

From changes in views of marriage, ritual and conflict resolution to B-pop to memories of family picnics to ancient monasteries, the 13 writers in this collection covers a wide range of experiences of new Bhutan.

These stories came out of a workshop hosted by Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy in 2012 for the fourth time with the theme - “Reflecting Change in Modern Bhutan”. These 19 stories and one picture story are personal and provocative and hopefully will stimulate further efforts from writers, bloggers and all those interested in the creative development of Bhutan.

Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy supports creative non-fiction writing to enable Bhutanese voices to be heard; an important dimension in an evolving democracy.

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Reflecting Change in Modern Bhutan

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BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY



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BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

Bhutan is a 21st Century country where tradition is powerful. As the country evolves it is important to seek out and describe significant changes in family, culture, society and community. And it is also important to articulate what elements of the traditional Bhutan should be celebrated and retained. That was the challenge facing a small group of writers who gathered in Thimphu in 2012.

They were participants in a Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop organised by the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy. Each was asked to come with two potential story or essay ideas: one focusing on an aspect of Bhutan that has changed, and the other on a significant aspect of traditional Bhutan that has not changed. The 19 stories in this book are the product of this workshop.

Bhutan is moving from an oral tradition to one that focuses on the written word as well. In this context, the kinds of stories in this collection are important as a way to carry forth the history and legends that had been told orally until now. Indeed, in my short experience in the country I've notice an increasing devotion to the importance of preserving stories and history - a sense of what could be lost if we are not careful.

The writers who participated in this workshop came from a wide range of backgrounds: medicine, the judiciary, education, journalism, photography, architecture. They came for a variety of reasons, but the thread that bind them together was a desire to tell true stories that are important. Writing is a key way for a society to understand itself, and that is true for writers of all sorts.

Like earlier collections of workshop stories, these stories follow the principles of creative non-fiction, which is that they must be true and accurate to the best of the writers' skills and ability. Sometimes the writers have obscured or hidden the identities of the people they are writing about, to prevent unnecessary embarrassment or shame. But you will not find fictional characters or made-up events in these stories. Each one is grounded in something specific and tangible: a specific ritual, place, person or story, for example, or a way in which a particular element of modernisation has affected traditional culture.

The writers, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy and I all hope that you will find these stories instructive, entertaining and memorable. Enjoy!

James Bettinger, Director, Stanford Knight Fellowship Program

PART I
BHUTAN IN CHANGE

The Evolving Culture of Criticism in Changing Bhutan

Dhrubaraj Sharma

Bhutanese people are said to be very polite and courteous. This quality comes from traditional values and customs, where the opinions and suggestions of seniors and superiors are always held in high esteem, and criticism is a sign of disrespect. However, the birth of private media in 2007, and democracy in 2008, have triggered a new culture of aggressive public discourse and criticism in Bhutan. Prior to 2008, debates and discussions in Parliament as well as in public life were less aggressive, perhaps due to the fact that there was no legal document like the Constitution, which granted freedom of speech and expression, although there were no documents or instructions that banned these fundamental freedoms prior to that. It must be acknowledged that even today, criticism is often urban - centric, and has yet to make inroads into rural Bhutan.

Initially, public criticism was centred around the two political parties, who criticised each other over the methods each was using to win the vote of the average Bhutanese, exposed to party politics for the first time. Since the elections, the art and craft of criticism has been effectively and cleverly used by the opposition party to fulfill its constitutional mandate. The mushrooming of several media houses after 2008 saw the use of the cane of criticism to “check & balance” the government, showing that the majority was not always right when it came to some controversial legislation it had passed, especially the Tobacco Control Act.

These developments have, in a subtle way, introduced a new culture, where criticism is accepted as part of our new and emerging democratic culture. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to see the chairperson of a meeting open the floor to criticism, alternative views, suggestions and advice. However, we were led to believe that the criticism in the media of the government’s handling of the lottery business was not taken positively. The continuous criticism in the media of the management of the controversial lottery business led the government

to ban the sale of the lucrative lottery business on moral or ethical grounds.

However, criticism has also taken a beating, especially when anonymous people with questionable intentions fuelled character assassination campaigns through the popular, easy and unlimited access to cyberspace. Perhaps criticism has also been derailed from its intended purpose, with speculation and online jokes that some media houses are digging too much into the past, to give a historical background for issues that happened long before 2008, which has a political tail attached to it. The blog of the opposition leader is an interesting forum where criticism can be accessed easily.

As the winds of change initiated in 2008 gather momentum through the landscape and mindscape of Bhutan and the Bhutanese people, effective tools like criticism will continuously be used and even misused by her citizens and politicians as part of the new democratic culture. The evolving culture of criticism is a change that a young democracy like Bhutan needs, and a change that can reinforce her democracy, if used with responsibility and supported by facts. At the same time, Bhutanese democracy needs to beware the nameless, faceless and fearless online serial critics.

Dreaming Wide Awake

(How one man's passion is taking shape into reality and leading to a silent revolution in Bhutanese music)

Dr. Dinesh Pradhan

He's dressed in a t-shirt and knee-length shorts, with a biker helmet on his head, and a bag slung over his right shoulder. It is past lunchtime and he tells me he has just cycled to work from home; it is Pedestrian Tuesday. He can come and go as he likes because he has no boss to answer to. He is his own master.

Meet Choeying Jatsho, a 25-year-old Electronics and Communications Engineer-turned-Music Producer.

He leads me to the basement of the building where his studio is located. As we descend the steps, the air becomes cooler, and the smell of freshly-sawn timber rises into my nostrils. We settle down into comfortable chairs in the production room, surrounded by computer monitors.

We're in M-Studio, a multimedia studio owned by Choeying's uncle, a graphics designer. The recording studio was conceptualised by Choeying and bankrolled by his uncle. Choeying produces music, while his uncle and other employees take care of the graphics and design work of the studio.

M-Studio broke into the Bhutanese contemporary music scene last November with their own genre of music, B-Pop. Choeying explains that it stands for "Bhutanese popular music." They have taken it upon themselves to promote it and make it heard throughout the country, as well as the world.

It is Choeying's love and passion for music that has led to this unique evolution of Bhutanese music.

With no formal training in music, and having largely taught himself to play innumerable instruments deftly, Choeying set out to chase

his dream, based on the keen sense of music he developed as he was growing up.

“Music was always in my family; my dad and his sisters used to play the guitar, my mom and my grandparents used to sing. At family functions, we always had a great deal of singing and dancing. Even before I was aware of who I was, music was already conditioned in me,” he recalls.

He also credits one of his uncles, who was very passionate about music. “He used to play a number of instruments, ranging from traditional to modern, and had them lying around his house. I taught myself how to play all those instruments,” he says.

He maintains that he still does not know the technicalities of notes and chords; he says he goes by the feel of the sounds, not by the book.

The same uncle also introduced him to Fruityloops, a music creation software. It was then that he moved from singing and playing instruments to laying tracks and producing musical pieces.

He was part of the Cultural Troupe in high school, and that helped to keep up his budding interest in music. A brilliant student, he held on to his passion by finely balancing his studies and his musical pursuits.

He even had a chance to sing and make music for a Dzongkha Rigzar album while still in high school. He was paid a handsome sum for it, but more than that, he jumped at the chance to get exposed to recording and producing music. Even with an album under his belt, he still had not considered music serious enough to be pursued as a full-time profession.

“Back then, it was all about bringing in good marks in school, going to a good college, finishing on time, coming back home to appear for the RCSC exams and landing a government job; even that was something conditioned in me, and I guess all students, right from school days,” he confides.

He did bring home good marks, and go to a good college, to study Electronics and Communications Engineering in India. He continued

to pursue his music interests while in college; he formed a band and played at college functions.

It was only in his 3rd year of college that he started becoming serious about his musical interests. He started reading books and watching movies about artists who followed their dreams, struggled, and made a career in music. He was inspired by these stories and started believing that music as a career was possible for him too, although he was a little disappointed about the situation in Bhutan.

“We didn’t have artists who made music their full-time careers; neither did the public think it was a viable profession to be in. The majority of people consider music as an interest which is to be pursued as a hobby in our spare time,” he says.

When he came home after finishing college, he discussed with his parents, for the first time, his intention of pursuing a musical career. Having played music all his life, Choeying now thought he needed to do something big. He was no longer content with merely singing and playing instruments, but became more and more interested in the process of producing a song.

It was during a casual conversation with his uncle that the idea of a recording studio was born. His uncle shared with him his intention to open a multimedia studio, and Choeying pitched the idea of a music-recording studio as one of the arms of this new multimedia house.

But the setting up of the studio was going to take time and patience, so Choeying appeared for the RCSC exam, like he was expected to, and passed, but he did not like the jobs on offer.

Then a job opening came up at Tashi Cell for a marketing manager with an Electrical Communication Engineering background. The job required him to be a bridge between the commercial aspect of the business and the technical aspect, with a certain amount of creativity involved as well.

He recalls: “The job was good. There were so many interesting things to learn, and my work was appreciated. I was paid well and there was a good career prospect ahead. While I worked there I gave it my

100%. But there used to be days when the work was light, that I'd sit and wonder if this was what I wanted to do forever. There was some dissatisfaction deep down."

While he worked at his day job, he was working on the side, on setting up his studio. He had already given his employers the condition that he'd be with them for a maximum of 2 years; he left one-and-a-half years later, when the studio was completed.

He and his uncle set out to build the recording studio with neither of them having any prior know-how. Choeying chuckles as he points out that his knowledge of sound and acoustics was the only thing he could rely on.

He went online, read a lot of articles and watched a lot of Youtube videos on how a studio is set up. They chose not to consult any technicians or go visit other studios because, he says, "That way, we'd have made something similar to the others or only slightly better; we wanted to build something, if not on par, then at least half as good as the studios that world-class musicians record in."

He rates his studio a modest 7/10. It has good acoustics, noise isolation and is spacious. Most of the materials that were used while building the studio were best possible alternatives of what is being used in good studios, because the original materials were difficult to procure. "We had to make do with what was available to us locally, because waiting for the original materials would have taken a lot of time, and the delay would have waned our enthusiasm; we simply couldn't afford to let that happen," he says, "In future, we'd like to replace these alternatives with the original ones."

Seven months after their launch, Choeying admits that the studio hasn't really been making money but they haven't been idle either. He says: "In the beginning, it is important for us to establish ourselves as a place that fosters creativity. People have to identify M-Studio with good quality work, something that is new and different."

The "new and different" he's talking about is B-Pop, a new style of Bhutanese music, not restricted to any language or genre. As long as Bhutanese have worked on it, it is B-Pop. Choeying came up with

this concept and proudly stakes a claim to it.

When asked how B-Pop is different from the already popular Rigsar brand of Bhutanese music, Choeying says: “Rigsar is just traditional Bhutanese music packaged in a new melody, there is a very limited range. B-Pop spans all genres from pop to reggae to soul, etc.”

He tells me that in Rigsar, there is a certain level of predictability, which brings a sense of sameness to the tune and melody, whereas in B-Pop, they try for something unique and individualised. “You can just feel the difference as soon as you listen to it,” he says, “Rigsar also doesn’t have mood variation within the same song; the songs just have verses and no definite chorus. While we don’t limit B-Pop to any set formula, we try to incorporate verses, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, etc.” He says that there is also a lot of Bollywood influence on Rigsar songs, which he has consciously tried to keep out of B-Pop.

