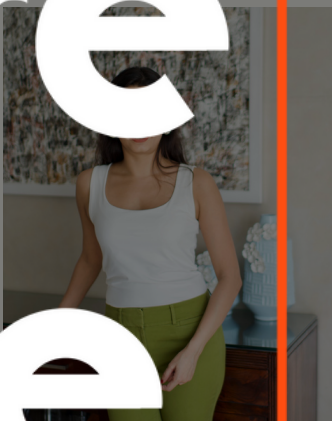
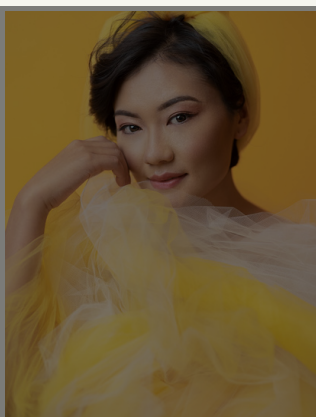


Explore culture



FOREWORD

*By Kutsab V Namgyel
Bhutan's Ambassador
to India*

*The Ambassador
of the Kingdom of Bhutan*



Foreword

I am very happy that the participants of the India-Bhutan Youth Summit are bringing out a magazine called "Explore Culture". I welcome this initiative by our youth.

The India-Bhutan Youth Summit was launched in 2018 when we held year long celebrations in both our countries to mark the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India. The youth summit was an initiative of the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) and the Centre for Escalation of Peace (CEP) to bring the youth in our two countries together and forge lasting bonds.

I was very happy to observe the enthusiasm of the young participants from our two countries at the beginning of the programme. It was even more gratifying for me to see how well the participants had bonded with each other by the time it concluded. They had come to understand and appreciate each other much more; the similarities and differences of their cultures and traditions, their aspirations as young citizens of their respective countries and the importance of the very close and mutually beneficial relations between India and Bhutan. I would like to express my deep appreciation to RIGSS and CEP for this important initiative.

India-Bhutan relations are very close and special. This is because we share very close bonds of culture and geography. More importantly, the leaders of our two countries have been committed to building our relations on the strong foundations of genuine friendship and trust.

For Bhutan, India is the land of Lord Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava who brought Buddhism to Bhutan. Buddhism helped to unify Bhutan as a nation state and Buddhism gave meaning and substance to our unique national identity. It is the wish of every Bhutanese to visit Bodhgaya at least once in their lifetime. So it is natural for the people of Bhutan to feel a close bond with India.

As a landlocked country with very high mountains along its northern borders, Bhutan opens up to the plains of India along its southern borders, providing us with access to the outside world. All our trade and commerce is with India or goes through India. Economic ties have reinforced cultural bonds to give strong



*The Ambassador
of the Kingdom of Bhutan*



substance to India Bhutan relations. At the political level, from the time when India's first Prime Minister and our Third King laid the strong foundations of India-Bhutan relations, all successive leaders in our two countries, cutting across party affiliations, have nurtured and strengthened the exemplary ties of friendship, understanding and cooperation between our two countries.

As Ambassador of Bhutan to India, I am very happy with the excellent state of India-Bhutan relations. I am also conscious that we cannot remain complacent and take our relations for granted because it is so good and special. We must continue to build and nurture this relationship at the political and people to people level. In this regard, it is the young citizens in both our countries who have the most crucial role to play. Our youth is our future and we must look for ways to build close contact between the youth in Bhutan and the youth in India.



V. Namgyel
Ambassador of Bhutan to India

FOREWORD

*By Ruchira Kamboj
India's Ambassador
to Bhutan*

*The Ambassador
of the Republic of India*



सत्यमेव जयते

Foreword

I am delighted to learn that a group of 21 youngsters from Bhutan and India have penned down their experiences on their participation in the India-Bhutan Youth Summit 2019 in the Explore Magazine.

India and Bhutan are bound in a singularly unique relationship that epitomizes friendship, trust and understanding that has stood the test of time over decades. It has therefore been a pleasure to read through the articles penned down by our youth that reflect their insights into our linkages across the spectrum of culture, history, economics, lifestyle, entertainment, tourism and of course, politics.

I will add that the candid yet substantive thoughts expressed within the pages of this magazine capture the essence of synergies between our two countries and will hopefully also motivate the reader to imbibe the same spirit of bonhomie and camaraderie that defines the India-Bhutan relationship.



