Somehow I never flunked.

There is an end for every beginning. The year had come to pass finally. I completed my twelfth grade in first division. It was time now to enter the job market. The competition was very stiff. Too many for too few. I somehow got through the selection interview.

I saw myself taking up the responsibility. My parents were proud of my achievement. The road I ahead of me is long and bumpy; yet, I must move on for another adventure in life.

## Bumthang – Sacred and Holy

Pema Wangda

I was initially posted as a teacher to Mongar in the year 2006 and the school I worked for was at Lingmethang Community Primary School. I served that school for two years with utmost dedication. Now I reminisce about the beautiful people and its wonderful ambience. The place I resided was an isolated place away from my school and no one but my lonesome heart and my conscience gave me company in the midst of seclusion. It was then that I realized how beautiful life can be; be it anywhere, it was the place that drove me towards the direction of delight.

Life is Direction. After two years of dedicated service, I got transferred to Bumthang because my sweet bonny love worked there. It was the right kind of decision I had made for it changed me drastically – there's not any irony reflected!

I traveled alone for tedious hours and there was no one except for the cool breeze and the sound of the screeching tyres with the track 'Romeo and Juliet' by Dire Strait that renewed and revived me instantly from the state of reverie.

The car I was travelling in finally made its descent towards the valley most people loved to visit for it was sacred and holy where great saints lived and built many sacred temples and monasteries. The place was Bumthang. As I drove, I saw clusters of prayer flags fluttering in the wind. They were everywhere – on the railings of the bridges, on mountainous roads, around chortens (stupas), almost everywhere my eyes could see, and instinctively a prayer sprang to my lips.

"Wow, what a dramatic landscape", I thought. And there was no doubt that the place was called by most people residing there a 'Replica of Switzerland'. It made me wonder and think hard why people compared this particular holy place with that of 'Switzerland'. It was beauty in itself; a breathtaking view in fact and I wish sometimes that it remained immortal and ever green like never before. It was my first time there. By the time the dusk arrived, I reached my home of dreams, safely.

Jambay Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples was built in 7th Century (627 A.D) by King Songtsan Gampo of Tibet as one of the 108 temples that he built in the Himalayan regions. And it still stands majestically and a lot of deeply religious people circumambulate the temple from dusk till dawn with a rosary in their hands. I was driven away by the thought that tormented me to know exactly why it was considered one of the most important temples.

I listened to him attentively and before I took leave from him, he said, “Never leave without paying homage to the one that stands before you”, the caretaker pointed at the top of the main entrance door. Looking up I saw that most people might not have noticed after paying a visit was grandeur a image of Guru preaching to his disciples. It is very important to take admonition if one visits Jambay Lhakhang. “It is believed that the first seed of Buddhism was sown in Bhutan with the construction of this temple”, the caretaker of the temple tells me.

Kuje Lhakhang Kuje was founded by Guru Padma Sambhava in 746 A.D. when he was invited from Nepal by King Sindhu Raja for his medical treatment. Guru Rinpoche meditated 7 days in a cave called Damar Dorjitse (Kurje) in order to tame the chief deity of Bumthang valley who stole the life – force of King Sindu Raja. During his meditation, Princess Tashi Khenden served Guru Rinpoche.

It is a place where a lot of religious ceremonial takes place and it is where most people from different parts of the country come to pay homage to great saints for their livelihood. I feel blessed and contented to be residing in such a holy and sacred place. And if there is a place where heaven and earth meet, surely Bumthang is it!

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