B-Pop has also received its fair share of criticism from people who say it is not Bhutanese music, or that the Dzongkha accent of the singers isn’t Bhutanese enough.

Choeying tells me this is the very essence of B-Pop – that it is the singers’ own style, something natural and felt from the heart, and highly personalised. He explains that this is not the case with our traditional Bhutanese music, where there are set rules about the style, the flow of melody, and there is not much deviation from that on which to stamp one’s own individual style.

“I have respect for traditional Bhutanese music and I feel it should be preserved, but at the same time, it should be allowed to evolve, in keeping with the times. If Bhutanese music doesn’t evolve, it will not be palatable to the younger generation and people will not have respect for it,” he says, “Even the music we’re producing in our studio, in a few years, will evolve into something different, and we’re open to that possibility.”

Choeying firmly believes that what they’re doing is unique, another step in the evolution of Bhutanese music.

Choeying spread the word through Facebook and uploaded all B-Pop

songs on soundcloud.com for free download. Since their artists are all young people, he felt people from the same age group would be their primary target. He did not intend to earn any revenue off the songs.

“We wanted to develop a taste of B-Pop among the young people so that they identify our studio with that sound, and keep coming for more,” he tells me with confidence. “We are promoting something entirely new, something that has never been heard of before, so we had to start small and focus on brand recognition first.”

He’s already seeing signs of a growing popularity of B-Pop among the youth. Recently, a boys’ dance troupe danced to one of the popular B-Pop numbers in a dance competition broadcast live by the national television channel, BBS. Choeying had nothing to do with how and why the boys chose one of his songs, but he says, with a smile, that he doesn’t mind the publicity.

Choeying works mainly with young people. He lets them write their own songs and create their own melody. Before they set out to work, he sits with them and talks extensively, so that he can understand the artists and where they come from. That way, he can know how to offer suggestions to help them improve their writing, or their singing.

“I encourage them to feel what they’ve written, so that it can be expressed in their songs; if they feel it, the listeners can feel it too,” he says.

He offers suggestions as to how one can better project one’s voice, and how to add expression, in a way, connect to the song. He says, these are some intangibles which are really important to set a song apart.

The young artists come to the studio out of their own interest, they don’t have any contract signed with the studio. They come in with their lyrics and melodies, and sit and discuss how to proceed with producing the song. Choeying provides them with a lot of creative freedom, with a firm hand of guidance, so that their creativity is not restrained by any sort of pressures. “Creating music is something that has to be done in a relaxed state,” he says.

They try to work in a pressure-free environment where there is no

worry about deadlines, the earnings, and the target audience. “We have no restrictions as far as creativity is concerned,” he remarks.

He tells me that he works mostly with the youth because they are a curious lot, they like to experiment and think outside the box. “Their mindset is malleable and they accept new things much more readily than the older generation, who have a particular taste ingrained in them,” he says.

One other reason why the studio wanted to work with the youth is that in future, M-Studio wants to hone their talents, nurture their skills and then launch and promote them as full-time artists.

“Their families still think of their passion for music as a hobby which is to be pursued on the side; the studio wants to step in and give them a chance to develop this passion into a full-time career,” Choeying says. “We will not make high and mighty promises and show false hope; we will explain to them and their families, the hard work and struggle that goes with it and the kinds of risks involved. At the same time, we’ll assure them that we will give the best from our side.”

Choeying wants to create a pool of talent who call M-Studio their home; they’d like to produce songs, make CDs, and distribute their music, and go on tours around Bhutan, maybe even out of the country. He tells me they have the capacity to go commercial, they’re just biding their time while they promote their studio and their artists.

“I would like to see kids in future wanting to be B-Pop artists and dreaming about a career in music,” he says with a smile.

The current situation in Bhutan is that almost all the artists still have a day job which pays their bills while they pursue their interests on the side, maybe for a little extra income. This discourages new artists and their families from taking up music as a full-time profession.

But the trend is changing; like Choeying, there are youngsters now who’re following their dreams and doing not just what they’re expected to do - which for a majority of them is to land a government job – but they are also making full-time careers out of what they’re passionate about.

Choeying is of the view that this is something that should be encouraged. Yet, he says, the number of people who dare to follow their dreams is rather measly.

It has something to do with the kind of upbringing we all have had while growing up. We were expected to aim for secure jobs and be content in them, rather than take risks with our careers by chasing our dreams. It is not an enabling environment for innovators and those who dare to tread off the beaten track. But the ones who do dare, and put in a commensurate amount of hard work and dedication, like Choeying, go on and sustain themselves just fine, maybe even earning a whole lot more.

Choeying adds: “Where there is good work done, money will automatically follow. In Bhutan, where the arts are concerned, it is seen as a risky career path because, while we are people who appreciate music and paintings, we’re not really in the habit of paying to appreciate them.”

“We take all the hard work that goes into it for granted and just linger our attention on the finished product for maybe a short while. For a quality product, actually there should not be any hesitation to pay money. For example, if we have a free, open-air concert in the Clock Tower Square, thousands will gather and enjoy the performance and if we were to charge for the same, the crowd would be considerably thinner,” he says.

Compared to his previous job, he says, his current line of work involves a lot of struggle, a lot of risks and not much money, but there’s a lot of satisfaction in what he does.

The smile on the artists’ faces when they listen to the completed song is priceless, he says. The happiness it brings them, their families, and their friends, is what keeps him going.

M-Studio has a Facebook page, and from 5-6 followers in the first 1-2 months, they now have more than 670. Choeying says it has been interesting to see the statistics of who have been visiting their page and how many keep coming back for more; all this has been very encouraging.

“That is what drives me and keeps my mind fresh. I did not quit my earlier job because I didn’t like it or I was frustrated there. I started that job to earn some money while I set up M-Studio,” he confides, “I’m doing something I love and I feel totally in control. It’s up to me to make it or break it.”

As a business venture, they’re running at a loss, month after month. But since Choeying’s uncle values creativity more than the money it brings in, he’s able to keep doing what he loves. He tells me his back-up plan was to keep working at his earlier job and save enough to setup his own studio.

The fact that his uncle also has a creative mind, had gone against convention and followed his passion, encouraged him a lot. He understood Choeying and his passion for music, and whole-heartedly supported him, morally and financially.

Choeying’s parents are happy and he says he’s surviving with what he saved from his earlier job. He says he hasn’t made any money from the studio; whatever the studio charges has been used to buy instruments and the like, putting it back into the business. He says he doesn’t have any regrets and is in fact really proud of what he’s achieved so far.

He beams as he says, “Everything worked out for me just great. A series of fortunate events and an enabling environment helped me chase my dream. I had an early exposure to music; my parents encouraged me and supported my decisions, and they are financially independent. My uncle supported my creative interests and financed the project so that I could realise my passion, the help of social networking sites and the Internet as a whole, which has helped spread the word . I have no pressures from anywhere that would deter me from doing what I love.”

A week after I had spoken to him, M-Studio launched its YouTube channel on June 21st, 2012, coinciding with World Music Day. As the first video played on, it reminded me of something Choeying had said earlier:

“I’m not content with doing just one thing; I have to keep all my options open and do new things to keep up the passion.”

National Dress (Gho and Kira)

Jamyang Tshering

As always in the library, I picked up a thick book entitled “The Kingdom of Bhutan.” There I saw many amazing and incredible pictures of our Dzongs and our forefathers.

I saw His Majesty the First King Ugyen Wangchuck wearing a dark gho, as well as their majesties the Queens wearing dull grey kiras. This interested me greatly, as the kiras and ghos they wore were unfashionable, and the pattern of the kira was so flowery during those times. Now, such pattern and style have been totally diminished, and this generation of ladies wears kiras having colour combination with tego. These changes have brought vast differences to our national dress.

As soon as I saw the pictures, I looked at myself in the mirror and found many contrasting features within myself too. The ghos our father wore in the past were low and hung just like a robe. The white scarf (*Gong*) is not worn, and the collar were open most of the time, whereas at present we wear Gho right to the knee level, and with the collar closed neatly. And the white scarf (*Gong*) is slightly folded beside the neck.

I had a long chat with my grandma, and she shared the information that, in her time, they wore two kiras and two tegos at a time, with a big kera (belt) folded laterally. Most of their things, like cup, scarf, purse and doma (betel nuts) were all carried inside their huge pockets. She said that today’s girls wear half kira and they carry all their things in a small “handbag.” Such changes have brought a great difference.

I went to my cousin’s house and I interviewed my uncle, who is so fond of Bhutanese culture and tradition. I still remember him saying: “Today’s youth will no longer follow the tradition of wearing gho and kira in the near future, so as a parent and guide, it’s our responsibility to pass on this tradition of wearing the national dress.” As soon as he said those words, I paused for a second and asked him: “How will you do that, uncle?” He nodded his head and replied: “Now for that,

I will always wear gho anywhere, at any time, to set an example to our innocent youth, because if such tradition becomes extinct like dinosaurs, it's going to be a big threat to our country.” He added: “Though our country is small, it's strong enough to be independent with those unique culture and identity.”

Having conducted interviews and polling among many people, I have realised and understood that one major effective way of preserving our identity is to follow the ancestors' unique culture and traditions, and keep their spirit alive. We can do this by wearing the national dress, so as to strengthen the identity of the country and be independent, like other countries.

The Village Belle

Karma Palden

It happened some 20 years ago.

The wine-coloured campfire blazed with translucent yellow edges, declaring their full mirth in its winter glory, while bursting sap and exploding beetles hum in the air.

The manoeuvring eyes were feasting on the swaying hips as the parish girls danced; the songs arrive, at his ears like a distant dream.

The songs died and so did the fire, while a shrewd sardonic smile was seen escaping as he retired for the night. She was ushered into his room.

A reward in the morning when he left, or did the slightest thought of becoming his wife run through her mind? Did she dread the thought of sharing a bed with a total stranger, or expected equal fun from the start? Did she enjoy the undue attention from a respected man? With no dating scene as such, maybe it was quite an opportunity....

Our village received an officer. He was on tour.

An educated man of standing, he probably thought a dame was well included in his travel allowance, or was he just following the precedent system?

My fellow villagers said, “please your guest”, while the girl muttered a curse upon beauty.

Earlier in the day, I witnessed to our elderly villagers talking to the village belle and her parents. She agreed to become the sacrificial lamb at the altar of the village’s prosperity and development. It is, like they say, a moral duty towards your village in the time of lecherous administrative tyranny.

Unlike usual gossip, this didn’t take root or attain any notoriety. The

belle didn't lose her morals. Oral history has it that the said knights never returned, but instead went on their conquests to other villages.

A friend of my mine sees his father in every elderly doctor he comes across. His father has no name, but is a vague face from some two decades ago in his mother's memory. Once in a while, he seeks him, when it is obvious his so-called father is oblivious of his existence.

He is a seed sown during such official tour.

Such liaisons were common back in the old days. Some have had happy endings, but many weren't so lucky. With time, things have changed. Perhaps back then, it was just a call of the times but for now, such courtships are becoming extinct for good.

N.B. This anecdotal piece nowhere reflects or portrays general Bhutanese opinion.