Ruchira Kamboj
Ambassador of India to Bhutan



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

- Vidhi Bubna

Women are taking center stage in conversations today. We are leading the world with our ideas, perseverance, dedication, hard work and ethics which we stand up for in this world. Women's work and contributions need to be recognized more in this world. There are multiple people across the world who still think that the concept of Feminism is flawed and it should not exist. Many people think that feminism is polluting the minds of women. Some people have gone as far to say that "Feminism is cancer". It is no secret that women need to work much harder than men to get to places and we still don't get the recognition that we deserve.

This issue of Explore Culture celebrates the work of women leaders from various fields in India and Bhutan. We recognize that the next generation of collaborators, leaders and other prominent people in the world will include women taking center stage. The women celebrated in this issue have contributed extensively to various fields including writing, direction, cooking, acting, research, education, travel and a variety of other fields. This edition of the magazine aims to inspire women by giving them a small peak into the experiences of leading women worldwide. Often, women who come from underprivileged backgrounds or backgrounds where they receive little support from their families to achieve their dreams, need an idol to look at and be inspired. This in no way means that the magazine aims to idolize these women. We aim to bring these women closer to the youth who they can inspire, who they can lead to become more empowered and better people for tomorrow.

When we delve deeper into the history of the cultures of our communities, we see nuanced patriarchy there. The women in our families several generations above did not have the same privileges that we do today.



We have a lot to thank the feminism movement across the world for. Women only got the right to vote in 1800's. There are still many countries worldwide, where women do not have the same freedom and privileges that we do and there are many countries which have much more freedom for women than us. We too have a duty, as a community to strive to contribute to the feminism movement. Not just for ourselves and for other women we are close to, but to women across the world. In the recent Black Lives Matter movement, we saw that the movement in America sparked debate and sent shockwaves across the world. Worldwide debate was enthused because of the movement and reflections in one part of the world. This should only make us realize that we are not just a small part of the world, but have a bigger role to play than it seems on the outset.

There is not one way in which you can contribute to the feminism movement. You don't need to attend a debate or wear particular clothing. You just need to be the person you are and that is "rebellion" enough. As I tell women around me, "Being your true self at every moment in your life is rebellion enough." You don't need to be a leading woman in an industry to contribute to the feminism movement. Feminism starts in your own house, in your own safe zone and comfort space. As a woman, I have always realized that to contribute to the feminism movement, I will have to stand up to people I love the most, often my father, partner, brother or friend. Often your activism starts within yourself, in the way you choose to live and what you tell yourself. The spark and the dynamite exists within you.

Explore Culture as a magazine has always stood for values which are centric to both India and Bhutan. It has played a role in bridging understanding and collaboration between both the neighboring countries. It recognized the contributions made by women to the world.

All Editions of Explore Culture have celebrated India and Bhutan's friendship. In this edition, we let women from both countries take center stage and highlight their work cross culturally. It is important for women not just to be recognized in their own countries, but internationally too so that they can collaborate internationally with more ease and pave way for international leadership.

The women in this issue are not only trendsetters and pathbreakers, but they are women who are creating better standards for tomorrow and are playing crucial roles in inspiring the youth. Hope you enjoy reading this edition with a tall glass of wine in your hands as you celebrate women and their work.

Hope you enjoy reading this edition. There's a lot of work that has gone into it and this is probably my favorite edition of Explore Culture.

Some acknowledgements from the Editor - This issue would not be possible without my design team led by Jenissa Paharia and has contributed to everything visual and creative. I would also like to thank Choki Wangchuk, Laskhya Sharma, Akshay Sarawgi and Indranuj Pathak who have supported me in the creation of this issue. Finally, I would like to thank the Center of Escalation of Peace, India and The Royal Institute of Governance and Strategic Studies because it was with them that I had my first ever tryst with the culture of Bhutan.

To the movement,
Vidhi Bubna

Letters to the editor at vidhiabubna@gmail.com



FROM THE DESIGN DESK

- Jenissa Paharia



Design is something so personal to everyone that we often forget that it even exists. It exists in the way you are, the way you dress, the way you think, the choices you make - there is design in everything around you. Design which incorporates equality and feminism can be empowering but it is rare in this world. Even in the 21st century, we see that design is predominantly catered to beauty which is societally accepted in most magazines.

Generally, publications have spotlighted women who are beautiful by societal standards - mostly models or actresses. There have been limited women from business, arts, research or scientific backgrounds which are given representation in publications. While designing this issue of Explore Culture, I particularly ensured that we create an equal spotlight for women across diverse backgrounds. If we want to break gender norms, it starts with appreciating women's work across diverse industries, not just restricted to the ones where men want to see them. If we need to kickstart change which will impact women not only in India and Bhutan, but worldwide, there needs to be higher thought given to "equal design" which incorporates fair representation.