Etiquette - In the Changing Times

Kinzang Dorjee

Every country has its own tradition that depicts its lifestyles and living culture. The culture and tradition truly promote harmony in the society. It is governed by a certain set of rules and regulations. The word “etiquette” in our context is the art and science of living, which our great leaders and ancestors had crafted, based on the discourses and teachings of Lord Buddha. Since then, it has been guiding our society to remain mindful, defined as the consciousness and uniformity of actions and thoughts. Etiquette in our local dialect is known as *Driglam NamZha*, which literally means to promote peace and harmony in the society by following the same set of principles of mindfulness. To be frank, the quality of a person in those days was said to be judged based on the knowledge they acquired on this subject. More importantly, it signifies national identity and unity.

The genesis of this intangible cultural heritage dates back to the life of Lord Buddha, who turned the wheel of Dharma for the wellbeing of the universe. The core values of harmonious living were derived from the principles and practices of Buddha’s teachings, which were mainly based on the Four Noble Truths. The enlightened soul once explained the culture of righteous living and right conduct to his chief disciples. Basically, existence in harmony was not a new concept for our society but the concept was derived from the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, righteous living.

It is believed that the core concept of harmonious living in our society correlates with the story of four friends - *Thuenpa Puenzhi* - a bird, rabbit, monkey and an elephant. They lived below a banyan tree in the forest of Varanasi, India. There had been a decline in their respect for each other, and in order to decide which amongst them was the most senior, they began to discuss the age of the banyan tree. The elephant recalled that when he was a baby, the tree was as small as a bush. The monkey recalled that it was a mere shrub when he was young. The rabbit described the tree as having been a leafless sapling. Finally, the bird commented that he had swallowed a seed, and that the tree had grown from his droppings. Thus, the bird was

honoured as the eldest, senior in rank to the rabbit, the monkey and the elephant. It restored harmony in the animal kingdom and all lived harmoniously thereafter. The crux of the story is to show respect and cooperation among the society, family, friends, etc.

From the 7th century onwards, Bhutan saw the integration of already existing Bhutanese culture with Buddhism which, since then, has played an important role in the way of life of the Bhutanese, and shaped their institutions, organisations, arts, drama, architecture, literature and social structure.

Basically, “etiquette” is broadly defined in three main codes of conduct, vis-à-vis, eating habits, behavioural approach and conscious living in the society. These three things touch almost all aspects of harmonious living in the society, and each of them has certain rules and regulations restraining us from negative actions of body, speech and mind. It teaches us to be mindful in our day-to-day activities. Today, tourists and foreign visitors to our country find us most humble, well mannered and genuinely helpful, which we solely attribute to our unique culture and traditions.

Tshering Penjor, a civil servant with the Department of Culture, states that the purpose of the *Driglam Namzha* (Conscious Pursuit of Harmonious Living) is to live a happy and healthy life. He said, “Through the *Driglam Namzha*, one can understand that he/she should not harm or destroy others. A person who knows the *Driglam Namzha* will offer his best service and dedication for the country. The safeguarding of the *Tsa-Wa-Sum*, protecting the religion, and preserving and promoting the culture and tradition, also depend on the knowledge of the same. Basically, it teaches the way of dressing, walking, talking, acting, eating habit, and so forth.”

With the change of time, the people’s character and way of thinking are degenerating gradually. A bond between people of different sections of society, involving both thought and action, is at stake. When modernisation is so forceful, it poses a threat to our intangible cultural heritage that was handed down from generation to generation by our beloved forefathers. Today’s citizens have a mindset that considers etiquette as a subject under compulsion to respect one’s seniors, and they restrict themselves to only knowing how to wear

costumes. The inception of a democratic culture in our society has further fuelled the downfall of our unique cultural heritage. Some people have the wrong thinking that everybody is equal in the eyes of a democracy, which it is not in the actual sense. Democracy to me is all about respecting each other's status, irrespective of the social background one may come from. Today, the respect is to be earned by respecting others instead of demanding it for yourself. The citizens of the present generation are apparently less interested in knowing about the subject. People from outside are fascinated by the existence of such a unique culture in our society.

Although Bhutan places great importance on the preservation and promotion of its cultural heritage, this does not imply that Bhutan intends to remain past-oriented and less prepared to be dynamic. For Bhutan, the wish for the development of the country has always been to bridge the gap between modernity and the treasures of the country's cultural heritage, the live values and traditions.

Turning its attention to development matters, the government has been eager to avoid some of the errors committed elsewhere. Conscious of the cultural erosion in other developed countries, the Royal Government has moved to protect Bhutan's unique cultural heritage by adopting preservation and promotion of cultural heritage as one of the Pillars of Bhutan's development philosophy, broadly termed as Gross National Happiness (GNH), along with the other Three Pillars of Good Governance, Sustainable and Equitable Socio-Economic Development and Preservation of Environment.

In conclusion, Bhutan's cultural heritage continues to serve as a unifying factor for harmony, social cohesion and the wellbeing of the people. It enables Bhutanese society to adjust and cope with the rapid pace of social change. In order to keep our traditions alive, and to hand over our rich and unique cultural heritage to future generations uninterruptedly, it is time for our citizens to come forward to strive hard to carry out research works and documentation to showcase to the world our rich and unique cultural heritage.

Too Many to Handle?

Kinley Wangmo

The framed black and white photograph stood out. Placed on the table, set near the leather armchairs, and amid colourful books, the photograph looked misplaced, yet quaint and fascinating.

In the photograph was a family. The father was missing. The mother sat on the steps outside a house, with her children around her. The youngest sat on her lap. There were five of them.

The eldest, Sonam Zam, looked about nine, and the youngest, Zeppa, about a year old.

Such photographs in many families represent a time gone by. They portray a time, about two decades back, when women raised five to eight children, toiled in the sun to ensure food security or, in the case of Sonam Zam's mother, worked as a nurse.

To any young urban mother, the photograph is a testimony to the amazing feats that their mothers performed. Raising a single child is a topic much discussed, and is reason enough for young working mothers not to have a second child today.

"I can't think of having another kid," said Sonam Zam, now in her 30's and married, with two daughters. She had her first daughter in her early 20's. This working mother, a teacher in a private school, said the reasons were plenty, the most striking ones being changes in perception of how children should be brought up, the value of money, improved awareness of health and nutrition, and the time parents could commit to their children.

"We want to provide the best for our children," Sonam Zam said. "Not that our parents didn't, but there are more choices now, and we want to enroll our children in the best private school, irrespective of how expensive the tuition fees are, and give them the best possible nutrition and clothing they can get."

Sonam recalls how she grew up playing outside in the dirt, and would walk around town (then a small settlement) with her kid brother on her back, with others following her. “We’d visit friends’ homes on our own, play where we wanted to and eat what we could lay our hands on.”

For children to do so, especially in an urban setting, is now unthinkable for most parents. “Whether it is the daycare or school, children get dropped off or picked up by parents, and it’s back home,” Sonam Zam said. “It’s not safe, with strangers all around and reckless drivers on the roads.”

With a busy schedule at work, Sonam drops her younger daughter at her mother’s place every morning, because babysitters are hard to come by. After work, Sonam and her husband pick her up and head home.

Sonam’s mother, Sangay Lhundup, in her 50s, cannot imagine not having any one of her children. She had her first when she was 19. For her, having five children is not a lot. “They’ve all grown up and are living independently, which wouldn’t have been the case, at least if we were living in the same locality, about two or three decades back,” she said.

“Bringing up children was never an issue then,” the nurse said. “There’d be someone to always help around, unlike now, with not many relatives having time to spare, and babysitters are hard to get.”

Living in a small community, and with the Basic Health Unit literally next door, it wasn’t much of a problem.

“But we faced our share of difficulty, because it was largely women’s responsibility then to raise children, but this barrier is breaking, even if only slightly,” she said. “And being posted to a rural community, with no roads, me and my husband had to carry them there.”

Back in Sonam’s apartment, as she prepares dinner, her husband helps with the cleaning and dishes. The family of four soon sit down on the floor, in a circle for dinner. Above them, nailed to the wall, is another photograph, in colour.

In the photograph is a family. Sonam Zam and her husband are seated on chairs. The younger daughter is on Sonam's lap. The other daughter is standing near her father.

Changing Facets of Marriages in Bhutan

Lobzang Rinzin Yargay

Until very recently, parents played major roles in the selection of partners for their children, especially in rural Bhutan. Children had very little say against their parents' choices. Moreover, the choices were limited to the children of close relatives and family friends. Marriages against parental wishes were rare. Astrological requirements needed to be considered as well. If the astrological signs of the couple were not compatible, their prosperity was at stake. Solemnisation of the marriage would be preceded by rituals and feasts. In some rural communities, the groom was required to work at the bride's home for years before he could take her away as his wife, after payment of bride price in the form of clothes, cattle, food and cash. Elopement and marriage against parental wishes were not common.

Look at a Bhutanese marriage registration certificate. It sanctifies the relationship as:

*Your union is bound by the silken scarf
May the relation endure even after the scarf disintegrates
May you remain committed even beyond the present life
May you be blessed with children and prosperity*

"We fell in love and started living together, and my parents did not object so long as I married the right person," says Sonam, a young unemployed graduate in Thimphu. She is living with Dorji, a corporate employee. They met in a Drayang (night club) one evening, a few years ago and started living together last year. "I am going to visit my husband's village in eastern Bhutan this winter after I deliver my child," says Sonam, confidently. She is at an advanced stage of her pregnancy. They recently registered their marriage in a local court.

In the recent past, people would have met their future spouses during *Tshechus* (religious ceremony) and other social occasions, which would be followed by negotiations between the parents or through middlemen. In some rural places, lovers met during the night for secret courtship.

As the case of Sonam and Dorji indicates, people no longer live with their parents or seek their approval regarding the choice or the suitability of spouses. There is very little or no formality and, increasingly, no rituals and ceremonies or celebrations. Courts do not insist on the knowledge and consent of the parents during registration of the marriages. It only requires the bride and the groom to be of marriageable age, which is over 18 years. You should not already be married, but should be legally divorced if there is a previous spouse. If you are already married, you need to obtain the consent of your existing spouse for the subsequent marriage. The courts register the marriage if these basic conditions are fulfilled and issue a certificate declaring the couple as a legally wedded couple. And yes, Bhutanese laws do not allow same-sex marriage as of yet!

According to Tharchean, a senior district judge, “Marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman who pledge to stand by each other together throughout their life.” As the story of Galem and Singye, and the words in the marriage certificate indicate, the union lasts beyond the present life. Judge Tharchean says that “Marriage is a serious social institution which confers special rights and duties on the couple and the children born out of it. Marriage and family are the foundations on which the society is built, and thus, marriages ultimately determine the wellbeing of the country.”

However, the present trend of marriages and the rate and the speed at which they are dissolved is worrisome. People now hardly seem to contemplate what responsibilities marriage entails and have no qualms about calling it quits at the slightest tumult of real life. Compelled by economic realities of urban life, the primary consideration now seems to be employment and income.

Since the marriages are not solemnised formally, and there is little or no parental or societal involvement in the union, the couple maintain a very low threshold of tolerance to save the marriages. The brunt of not-so-formal marriages and impulsive divorces is often borne by the children, and ultimately the society, when children come into conflict with laws. Since marriages are the building blocks of society, shouldn't the courts ensure that the marriages are not dissolved hastily? “We counsel the spouses on the disadvantages of divorce,” says Phuntsho Dorji, a Registrar with Thimphu's busy family court.

However, he says that “by the time the matter reaches the courts, the marriages are often irretrievably broken down.”

Moreover, educated and employed women do not “remain trapped” in “bad marriages” for too long any more. As per the 2011 annual report of the judiciary, adultery or extramarital affairs, jealousy and misunderstanding seem to be the common causes for the breakup of marriages. Education, equality of sexes, pursuit of career, separate living, economic independence, domestic violence, emotional blackmail, hostile environment, refusal or failure to discharge spousal or parental duties, family or parental interference, also contribute towards divorces. According to the report, in most of the cases, it is the women who applied to the court for dissolution of their marriages.

While the statistics speak well of the independence and equality of sexes, the seriousness of the institution of marriage has become questionable. What about the custody, education, maintenance and wellbeing of our children who are the future citizens and leaders of our country? As a result of parental infidelity, the children are known to become anxious, frightened or feel rejected or uncared for. Such children are prone to have affairs themselves when they marry. Hostile home environments and parental animosity affect the children psychologically, which manifests in the form of poor academic performance, anxiety, depression, bullying, victimisation and sometimes, even illness. It also results in low self-esteem, behaviour problems and adjustment difficulties.

However, the court must carefully proceed on a case-by-case basis. If the preservation of marriages results in perpetuation of pain and suffering and poses a risk to the safety of the spouses and children, divorce should not be delayed. While arranged marriages may have no place, let us make an informed choice and be mindful of the responsibilities accompanying marriages. One thing people must not forget is that they may divorce from each other but not from their children.

New Streets – The Changing Face of the Capital

Phuntsho Norbu Namgyel

A very well constructed building in the heart of Thimphu city known as “Dewa Khangzang” is truly a blessing to me and my family. And it is also said that it has become the talk of the town. It is a fully commercial building, apart from the owner’s residence in the attic.

The Norzin area, at the heart of Thimphu city, used to have many typical Bhutanese houses made of stones, mud bricks and wood. Old-fashioned traditional houses used to fill up Thimphu back then.

Amongst all the traditional houses, there is one I am going to tell you about the old house in which I grew up. It goes way back to the 1960s, or maybe even earlier.

It started with my grandparents’ arrival in Thimphu on foot all the way from Trashigang in the year 1956. My grandfather served in the court of the third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. It was a time when modernisation had just started taking place in the country. As the service at the Royal court became heavy and busy, my grandparents could not return to their village. So they bought land, one-fourth of an acre, for Nu. 500 - the land on which they built their house and the house in which I grew up. My grandmother reminisces that the land was all muddy and no one wanted to buy it back then.

It is said that it took more than a year to complete construction of the house. It was two- storied, with four residential areas (two at the top and two at the bottom) and was said to have been looked upon with high regard by many people for its architectural design.

My mother, like me, also grew up in the very same house and eventually started living there on her own. I still remember that there was a huge garden right in front of the house. We used to plant various vegetables during the summer and other fertile seasons, but with the fall of winter, it became dry, turning the field into a huge playground. That was when the neighbourhood had a very fun and

interactive way of living. The neighbourhood kids used to come and play altogether at the playground in front of my house.

There was only one road that was right above our garden, and the present road on the right side was just a footpath then. I grew up seeing the changing face of the capital from where I lived. I remember when I was just 8 or 9 years' old, our big garden that we loved so much was turned into the second road. We were so disheartened when our seasonal playground was taken away and turned into the second road.

Years went by, and two extremely wide roads were built right in front of our house. Thimphu was turning into a construction haven and it still is. Buildings started shooting up everywhere. The streets started becoming busier and busier by the day. And even our neighbours, on the left side (towards the Changlimithang Stadium from our house), built a complex, the Namgay Khangzang. The capital's face gradually started to change; it was an exciting, yet sad, experience.

Amidst all the construction, and the hasty race towards modernisation, I used to feel that we were being left behind. I guess that was the side effect of modernisation, that you developed a feeling that you should also race along with them and that you cannot afford to remain backward. Not long after, we started construction of our own fully-commercial building as well.

It was hard for me as I saw my old house being brought down. All my childhood memories were demolished along with the old traditional mud house. But the building brought new hopes and joy to me and my family. We couldn't afford to stay behind, we had to move on.

One more street was added to the side, leading from the Sabji bazaar to the main road in front. More buildings, taller and bigger, came up. Thimphu's landscape changed. Thimphu turned into a city, foreigners would call it a "huge village". But it's all the same. Thimphu is a different place now, it's continuing to grow. But every individual's childhood memories, including mine, lie embedded somewhere beneath the new buildings.

Movies in Bhutan

Sonam Pelden

Gasa Lamei Singye is the Bhutanese version of “Romeo and Juliet”. Like the star-crossed lovers, the protagonists in *Gasa Lamei Singye* also meet a tragic end. In a bittersweet sort of way, it made perfect sense to be the story based on which the first movie in Bhutan was made.

After *Gasa Lamei Singye*, not many people came forward to act in movies, except for small-budget movies from small production houses. The commercial movies as seen now became popular with *Jigdre*, a love story which was a copy of the Hollywood movie, *Untamed Heart*.

Two decades saw an influx of movies in the market. There have been, to be fair, some good and memorable movie moments. On average, many movies that came into the market lasted a few weeks or months, and would then go out of circulation and were forgotten soon after.

At the moment, the general public are happy to observe the antics of their favourite comedians, who are put in the storyline more as plot relief than as comic relief (as is the norm in movies from other countries) on the big screen and in the repeated storylines, but the more analytical and selective movie buffs tend to shy away from the Bhutanese movies, the reasons being the repeated and badly copied storylines.

The industry makes an average of 18 movies a year. Yet many would argue, they are not “good movies”, just movies that touch no part of the thinking person, and which are not a reflection of the real Bhutan. Many of the movies are copies of movies from other countries and many are adapted versions of popular movies. To state a few examples: *Jigdre* (*Untamed Heart*), and *Yangsel* (*My Beloved Ghost/Just Like Heaven*). The movie industry in Bhutan is going through a slow phase right now, where there are a few bright spots occasionally, and stagnation in the case of the usage of the same actors and directors, and the same story line.

One of the most original movie makers from Bhutan is Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. His non-commercial movies, like *The Cup* and *Travelers and Magicians*, are beautifully made. The latter was shot in Bhutan and is a beautiful portrayal of the uniqueness of Bhutan.

Karma Tshering is a commercial movie-maker and has brought out some well-received movies. He is inspired by the movie-making style of Khyentse Rinpoche, and considers him his idol. Karma's movies have gained recognition as serious movies with substance. From documentaries to commercial films, from the romantic genre to making movies based on true-life events, to organising the first Miss Bhutan pageant, to owning a women's magazine, he is a man who has done many things that many people will never get to do. More than anything, he is a veteran film-maker who is passionate about his trade. In his presence, it's easy to see his passion for film-making shining through. Having grown up watching Bollywood movies, he had always dreamt of making movies that would represent the Bhutanese. He started making movies in 1998 and *Jigdrel* marked the changing point of the industry. His last movie came out in 2004 and since then, he has moved into different ventures, but he continues to observe the industry, and is vice-president of MPAB (Motion Pictures Association of Bhutan). He has been an interested and avid movie-goer and he predicts that the industry, if it goes along the same line and at the same pace, will end in stagnation, and a downfall will occur due to the poor quality of the movies being produced. Karma is planning to start shooting a movie that he hopes will be a changing point in the current way of movie making, and judging from the movies he brought out in the past, it seems like a great time to look forward to it.

In between the dancing around the trees and the similar storylines, slowly and silently, some new-age thinking film-makers are coming into being. These documentary and short-film makers are trying to change the face of movies in Bhutan. Their aim is to bring new genres and new ways of telling a story to the Bhutanese audience who, in their opinion, will become more and more critical and analytical with time. These young movie-makers have taken a different path and are working at trying to tell the real Bhutanese story. Dechen Roder, Tashi Gyeltshen and Kelzang Dorji are three short-documentary makers, a part of the small group of movie-makers behind the change to come.

Documentary maker Dechen Roder believes that Bhutanese movie-makers can become examples, she says, “Although I believe our film industry is of course, young, and our biggest obstacle is a lack of technical expertise. I also think we need to realise that we have so many original stories and voices, and we don’t need to rely on outside influences and stories. We have the essence. We just need to find it, realise it, nurture it, and get some technical help to bring it to fruition. This is why I am sad when Bhutanese films copy from outside. We copy the stories instead of the techniques and skills, and I think it should be the other way round.”

Tashi Gyeltshen, a man who has made some very good short movies, on the other hand, aims to be a storyteller first and then a filmmaker. His job is to tell a good story and to care about it. All he aims to be is genuine and true and not different.

Kelzang Dorji joined the bandwagon of change just recently. He decided not to walk the well-beaten path of joining the civil service, but instead to take up film-making. Concentrating on short films and documentaries, his aim is to make Bhutanese movies more realistic and less melodramatic.

With veteran film-makers like Karma Tshering, and the new-age film-makers like Dechen, Tashi and Kelzang, there is hope that there will be a change in the movies made in Bhutan. And one day in the near future, Bhutanese movies will have its own identity and be a reflection of the real Bhutan. Otherwise, to quote Karma Tshering, “If we go at the same pace, we will have no good movies to pass down to the future Bhutanese film-makers to look to as reference and no classic movies to pass down to future movie buffs.”

For the audience, all that they demand is a movie that entertains them, and for the new-age thinking people, they demand a movie that represents their time.

Rural Urban Migration

Sonam Yangdon

There was a time when farmers were proud to say that their children were in town doing jobs. But today, they make the same statement with lots of grief in their heart and pain in their eyes. Migration from rural to urban areas is a major environmental change and as most migrants are young adults, they tend to leave their older family members behind, especially their own parents. Think deeply with our Buddhist mind about the adverse consequences on the rural older parents. Put yourself in their shoes and imagine how you would feel, it's very likely that there will be some detrimental effect on the rural parents' mental health, because who on earth would be happy when they lose close contact with their flesh and blood? Such is the change of culture in Bhutan.

Most of the agricultural work today are done by tired and old people, because they have no other choice to sustain themselves, as their children turn their backs, once they move out to town, although not every one does this.

Not many will care to take a look at the reports by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), which show that the internal migration or rural-urban migration rate in Bhutan is the highest in South Asia, which is nothing to be very proud of. Our government has accepted that internal migration is expected, because there is no other choice for rural youths than to move to town if they want to lead a standard life.

The main factor is that rural people have the notion (which is not wrong) that urban centres would provide them with the best quality education, lots of employment opportunities, and the kind of lifestyle they had always dreamt of and wished for, in pursuit of happiness. They come to the urban centres to turn their dreams into reality, but many fail to overcome the urban challenge. That's when the roots of all problems get further nurtured.

Reports also show that a majority of the migrants are male, and as

a result of this trend, the percentage of females in the villages has increased, along with the percentage of elderly villagers, directly affecting economic productivity, because the main productive force has migrated. Women who are impregnated and left behind suffer the most. They are not able to provide basic education for their children, and on top of that, they keep their children at home to attend to the household chores.

So the obvious fact is that rural-urban migration is a phenomenon that is a result of various problems in the rural centre of our country.

When the internal migration happens faster than anyone can stop it, the people living in the urban centres become the victims. We can already see and feel for ourselves the common pressures urban centres are experiencing, such as waste management, traffic congestion, water shortages, increasing social issues, health problems and sanitation issues.