Every woman featured in this issue of Explore Culture comes from a diverse industry. We celebrate women across various backgrounds, profiles and industries in this issue. There are many women who are aspiring directors, chefs, authors, industrialists, researchers, travelers and scientists. The magazine gives space to not only every woman who is featured here, but also gives space to the audience reading the issue, and acknowledges that they have a variety of aspirations, goals, dreams, hopes and ideas. By giving everyone equal space, we have not only opened horizons for future leaders, but also for our future generations by respecting every profession and work profile equally. I hope this issue empowers you and brings a wave of change.

I would like to thank Vidhi Bubna from the bottom of my heart for allowing me this incredible opportunity to be a part of this magazine.

To the movement,
Jenissa Paharia

jenissa.paharia@gmail.com

A portrait of Ms. Ruchira Kamboj, a woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling and wearing a white shawl. She is standing in a room with a lamp and a doorway in the background. The image is framed by an orange border on the top and left, and a green border on the bottom and right.

**SPECIAL FEATURE
MS.RUCHIRA KAMBOJ**

**AMBASSADOR OF INDIA
TO BHUTAN**

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



When did you decide that you wanted to join the foreign services? Tell us more about your journey.

That was quite early I would say - while in school. I enjoyed the pursuit of, and discussions on international relations, and greatly looked forward to actual practice! I guess I was fortunate and quite blessed that this aspiration came true.

The relations between India and Bhutan have been historically significant and more so now when the former's relations with few other neighbours seem to be muffled with confusion and disturbances. What do you believe will strengthen India - Bhutan's bond even more?

Bhutan and India are bound together by ties of geography, history, culture, spiritual traditions and centuries old people-to-people interactions.

The special friendship has not only benefited our two nations, it has also created an example for the whole world, an epitome of two nations, of two different sizes, living together for collective growth, bound by an unparalleled friendship.

Both Bhutan and India have young populations. Both Bhutan and India are rapidly transforming societies.

A greater focus on youth-centric activities both sides through enhanced exchanges and connectivities, in particular in those sectors where India brings unique strengths to the table, such as IT, STEM, Start-Ups, could potentially be hugely beneficial for further growth and progress. As one tiny example, this year itself, eight Bhutanese students have entered our IITs against their chosen Masters' Programmes.

This ties in with His Majesty's vision and focus on STEM, where technology is rapidly transforming the world around us, and where the pace of scientific advancement is relentless in its pursuit towards creation.

What other plans and bilateral agreements can we foresee other than energy (hydroelectric) and tourism that will be a boon for both the South Asian countries?

The relationship between Bhutan and India today is multi- dimensional encompassing diverse sectors, not being limited to the traditional sectors but opening up to new and emerging spaces such as financial technology cooperation, IT, Start-Ups and Space Science and Technology, for mutually beneficial growth and cooperation.

I am pleased to share and following the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bhutan in 2019, action has matched talk, and we are well into implementing much of what was envisaged during this memorable visit, reflective of our commitment to advancing the economic and infrastructural development of Bhutan, per the priorities and wishes of the Government and the people of Bhutan.





Speaking of energy diplomacy, what are your personal views on the environment and climate change. What lessons can the world learn from Bhutan's carbon-negative approach?

There are no two views that the world needs to think and act green, to support sustainable growth. India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embarked upon a massive upward trajectory as we seek to harness solar and wind energy to power our future. The International Solar Alliance is one example -since 2015, this 87 signatory-alliance is propelling Earth to a low-carbon growth path. Similarly, the Coalition for Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure aims at a climate-change and disaster-resilient future for all.

As for Bhutan, you are truly an example to the world, having envisioned the "requirement" to be green in your country's constitution, and being practically the world's only carbon negative country. Importantly, you are not just resting on past laurels but diversifying slowly but steadily into new spaces- into renewable energy such as solar and wind power; towards green transport; the ban on single-use plastic etc. These, among others, are examples of a country that is deeply respectful and committed to the environment. This is without doubt a tribute to the vision and leadership provided by the Druk Gyalpos of Bhutan, as most recently reiterated at the UN Secretary General's High Level RoundTable on Climate Action by Lyonchhen Dr. Lotay Tshering.

As mentioned before, both countries have also been focusing on cross-cultural tourism with initiatives like digital payments making the process more convenient. Can you speak more about this and the different contours that need to be strengthened?

We share His Majesty's vision for harnessing technology towards economic development and towards strengthening our partnership in new areas such as digital and emerging technologies, financial integration etc.