But behind every problem, there is room for optimism. The rural-urban migration issue in Bhutan really has not gone so out of hand that we cannot implement the planned solutions. Our government is trying its best to follow the rural development programme, which aims to distribute social benefits, infrastructure and services, to be suitably carried out. As Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Minister for Economic Affairs, pointed out, internal migration cannot be stopped completely, but we can carefully attend to it, and facilitate it in such a way that the rural potential is not wasted.

The government aims to enable rural people to expand their choices and live better lives in their own hometown. Experts say that our country's future will be shaped by human migration, which will have a huge impact upon our culture, social relationships and economy.

So, we must deal with the issue very carefully so that we can make every part of Bhutan a happy and comfortable place in which to live.

Watch Your Step – Is Buddhism Becoming an Ordinary Daily Routine?

Thoepaga Namgyal Dawa

It was a very busy time of the semester and, naturally, everyone there was at their busiest. As I hastily made my way back to my living quarters from class, I nearly lost my footing at the sight of a note on the ground. I hadn't watched my step. This particular note, which nearly had me land on my face, sparked in me a very deep and disturbing thought. Am I a Buddhist or just a namesake Buddhist? On the note was written: "Watch out! Our tiny friends are crossing..."

Buddhism is believed to have been born with the enlightenment of the Buddha, and was first taught at his first sermon at Varanasi, India. Since then, it has flourished as one of the most dominant faiths in the world. The Buddha's teachings consist mainly of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, with probably a few stories and examples used here and there to make easier understanding of the doctrine.

Often there is this misunderstanding between "teachings" and "stories." A similar misconception is also prominent in the teaching profession. A teacher's job is not to teach but to help their learners learn. This is what is happening nowadays; stories are mistaken for teachings and this results in the culmination of different sects of the same religion based on beliefs and practices. The same religion becoming divided is, to me, a ridiculous thing. What's the point of debating about the same thing going in the same direction?

Buddhism started flourishing in Bhutan from the 8th century onwards, with the visit of the great Indian saint, Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rinpoche. With the course of time, the Buddhist doctrine has undergone various changes. Great yogis and masters, who came one after the other, left behind wonderful legacies, which teach in simple ways the core of the doctrine. The Buddhism we see in Bhutan is the result of the legacies left behind by these great tantric yogis and masters.

It is the 21st century, and Bhutan, like many other nations in the world, is still in its growing stage. We see two threads of advancement in the country - rapid modernisation in urban areas, and a slow-paced march towards development in the rural. These make for completely varied lifestyles in the two areas. But despite the different lifestyles, one thing remains the same - the country's faith remains enshrined in everyone's lives.

Buddhism, as stated in the Constitution, is the country's state religion. Also, freedom is given to the people to choose their own faiths, but without the freedom to go about preaching it. Despite the freedom, a majority of the Bhutanese population follow the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism is taught everywhere in the country and the people of Bhutan have high regard for it as their original faith. But nowadays, there's a new trend to practicing Buddhism in the country. It has become a way of life indeed, but more as a routine, I fear.

The Samtse College of Education has been known for producing the finest teachers in the country. My admission to the college cannot exactly be termed "ambition-wise," but then I felt it slowly growing into one. Eventually, my whole outlook towards the noble profession changed and I started to develop this need to nurture myself as an ideal idol, meaning I'd have to be iconic in all terms; ethical, traditional, professional, conduct-wise, presentation-wise and religion-wise.

Wangdi, a gentle and simple man in his mid-20's, is a post-graduate trainee teacher at the Samtse College of Education. After graduating from Sherubtse College and appearing for the 2011 RCSC exams, faith deemed that he would become a teacher. Apart from being a very active trainee with initiative, he is also good at sports. But it is not his simplicity, his gentleness or his initiative that sets him apart from the rest of the people. He is not just a Buddhist, he is a Buddhist by heart and by virtue. And his leaving a note on the ground to remind people to be wary of the humble army of ants crossing the path is a simple example.

My family is a very religious family. Like any other Buddhist family in Bhutan, we visit *lhakhangs* and religious sites on an occasional basis, such as on *due-zangs*, promotions, exams, sickness, etc. I have always thought it as a duty on my part, as a follower of the faith, that

I do so. I was positive that I was a Buddhist, by birth and by heart. I've always had faith in my religion and I respect it whole-heartedly. I would always turn the prayer wheels and the prayer flags, offer to my protectors before I had anything to eat, and do all other things a Bhutanese Buddhist would normally do.

I've had my fair share of realisations, but by far the greatest would be that of my very own religion. The thought that I was a whole-hearted Buddhist was shattered the moment I saw Wangdi's note. I felt that I wasn't a true Buddhist - the Buddhist feelings that come from the depths of the heart. I realised I did not visit *lhakhangs* and religious sites on other occasions apart from auspicious occasions, in sicknesses, etc. And even if I did visit, I noticed I had not once prayed whole-heartedly for all sentient beings. All I would do was pray for myself; in a way, I was selfish. Besides not visiting religious sites and praying whole-heartedly, I also realised that I had only rare acts of complete compassion - that of Buddhist nature. I started pondering over all aspects of Buddhism in our country. How many Buddhists in Bhutan visit religious sites on occasions other than auspicious and special ones? What percentage of Buddhists in Bhutan, when they pray in the morning or in the evening, whole-heartedly prays for all sentient beings? How many engrave virtuous acts (not necessarily of high levels, such as that of a true Buddhist) in their daily lives? But these thoughts and worries would be short-lived.

A month passed by after my encounter with the "eye-opening note." Normal routine commenced and before too long, with the busy hustle of college work and life, every bit about the note was erased from my memory. The human tendency to forget can be incredible at times. Things that are very bothersome are often never kept in the record chambers of our heads.

Another busy day and a hurrying rush to the class from the hostel, and what do I find? Another note on the ground: "Ants!! Ants!! Ants!!" "Wangdi, you dammed too-good-of-a-soul!" This time, I became awfully disgusted with myself. And this time, the thought would not leave me. I thought I had realised, but then, sadly, I forgot.

Ever since my encounter with Wangdi's note, I have wondered if the rest of the Bhutanese Buddhists, unlike me, are Buddhists by heart.

Do other people of my country forget as well? I wonder if the type of Buddhism practiced in Bhutan has gone from being true, to becoming just a “routine” thing in their lives. I wonder how many Buddhists in our country think of others before themselves (be it human beings or animals). I wonder how many Buddhists in our country watch their steps when they walk.

PART II
BHUTAN UNCHANGED

Unchanged Apathy Towards Pedestrian Facilities

Dhrubaraj Sharma

It was September 2010. Coming back to Thimphu after 5 years obviously aroused a special feeling. For so long, my idea of Thimphu city was mostly conceived through the images and stories in the media, and the experiences shared by visitors. And almost everyone would say that the Centenary Celebrations and the SAARC Summit have completely changed the city. As these sacred and momentous events are once-in-a-lifetime occasions, I was mostly looking forward to the idea of the government making Thimphu a pedestrian-friendly city. Since we neither produce any cars, nor have any oil resources, the promotion of pedestrian facilities and infrastructure was an idea whose time had really come, especially in our valleys, where fertile paddy fields are fast becoming car-filled concrete jungles.

However, the moment I dropped down from the Bhutan Post public bus service near the Olarangchu Bridge at Olakaha, I was left wondering if this excellent idea is yet to take root in our capital city. Without any pedestrian walkway by the expressway, I was just inches away from an accident, as the cars zoomed past as if the world would end soon. Looking along the expressway, one could easily see many segments where people from all walks of life were trying to cross the road, using the indigenous look-and-run technique. Without any pedestrian walkway or an underpass or a foot over-bridge, everyone was taking a huge risk just to reach the other side of the road. And suddenly, it became all too obvious that the designers of the expressway thought only about the cars, and nothing else. I hurdled over the steel barricade and found security on an organically developed footpath with the Wangchu flowing below, but then I was forced to consider my colliding interest between my unrealistic expectations and ground reality, that this was actually happening in a country where walking was the only means of travel prior to the 1960s. And it has been estimated that Thimphu city, with a population of around 100,000 people, has a population of roughly 40,000 cars!

Wow! The swimming pool road had become a boulevard with concrete dividers, and there were additional footpaths on the upper

side, but the two underpasses beneath showed the reality of our pedestrian facilities. The leftover beer bottles, torn condom packets, cigarette butts, dried human excreta, the urinal froth and odour and ravaged lighting fixtures inside them resonated with the city's social health problems, behind the failure of Thimphu's first underpass pedestrian facility. Normally, pedestrian underpasses are built with additional support facilities, like a newspaper stall, milk booth, fruit stall, police kiosk or even a cobbler's corner. These facilities not only attract pedestrians to use them, but also help to control anti-social/underground activities. Unfortunately, our underpass is a mere 3 meters wide tunnel devoid of any additional facilities, an allergy for the pedestrian but a perfect hideout for the underground opportunist: Another example of where we cared more for the cars than for the pedestrians' amenities.

In order to inculcate the idea of walking amongst the car-dependent urban population, the Government came up with the initiative that every Tuesday should be observed as Pedestrian Day, where private cars won't be allowed to enter the core of the city. This has been received with mixed reactions, and a high degree of success. However, initiatives to improve pedestrian facilities, like additional footpaths, flyover bridges and effective underpasses are yet to gain momentum.

Time Flows Still

Dr. Dinesh Pradhan

There are one hundred and eleven wooden planks on the main span of the wooden cantilever bridge at Nemey Zampa, seen as one approaches the Paro Rinpung Dzong. Some fifteen years ago, as a kid, I counted them almost every day, on the way to and back from school, which was within sight of the bridge.

Much water has flowed under this bridge since then, and when I counted that day, I smiled when I got off the final plank with the same number, one hundred and eleven.

The dawn was jostling for space with the night sky, and the air had the remnants of the winter chill. My breath came out as vapour as I made my way up the granite flagstone-paved path to the Dzong. These are the same stones on which Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi once walked, back in 1958. I have no idea how old this path actually is; the Dzong itself was built in the 17th Century.

It was the last day of the Paro *Tshechu*, and I was making my way up the path to the *Tshechu* grounds to witness the *Guru Thongdrol*.

Tshechus are festivals held in honour of Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche “the precious teacher”. The dates and duration of the *Tshechus* vary between different places, but almost all of them are held on the 10th day of the month according to the Bhutanese lunar calendar.

Monks as well as laymen perform the various dances (*Chham*) during the *Tshechus*. The dancers personify the compassionate as well as wrathful deities, heroes, demons and even animals. Deities are invoked by these dances and onlookers are blessed and protected from misfortune. It is also a yearly social gathering for people to come together and rejoice.

My personal favourite is the Dance of Judgement of Death (*Raksha*

Machham), where the Lord of Death (*Shinje Chhogyel*) pronounces the verdict for a good man and a sinner after they've both crossed the *Bardo* (an in-between period of wandering after death).

The *Guru Thongdrol* is displayed for a few hours at dawn on the last day of the *Paro Tshechu*. *Thongdrol* stands for “liberation at sight” (Thong: to see; Drol: liberation). The *Guru Thongdrol* of *Paro* is one of the largest in the world and is almost 350 years old.