To this end, Prime Ministers Shri Narendra Modi and Dr. Lotay Tshering had launched the first phase of the Rupay Card in 2019. With this, Indian citizens have been facilitated in making payments with their Indian bank-issued debit cards, in Bhutan. A second phase to be launched in 2020, will enable the use of Bhutanese bank-issued RuPay Cards across Points of Sale terminals in India. This will benefit all Bhutanese citizens who visit India for education, medical treatment, pilgrimage, work or tourism.

This cross border financial integration will further facilitate our warm people-to-people contacts and integrate furthermore the economies of our two countries.

Your father was an Army officer and your mother, a Professor at Delhi University. Do you credit your success to the environment you were brought up in? How important do you think are parents' support to a child for achieving some feat?

I would agree with you that the early childhood years are critical in shaping future orientation. I was fortunate and blessed in having a vision and values through personal example from my parents, that have stood me in good stead. I wish that for every child on this planet- that their potential is fully realised in safety and with opportunity.



You seem to have an eye for Bhutanese art and culture. You also have been promoting a film called Lunana recently. Tell us more about that.

It is always a privilege to serve as India's Representative abroad and to get a rare insight each time into a country's culture and way of being, so to speak. The more so, with a country like Bhutan, which offers such a rich and unique mosaic, in itself.

Speaking of "Lunana", I was personally thrilled that this will be Bhutan's official entry to the Oscars, an exquisite opportunity for the world to learn more about this singularly unique country.

Tell us about your previous experiences, of representing India at UNESCO and being a high commissioner to South Africa.

There are no two ways about this: it is an outstanding honour each time to bat for India. It was thus my privilege to serve both as Ambassador of India within the multilateral settings of UNESCO, Paris and as High Commissioner of India for South Africa, a country with which India has a shared history and importantly and going forward, an equally rich future.

If not Foreign Service, what else would you have pursued?

I am indeed fortunate to have lived my dream, I had frankly only envisaged this as a career.

What is the most important lesson you have learned in the 33 years of your glorious service?

A simple message: lead by example.

A message to the young Indians who want to represent their country globally.

I would unequivocally and unhesitatingly say this to my Indian friends that if you do wish to represent your country globally, the best way to do so is through the Indian Foreign Service, an opportunity and a challenge, like no other!



EXPLORE CULTURE

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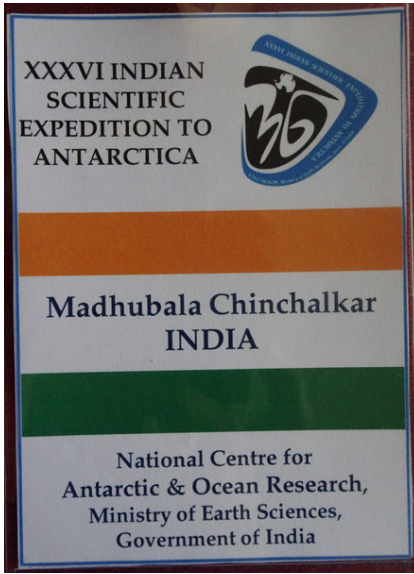
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DR. MADHUBALA CHINCHALKAR

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



Polar Woman



You went to Antarctica at the age of 58, please tell us more about what you did there?

It was a chance, and my stars were aligned. There were two doctors who were supposed to go to Antarctica with the researchers, but they backed out. It was after that, I read an advertisement in the newspaper about the requirement of a medical officer for the 36th Indian Scientific Expedition to Antarctica (2016- 2017) and I decided to apply. I had never in my wildest dreams imagined going to the Antarctic subcontinent, but I was chosen to go as a doctor. I went there for one year. I was the only woman at the Maitri station in Antarctica. Not the first woman to be there, but the only woman for this mission (2016-2017).

Tell us more about the award-winning documentary you created.

During the time I was in Antarctica, I shot multiple photos as well as videos of my time there, amazing nature, polar night, blizzards, Aurora Australis, milky way, naturally occurring ice caves etc.