I walked up this stone-paved path at the crack of dawn as a child without knowing why or understanding its significance; today, I have realised its importance enough to have come all the way from *Thimphu* in the wee hours of the morning.

Walking with me were the local people of *Paro*, decked in their finest clothes, most noticeable among them being the *Goechey* (brocade) ghos and tegos. At such festivals, ghos and kiras with intricate patterns, some of them passed down as family heirlooms, are worn with pride.

A majority of them were carrying packed lunches, meals that will be shared among family members after witnessing the *Thongdrol*. This is an age-old tradition, and the only change over time has been the way the food is carried: *Bangchungs* (cane basket containers) have now been replaced by plastic hot-cases. *Bangchungs* are now sold as “decorative pieces” to visiting tourists.

As I approached the *Tshechu* grounds, I noticed that the temporary stalls that used to line both sides of the grounds were conspicuous by their absence. The stalls used to sell food and drinks, hosted games for prizes, and sold handicrafts to tourists.

The stalls used to give the *Tshechu* a fair-like atmosphere and used to be a way for the local people to indulge in fun and frolic, a break from the normally serious routines on their farms. To maintain hygiene at the *Tshechu* grounds, the stalls are now located near *Paro* town.

Save for the stalls, not much has changed from fifteen years back. The *Lhakhangs* that host the *Tshechu* and *Thongdrol*, the way the ceremonies are conducted, even the number of people in the crowd, seemed the same as before. And of course, the *Guru Thongdrol* itself

stands as a living testament to the timelessness of such traditions and customs of our country.

I moved silently with the crowd towards the *Guru Thongdrol* and sought blessings. As I walked away to look at it from afar, I was as mesmerised by the majesty of the *Thongdrol*, as I had been as a small child. I silently looked on as the first rays of the sun came streaming through the trees and the *Thongdrol* was rolled up for another year.

When I approached the bridge on my way down, I was ushered by policemen to take the exit path which led to a make-shift bridge over the river, solely for people returning from the *Tshechu*. I was disappointed by the fact that I could not count, once more, the unchanging number of planks on the wooden cantilever bridge.

Chortens in Bhutan

Jamyang Tshering

Chortens are known as “stupas” in India, and can be seen everywhere in Bhutan, be it on the hilltops, in the valleys, near a dzong or a monastery, and even on high mountain passes. From the time Buddhism flourished, the architectural style of building *chortens* all over the Buddhist countries remains the same, according to religious perspective.

On 14 June 2012, I travelled around, polling different people in Thimphu, asking about the *chortens*.

Jigten Tshering, a recent class 12 graduate, said that “*chortens* are religious monuments that are built in order to worship gods. *Chortens* were mainly built to keep the relics of the Buddha and other Buddhist saints. If we go around the *chortens* it’s believed to earn merits.”

His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche once also said: “When a great teacher passes away, his body is no more, but to indicate that his mind is dwelling forever in an unchanging way in the *dharmakaya*, one will erect a stupa as a symbol of the mind of the buddhas.”

Pema Tshering (owner of Dewa Khangzang) also shared the information that *chorten* means “the basis of offering.” It is a symbol of enlightened mind, and the path to its realisation.

As Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, the “stupa represents the Buddha’s body, his speech and his mind, but most especially his mind, and every part shows the path to Enlightenment. The visual impact of the stupa on the observer brings a direct experience of inherent wakefulness and dignity. Stupas continue to be built because of their ability to liberate one, simply upon seeing their structure.” Indeed it’s true that stupas have greater roles in Buddhism.

I interviewed Ms. Sonam Wangmo (ex-project manager of Raynaling) and she explained there were three types of *chortens*, generally characterised as Bhutanese, Tibetan and Nepali style.

She said that the Nepali-Style *chorten* is a classical stupa, having a pair of eyes painted on each of the four sides of the tower. She added that the eyes represent Buddha's eyes, and the nose is the Sanskrit character for the number one, symbolising the true Buddha.

The Chortenkorā in Trashiyangtse and Chendebji *chorten* near Trongsa are examples of this style.

The second style, the Tibetan-Style *chorten*, has a shape similar to a stupa, she said. The round part is flared outward, instead of being a dome shape.

National Memorial *chorten* in Thimphu is an excellent example of this style.

The Bhutanese-style *chorten* consists of a square stone pillar with red band painted on the top. Some Bhutanese *chortens* have a ball and crescent, representing the moon and the sun, on the top. She also said that the exact style of origin is not known.

Lungtenzampa *chorten* near LungtenZampa Bridge in Thimphu is a perfect example of a Bhutanese-style *chorten*.

Kelzang Thinley, (BBS Thimphu, on April 17, 2012) has written that the *chorten* is also known as “the *chorten* of heaped Lotuses.” It refers to the birth of the Buddha. It resembles the seven steps of Buddha's birth in all four directions - East, West, North and South. In each direction, lotuses sprang up, symbolising the four immeasurables of love, compassion, joy and equanimity.

The four steps of the base of the *chorten* are circular, and decorated with lotus-petal designs. Seven heaped lotus steps are occasionally constructed. This refers to the seven first steps of the Buddha.

There are many complicated structures and designs of *chortens* and they have many meanings and significance. Meanwhile, their architecture and structural design are the same in every Buddhist country, and they have many perspectives and are momentous.

A Road to Unique Democracy

Kinzang Dorjee

The democratic culture in our society is unique and different from other countries. Though the concept and principles are the same everywhere, we practice them in a different way. A special feature of our democracy is that it was given against the will of our people. The people did not ask for the power and authority, which our government possessed in the past. In fact, the people were content with the services they had received.

Although democracy in Bhutan was formalised only in 2008, with the adoption of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, a democratic culture and system had existed much earlier, in 1907. The history unveils that Gongsa Ugyen Wangchuck was unanimously elected as the first hereditary King of Bhutan by the clergy and the people's representatives from twenty districts, on December 17, 1907. In olden times, all the business of the Royal Court was transacted no differently from the systems carried out in other countries.

The existence of a democratic culture and tradition in the early days was further proven by the introduction of the National Assembly (*Gyaljong Tshogdhu*) of Bhutan by His Majesty the Third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, in 1953. The first historic National Assembly session was held in Punakha Dzong. The House was represented by the clergy, the Council of Cabinet Ministers and the people's representatives from all the districts in the country. The meeting deliberated at length on the issues that had to be discussed in such a large forum, where there was maximum representation from all walks of life.

The record shows that His Majesty adopted a different system of Governance and initiated the decentralisation of power, by appointing secretaries and other officials in different districts. In fact, this was a first noble move and an attempt by the Government functionaries to reach out to the common people. His Majesty gradually began to democratise his rule by giving powers to the National Assembly, enabling the members to discuss openly and make decisions without

any proviso. In 1961, the first Five Year Plan (FYP) was introduced in order to enable the people to engage in the planning processes for their own development and requirement.

The introduction of numerous institutions in the country during His Majesty's reign clearly manifested the real devolution of powers to the people. It is hard to believe that His Majesty even issued a *Kasho* "Royal Decree" to the members of the National Assembly on November 13, 1968, which stated that the members of the National Assembly of Bhutan must have the right for a vote of no confidence in him if his actions are not in the national interest.

Are there any leaders in the world who do not want to grasp and hold on to the power and authority they have? In fact, leaders around the world want more and more powers, and become greedier as they proceed further. Democracy has failed to function properly in many countries. Every day, the tabloids report that there is conflict between the people and government, mainly about power-sharing deals. People protesting against their government's rule have become daily business. Frequent changes of government further confuse people and add fuel to un-stabilise the nation. So, there are some negative impacts of democracy upon society, if not properly institutionalised. The failures of democracy witnessed in other regions were taken as a lesson. For a country like ours, where there is a scarcity of resources, we cannot think of changing government frequently.

When interviewed, Ap Tshering, 58, from Trashigang said: "Our people are fortunate to get a selfless King every time. We must not forget that democracy in our country is an enormous gift from the Golden Throne." He is of the view that democracy had happened on a good note, unlike in other countries. However, he argues that some people think that democracy means freedom, which permits them to do whatever they like. Tashi Choden, a corporate employee in Thimphu, said that democracy is a system of government by the majority of the population, or all the eligible members of state, typically through elected representatives.

A true foundation of democracy was laid by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, as soon as he ascended to the Golden Throne on June 2, 1974. His Majesty addressed the nation: "As far as you, my people,

are concerned, you should not adopt the attitude that whatever is required to be done for your welfare will be done entirely by the government. On the contrary, a little effort on your part will be much more effective than a great deal of effort on the part of the government.” One can clearly understand the statement that His Majesty was trying to make, by urging his people to participate in the planning processes for their own good.

In line with the policy of decentralisation, the institutions of Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogchung (DYT) and Gewog Yargay Tshogchung (GYT) were formally launched in 1981 and 1991 respectively. The new development institutions were initiated from the Golden Throne mainly to ensure the people’s participation and decision-making in the planning processes. All the reforms, be it development administration or administrative development, were geared towards the introduction of a parliamentary democracy in 2008. His Majesty has worked tirelessly and selflessly for thirty-two years, to turn ours into one of the most successful institutions in the world.

His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo understood the good of democracy, and every step taken for building democracy in Bhutan was carefully thought out by our dynamic leaders. The institutions upholding and nurturing the system were well in place.

To be frank, at the embryonic stage of His Majesty’s idea of introducing a parliamentary democracy, it was not welcome news for the people of this country. The people had been very happy and comfortable under the rule of Monarchy since 1907, and preferred to continue with the same system. The people of all twenty Dzongkhags submitted a request to His Majesty to retain power and authority within the Throne. However, our Bodhisattva King, having understood the true essence of democracy, convinced the people to accept it with humility and pride. Their Majesties toured all the Dzongkhags to discuss and consult with the people on the draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Our people grew to have full faith in democracy, since the move was from the Golden Throne, and accepted it as a gift from an enlightened Monarch.

On 17 December 2005, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo stunned the nation by announcing his abdication from the throne in favour of his young and dynamic son. His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo finally stepped down in 2006, and handed over all the power and control of the government to the people. Democracy is for the people, by the people and of the people, as stated by the enlightened souls.

In order to uphold and nurture the true principles of this young democracy, His Majesty the Fifth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has been working tirelessly day and night, ensuring his subjects live a happy and peaceful life at all times. It is aptly said that His Majesty is the custodian of democracy, and promoter of the Gross National Happiness (GNH), the development philosophy of this Buddhist country. His Majesty's firm belief is that the culture of democracy can only be strengthened through the institutionalisation of various constitutional offices and other legal frameworks in the country to guide the system through the journey of time. In short, with His Majesty's advocacy of democracy and under his benevolent guidance, the people's faith for democracy had increased, which led to a successful introduction of democracy in the country in 2008.

Our fellow citizens must not forget the unconditional love and great care ushered in by the Dharma Kings over the ages. A sense of profound gratitude to our monarch must be deeply rooted in our hearts at all times, to come and pray for the long life of those who had worked selflessly for the wellbeing of our people and the country.

Still Devotional Prayers (Part I)

Through the lens of Asha Kezang



Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion of Bhutan which is practiced by two-thirds to three-quarters of the population. Although originating in Tibetan Buddhism, the Buddhism practiced in Bhutan differs significantly in its rituals, liturgy, and monastic organization. The state religion has long been supported financially by the government through annual subsidies to monasteries, shrines, monks, and nuns. Both monks and nuns keep their heads shaved and wear distinguishing maroon robes. Their days are spent in study and meditation. Common people do practice the religion in their own ways: day to day works, in their speech, in their thought and visiting the holy places and persons on holy dates (8, 10, 15, 25, 28 and 30th day in a month in the Bhutanese calendar).

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Still Devotional Prayers (Part II)

Through the lens of Asha Kezang



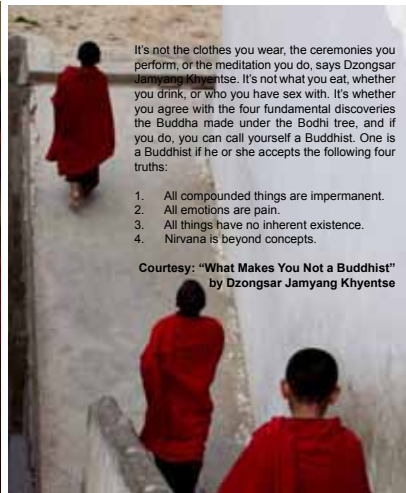
Before the introduction of Buddhism, Bön religion was prevalent in Bhutan. Imported from Tibet and India in the eighth century, Bön doctrine became so strongly reinvigorated by Buddhism that by the eleventh century it reasserted itself as an independent school apart from Buddhism. Bön continues to be practiced in modern Bhutan. The majority of Buddhists in Bhutan are adherents of the Drukpa subsect of the Kargyupa (literally, oral transmission) school, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.



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Still Devotional Prayers (Part III)

Through the Lens of Asha Kezang



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Customary Practice of Amicable Resolution (mediation) of Disputes in Bhutanese Communities

Lobzang Rinzin Yargay

Recently, in a remote hamlet in Sakten, Wangmo's cows strayed into Tshomo's farm and destroyed her maize crop. A dispute arose between the two neighbours and Tshomo was threatening to drag Wangmo through the court. In the past, Wangmo and Tshomo would have sat before a village elder, or any other neutral or trusted person, near a temple or under a tree, and resolved such disputes, without the need to go to court.

Disputes are an inevitable part of all human and social relationships, and need to be resolved if we are not to take the law into our own hands, or resort to confrontation or retaliatory measures. In fact, what distinguishes human beings from the animals is the manner in which we resolve our differences and disputes. In the animal kingdom, might is right, the weaker ones never get justice. Moreover, we do not judge our own cases, but take them to neutral persons, such as mediators and judges, for their decisions.

We are truly a welfare state. Successive monarchs have initiated judicial reforms to ensure speedy and inexpensive justice to the people. For a country of our means, we have a fairly good legal system in terms of efficiency of delivery of legal services. Judicial services are almost free, like medicine and education. In order to cement the bond among the citizens by mitigating the divisive effect of court litigation, His Majesty the King has decreed that the cases be resolved amicably resulting in no "losers" or "winners", especially for those who appealed to him, so that people return home as friends and neighbours. His Majesty has on several occasions urged the people to engage in consultative and collaborative processes, rather than digging their feet in, within their respective "territories".

Courts are not the only place where we can resolve our disputes. We can resolve our disputes right at the place where they occur – in the communities and villages, in our offices and institutions. We call it *Nangkha Nangdrig* "internal or mutual compromise", in which people,

on their own, or with the help of one or more neutral facilitators, arrive at mutually acceptable solutions. According to HRH Princess Ashi Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, President of the Bhutan National Legal Institute, “This precious legacy faces the threat of decline unless we strengthen it by imparting basic mediation tools and skills to the appropriate people in the communities.” Her Royal Highness said that “many of the matrimonial and monetary cases currently clogging up the legal system could be mediated in the communities.”

Disputes are not desirable. History reveals that people had discouraged litigation and persuaded each other to compromise. In the olden days, the Kings or rulers settled the disputes of their subjects. Courts were instituted later, when the rulers became preoccupied with multiple affairs of the state. Disputes were then settled through the intermediaries of the judges in courts. Even when the formal courts were instituted, many people opted for or preferred to resolve their disputes out of the courts. In our country, courts were formally established in the 1960s.

In Bhutan, due to the rugged terrain and close-knit communities, we were accustomed to resolving our disputes amicably in the communities. The words of the senior members of the community were complied with. Moreover, compassion, non-violence, tolerance and other values of Buddhism prevent us from hurting even our “enemies”. Even when the courts were instituted, people believed that it was better to lose their cases in the villages than win in the courts, just as the Chinese believed that entering a court is similar to entering the mouth of a tiger. In France, Voltaire said that he had only been ruined twice in his life – once when he lost a court case, and once when he won one. While we have come far in terms of professionalism of the judicial personnel and user-friendliness of the courts, some protracted litigations take considerable time in overcrowded courts, besides damaging relationships.

Even in countries like the USA and Canada, alternative systems of dispute resolutions are increasingly being used, as a rapidly expanding process of settlement of disputes outside the court system. This is mainly due to the amount of resources and time involved in court litigation. Moreover, business and commercial disputes are mostly settled out of court to preserve relations and reputations, besides

saving resources in legal fees and incidental expenses. If all the disputes go to the courts, they will not only clog up and slow down the legal system, but they will lead to increased animosity among the citizens, as litigation results in “winners” and “losers”, due to the adversarial nature of the court proceedings, according to Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, Chief Justice of Bhutan.

Ask any common people, and many still say that the court is an intimidating place and formality-ridden. Even an average educated person finds courts and legal processes complex. A court is indeed a serious place everywhere, due to the very nature of tasks it performs, i.e. finding “truth” and dispensing “justice.” While courts may remain solemn places, they are not the only places to go when we have disputes. In fact, people are expected to go to court only when all other avenues have been exhausted, or attempts at amicable settlements fail. Most of the disputes need to be resolved right at the places where they arise, i.e., in the villages and communities, and through the intermediaries of local community leaders, elderly villagers and others who are trusted by the people.

Washing dirty linen in public has always been discouraged in Bhutan. We have always believed that the “sore in the mouth should be nursed by the tongue without seeking external intervention”. Villagers interpreted external intervention as loss of face or image of their villages. We have also believed in the prompt resolution of disputes before they escalate. We also knew that unlike wine, a dispute becomes sour with time, and the fire has to be extinguished while it is still small. Just as the Chinese writer Sun Tzu said that “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,” we say that we should subdue our enemy with wisdom, and conquer kin with love. We believed in collaboration and compromise in resolving our disputes not in competition and litigation. We were used to compromising in such a way that “neither the tiger is humiliated nor the deer loses its life”. Similarly, we compromised, ensuring that “neither the snake was killed nor the stick was broken”.

In the amicable settlement of disputes in the communities, we adhered to the words and advice of the elderly people and local community leaders. Moreover, the risk of social sanction, or “loss of face,” compelled compliance or cooperation and deterred litigation.

People who resorted to litigation in courts were often stigmatised as litigious or even “evil”, and therefore, often shunned by society. The positive effect was that it helped preserve the unity among the people and peace and harmony in the villages. It is not clear how long these values will survive against the currents of “equality”, “rights” and “freedoms”.

Preservation of culture is one of the pillars of GNH, and amicable resolution of disputes occupies an important place in it. Let’s pause for a moment and see where we are headed. In the urban areas, we are beginning to ignore who lives next door. Anonymity and individualism are known to result in hostility and crimes. Our once-sleepy hamlets are rapidly being transformed into “towns”, posing a threat to our values of co-operation, unity, mutual respect and interdependence. Unlike most of us who grew up on a rich diet of stories, our children are beginning to grow up far away from their parents, devoid of basic values. We are competing to enhance comfort, freedom and wealth. These pursuits may result in disputes distracting us from fruitful endeavour.

The process of mediation of disputes in communities with the help of *Barmi* “mediator” is simple and informal. The *Barmis* are mainly local community leaders, elderly citizens, retired civil servants, businessmen, learned monks and any other suitable people who are held in high esteem in the community. They help people to own up to their mistakes and to reconcile over a cup of *arra* “local wine” or tea. At times, it is a simple exchange of apologies, followed by handshakes. It rarely involves payment of compensation and restitution of properties. People rarely pay *Barzey* “legal fee” to the mediators; instead, the mediators take pride in reconciliation between their neighbours and in restoring normalcy to society, through their free service. The settlements are rarely reduced to *Genja* “settlement agreement”, and almost never need court intervention for enforcement of the promises and commitments made during the mediation.

The Bhutanese legal system reveals the foresight of successive monarchs regarding the importance of the informal and amicable resolution of disputes. The traditional practice of *Nangkha Nangdrig* is an integral part of the legal system. Successive laws are replete with procedures and mechanisms for settlement of disputes informally,

both outside and inside the courts. Courts are mandated to grant opportunities to the parties to settle their cases amicably at any stage of the proceedings, before the judgments are rendered.

In civil cases especially, it is mandatory for the courts to remind the parties of the opportunity or right to settle their case through mediation, before the case is heard and disposed of by the courts. However, there is, as yet, no in-house mediator or mediation facility in the courts. So the parties are required to take leave of the courts to find appropriate mediators outside the courts, who are normally retired civil servants, businessmen, *Jabmis* “lay legal counsels”, and now, even professional legal practitioners in the urban areas.

The parties are free to negotiate their cases or mediate the disputes at the courts from the time they are filed till the judgments are rendered, but even when the cases are appealed to the higher courts, the parties are granted the opportunity to settle the cases amicably. And if the cases reach His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo, after judicial remedies have been exhausted, the people are given another opportunity to resolve the disputes amicably.

The importance accorded to the system of amicable resolution of disputes can be gauged from Article 21, Clause 16 of the Constitution, which states that the “Parliament may, by law, establish impartial and independent Administrative Tribunals as well as Alternative Dispute Resolution centers.” The Bhutan National Legal Institute has initiated a revitalisation or strengthening of the age-old customary practice of amicable settlement of disputes in the communities through its nation-wide training of local community leaders. This is a wise and timely step which will have a profound impact on the promotion of culture, the resolution of disputes, preservation of relations between people and, ultimately, maintaining and promoting harmony and peace in the country.

Mediation of disputes in rural Bhutan and arbitration of commercial disputes in urban areas assume significance as we enter an era of accelerated economic development. Rapid economic development is accompanied by more economic and commercial activities, which inevitably result in more conflicts and disputes, which call for more and more laws. Unfortunately, as the laws circumscribe the conduct

of the people, more laws also mean more disputes and crimes. More disputes and crimes mean more cases for the judiciary, which exert pressure on limited judicial resources. Therefore, if some of the cases are mediated or prevented from reaching the courts, both the judiciary and the people stand to benefit. The judiciary can allocate its resources to cases which deserve intervention, and people will be spared much time and expense. Above all, expeditious and amicable resolution of the disputes will not only save resources for the people, but preserve their relations and promote harmony in the society. This system, as it has done for ages, is intended to lend prompt and patient ears to the agonies or grievances of the people, and offer advice, or counsel them into giving a second thought to their emotional or impulsive reactions before they resort to judicial remedies and become entangled in bitter and protracted litigation.

However, due to the increasing complexity of legal disputes, an increase in the literacy of the population and overall sophistication of the society, the community leaders are increasingly finding it difficult to give convincing advice to the people. Secondly, the roles of the local community leaders as dispute resolvers have not been officially acknowledged. Therefore, other than the customary or moral duty, there is nothing which requires the local leaders to assist people in resolving their disputes. However, it is reported that fewer cases come to the court from places where the local leaders are efficient in dispute resolution or take their roles as mediators seriously.

Most community leaders are of the view that they now need legal literacy to resolve disputes. They need to be trained on how to fulfil their traditional roles in modern times. They need to know that disputes are amicably settled through negotiation and mediation based on the interests and needs of the parties, leading to a win-win situation, rather than on the determination of the rights of the parties as per laws as in courts, leading to a winner-take-all or win-lose situation. Some of the reasons why some parties to disputes may choose to mediate their cases outside the court are the lengthy processes, rigid formalities and solemn atmosphere associated with traditional court proceedings.

However, mediation of disputes is not without disadvantages. Sometimes the neutrality of the mediators becomes doubtful. They

can become biased, political and partisan. At times, powerful or influential people in the communities can influence the process. People also fear losing dignity and prestige when they compromise their cases. The mediators lack adequate knowledge and experience. Some mediators are manipulative and impose solutions against the wishes of the parties, and therefore disputes resurface, due to unjust compromise or hasty resolution. The process is voluntary and can be terminated at any time, at the request of the parties. Besides, not everyone is interested in “win-win” or compromise solutions. Moreover, mediation is not a substitute for a formal judicial system; mediators are not substitutes for professional, trained and experienced judges, who decide cases without fear or favour, based on established procedures and clear laws. Finally, unlike many other countries, litigation is still inexpensive in Bhutan and the courts are efficient.

But the courts are getting inundated with cases, and justice is getting delayed, and more expensive. Therefore, we need to revitalise alternative dispute resolution processes, such as mediation. It is the most appropriate process for a small country like Bhutan, where people share a small space and limited resources. *Nangkha Nangdri* enhances happiness and strengthens peace in the community. The practice of informal resolution of disputes is an age-old custom which is an integral part of our culture and history. The system needs to be strengthened by training appropriate people and restoring the faith and the trust of people like Wangmo and Tshomo, so that they need not go far out of their doorsteps to seek justice when disputes arise, and can remain happy neighbours.

My Two Mothers

Sonam Pelden

I have two mothers. For anyone who has not been to Bhutan, you would assume that I was given for adoption. Well, that is not the case, and I guess that is why that statement is riddled with a lot of questions. But it is true, I have two mothers; one gave birth to me, the other was made my mother by fate and by a small touch of destiny.

When I was born, the time was one, which was not lucky for my mother and I. The bad luck had to be warded off, and since it wasn't the first case of a baby being born in a bad hour and it was not that uncommon, my parents knew what to do. They had to choose a woman and ask her to be my mother. The person that they asked was my mother's best friend. In a small ceremony, my mother's best friend was then given me as her daughter, and my parents gave her a gift as a token of their gratitude. From then on, I had two mothers. I wasn't sent off to live with my new mother, but every once in a while, I would be given gifts from my other mother, her token to her daughter.

In my whole life, I lived in a household that always had the presence of my other mother. She had many children of her own, but she was always with our family for at least a month in a year. I never understood why, but the bond of friendship was very strong between my two mothers. Though they came from their villages, one from Yangtse, the other from Kurtoe, they were very different persons and had very different lives.

My own mother has always been a rock; she is not literate but she always found a way to generate some income to help my father with the expenses. My other mother, on the other hand, went to primary school, but her fate took her into a hard marriage. She is someone who has suffered a lot. They are both very different, but they are closer than even siblings.

In some ways, I wonder if things would have been any different had I been born in a luckier hour, but I know if that had been the case, I

would not have been able to witness the great friendship that exists between these two women.

When they first met, they were in their early 20s. Both had two children; they lived in a small house, which had a common entrance, and after the few first moments of shy curiosity, they became the best of friends.

I don't know if I connected them more deeply, but I do know that their bond of friendship became stronger over the years. In many ways, they grew up together. Their friendship evolved as they started to change. When they were younger, they provided love and support to each other, they provided each other a shoulder to cry on, they were the understanding ears and the tearful eyes for each other, they stood up for one another and stood firmly beside each other, or even behind one another, as and when the moment required. Unconsciously, the two completely unrelated women had become sisters.

As they grew older, there was a threat of becoming disconnected, yet once again, their friendship gave them a new avenue to pursue together. In their 20s, their daily troubles had connected them; in their 30s, their children had given them hours of things to talk about; in their 40s, their new and growing interest in religion and our spiritual pursuit had them groping forwards together, and now in their 50s, their mutual love and faith for the teachings by the Buddha and other great saints, connect them more deeply than all other things combined.

For three decades and more, these two women have been friends; they know everything about each other, and they accept all that is good and bad about each other. They grew up together, saw many happy moments together; they were there when they lost loved ones, they shared the happy moments of youth and are now so connected in the autumn of their lives, they await winter with hearts intertwined and connected closely by love and the spiritual belief in karma and the hope to meet again in another life.

If that isn't true friendship, I would be quite curious to know what is. And the example of this deep bond of friendship, and how sometimes friends can become family, make me thank the two mothers in my

life so very much. I know I would be giving myself too much credit, but the faith my parents had in my other mother, to request her to be my mother, probably was the turning point in their relationship.

I thank God for having given me two wonderful women to look at and learn from - my two mothers.

Rituals

Sonam Yangdon

Religious rites and rituals are an integral part of Bhutanese society. Performing religious ceremonies is known to provide psychological wellbeing, like comfort, satisfaction, hope and solace to the household who arranges them. That's the reason the traditional religious practices still exist today. The ritual ceremonies are performed yearly to avoid any mishaps that may befall the family members.

It's impressive to know that the tradition of performing rituals is not just done in the villages, but in the cities as well.

When faced with serious illness, individuals often display more outward signs of devotion to perform religious ceremonies first, rather than opting for a medical check-up. It is because individuals in Bhutan still believe that when they fall sick, it's to do with the haunted spirits. So in order to satisfy their lust for our lives, sacrificial *tormas* "fragile statues made out of flour" are moulded and then placed at a strategic location, where three footpaths cross one another.

Conducting rituals at home not only drives away the haunted spirits, but it is also a great time for the family members who have been away from each other for a long time to get together and find out what's happening in their respective lives. As people flock in continuously, they are served plenty of drinks, mainly *arra*, and food in abundance.

As the alcohol takes effect, people start dancing, celebrating the jubilant get-together. But with the changing times, the ritual performer also seizes the opportunity to hike his or her fees. It requires a huge amount of money, because the resources necessary to conduct rituals are very expensive, and this becomes a huge burden for the poor.

The people who perform rituals were given so much of respect in the past because they performed from their heart, and did not ask for too much fees, but now they are referred to as "naughty ritual performer," who are usually involved in easy earnings by demanding huge amounts. Some ritual performers even demand to be picked up

and dropped home in chic cars. It's a great shame to see some monks dozing and snoring in between prayers, or talking on phones. The modern monks really need to be disciplined.

Since it is expensive and even sinful to make meat part of rituals, our *Je Khenpo* (the spiritual leader) issued a decree stating that meat is banned during ritual ceremonies. And that's when those who could not hold rituals, even though they really wanted to, due to budget constraints, sighed in relief.

The conducting of religious ceremonies reminds us that we are still following our traditions, and we should be proud of it, and try to impart the same to our future generations, so that we don't have to tell them stories when they see photographs of monks reading religious texts, and when they watch videos of monks playing the "melody of dharma".

Pilgrimage to Talo

Tsedon Dorji

True to the expression “home is where the heart is,” my spiritual home and the one place where my mind and heart are at peace is in Talo, Punakha, my maternal ancestral village. Four generations of matriarchs in my family either lived in or was born and raised in Talo.

Talo is located at an altitude of about 2,800 meters above sea level along the green hill-slopes of the western district of Punakha. Right at the top of this picturesque village is an ancient monastery called Talo Shedra.

Because we Bhutanese largely believe that a deity protects any holy or sacrosanct site, it is not unusual to see devotees making pilgrimages to their respective village *lhakhangs* and monasteries to offer prayers and other tangible items, and to conduct religious rituals.

From the time I was a little girl, our family tradition of visiting Talo annually to pay respects to our deity, respectfully referred to as *Talo Gyap*, was always something I looked forward to. It was like visiting a beloved family elder who lived very far away. My sister and I enjoyed the hustle and bustle at home as our grandmother and mother prepared mouth-watering delicacies to take as offerings to the monks, and for our family lunch.

Punakha is a two-and-a-half to three hours’ drive from Thimphu, and when I was a child, the drivable road only went halfway up to Talo. We had to walk for another hour or so to reach Talo Shedra. Till the age of six, my father or uncles carried me. From age seven, I walked with my grandparents as they slowly climbed uphill.

Perhaps it was because of the faith we had, supplemented by the clean crisp air, that reaching the monastery after the walk was the best feeling in the world. It felt as though our tiredness was transformed into a new spurt of energy, as we straightened out and dusted our ghos and kiras, usually crumpled and dusty from the hike.

From the outside, Talo Shedra monastery looks like a smaller version of a Dzong, complete with an inner rectangular courtyard. Whenever I walk on the stone slabs of the courtyard floor, I think about how this same ground was stepped upon by my ancestors many years ago, and I continue to feel an instant sense of belonging. The same feeling comes over me when I put my hands on the two ancient giant cyprus trees near the side entrance of the monastery. The trees are believed to be more than a 150 years old. I imagine my ancestors resting at the foot of the trees, or perhaps they, too, put their hands on the exact spot where I had mine.

With our offerings consisting of meat dishes, seasonal fruits, assorted candies, packets of chips and other snacks neatly placed in plastic woven baskets, the first order of the day was to head straight to the main altar room, or goenkha, of the monastery. This main altar room is where *Talo Gyap* is worshipped. After prostrating, and handing over our offerings to the monk to arrange at the goenkha, we offer prayers and respects to the Buddha and *Talo Gyap*. This, for me, is the single most special moment of our annual visit to Talo: My family members and I all in prayer, hands folded in the Buddhist lotus position, united in offering thanks to enlightened beings for keeping us healthy and safe and praying for the wellbeing of all sentient beings. This is also a moment for us to reflect on our own actions and to pray that the Buddha's nature influence each and every activity we partake in.

After we pay our respects and offer prayers in the other altar rooms in the monastery, we usually settle down for lunch. To this day, the green grassy lawn adjacent to the monastery near the cyprus trees is where we set up our packed lunch. Because Talo is warmer than Thimphu, the weather is usually pleasant. With my stomach full, and a wonderful feeling of being spiritually cleansed, I feel most at peace. Talo has a special aura, a feeling of tranquillity that must be felt firsthand.

Almost two decades have passed since my first recollection of my initial visits to Talo. The journey to Punakha still takes two to three hours, but now the road access has made it possible for cars to come all the way up to the entrance of the Talo Shedra. The hustle and bustle had continued at home the day before we head to Talo. My grandmother and mother still retain their prime responsibilities of

creating delicious meals to take as offerings and lunch. I know, with a heavy bitter-sweetness in my chest, that one day my grandmother will not be there, but it will be my mother with her daughters in the kitchen preparing for our family visit to Talo. I also imagine my future children, nephews, nieces and eventually grandchildren, watching us with that same sense of excitement, and eventually carrying on this effort of love.