I was deeply humbled to see life in the middle of divine nature during summer....The harsh continent when there is hardly any life during winter! and at the same time my experiences about the serious threat of ' Climate Change'! I wanted to show these experiences to people across the world who may never have been to Antarctica... at the same time to draw their attention to the serious threat to our beautiful planet! I compiled all the videos and I wrote the background information for the documentary. In 'Maitri' I got an opportunity to read more about this icy continent. There was a huge collection of books here, right from the days of 'Dakshin Gangotri'! It was a treasure that I discovered during wintering in 'Maitri'. I helped in setting up the Library in Maitri too and could read almost all the books it had about 'Antarctica'! The entire idea was to help people understand what Antarctica all is about and to bring a piece of it back to their homes that they could watch on tv. I do not believe that it is comparable to watching it on television, but it is still something for the people who cannot imagine going there. The documentary is called "... AND SKUA RETURNED EARLY!". Skua is the name of a bird whose arrival in Antarctica marks the beginning of summer here, and early arrival of Skua is a sign of grave warning about early onset of summer because of Climate Change. I hope this documentary, which has won many awards nationally and internationally, reaches out to more people. Please watch it if you are reading this.



Your mission to Antarctica was cut short, why was that?

One of the mission members got extremely ill during the winter season. There is darkness in Antarctica, during polar nights, and no one can come to Antarctica during a long winter of about eight months! The Southern Ocean freezes. Our physical contact with the outside world is cut off. No ships or airplanes can come to Antarctica during this period. When one of the expedition members got seriously ill, I had to take care of him daily because I was the only doctor to our team. As soon as the winter season ended, the first flight landed in Antarctica, National Center for Antarctic, and Ocean Research (NCAOR) arranged for emergency medical evacuation of this patient by that flight. I flew back with the member to Cape Town to ensure that he was taken care of at a hospital. The doctor at the hospital was stunned that the person had survived for a long winter in Antarctica because he had a life-threatening illness! My mission was cut short as I had to rush the member to Cape Town South Africa. (Launching pad of Indian Scientific Expedition.)

Would you ever want to apply to go to Antarctica again?

Going to Antarctica for a yearlong is commitment. As much as I want to go there again, I do not think that it is easy to leave my family and go there for an extended duration. As I said before, the stars must align. I hope my stars align again and I get to go there soon.

What is your best memory of Antarctica?

Antarctica is the best place I have ever been to in my life. It was a spiritual and character-building experience for me. In Antarctica, we feel the presence of the creator of the universe all around and of which we become a part! My best memory of the place is amazing nature, stunning colours of sunset and sunrise and watching the aurora lights during polar night. Antarctica is the only place on our planet where humans did not get any chance to interfere with nature! In short, without humans how our beautiful planet would be is Antarctica! In 1959, an International treaty was signed, by which there is no permission for human habitat, tourism, or mining on this continent. This pristine icy continent has been reserved only for the purpose of science and peace. There is no pollution in Antarctica. I miss Antarctica so much now. I really want to go back there.

What role did you play in women empowerment in Antarctica when you were there?

Not many women have done wintering in Maitri, so till now there was no separate ladies' urinal in the Maitri station! When I stayed during winter here, the first ladies' urinal was constructed and inaugurated by me. Before that, women would use pee bottles & pee in them and discard urine at the male urinals. There is an international treaty. Strict rules are in place for all the research bases for disposal of waste, to prevent pollution of this continent. Antarctica is a pristine land and humans should take more effort to preserve it.



Do you think there needs to be greater involvement of the youth in missions like Antarctica mission? How can the youth contribute?

Youth is our future and their greater involvement in such missions will make a great difference to our planet and thus to the future of mankind!

The expedition team has scientists and logistic members. Participation in various research projects or providing logistic support to scientific researchers and helping in maintenance of research base are the two important fields in which youth can contribute.

What are 3 things you want to see the youth doing for the environment today.

Recycling to reduce waste creation, conservation of energy resources and prevention of green gas emission. In short what UNO is advocating

REDUCE

REUSE

RECYCLE

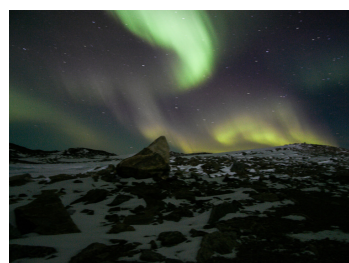
REDUCE USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES, REUSE THEM MORE AND RECYCLE

What is your message to other women who want to apply for Indian Antarctic program?

I want to tell everyone reading this, if you want to do something, determination and efforts can make it happen. You do not know if you will get in or not, do not think about that. Just attempt and take your shot. When things are meant to happen in your life, they will. Antarctica is the most pristine land in this world, and everyone deserves to see it once in their life. It is very untouched. In the beginning of the twentieth century early explorers used to take dog sledges to Antarctica to explore it, numerous people died because of the harsh weather and because the land is uninhabited. As if there was a wall of ice all around Antarctica, and it was not possible to go there before since there were no ice breaker ships or airplanes. However, now there are expeditions to the subcontinent, and the youth should undertake them.

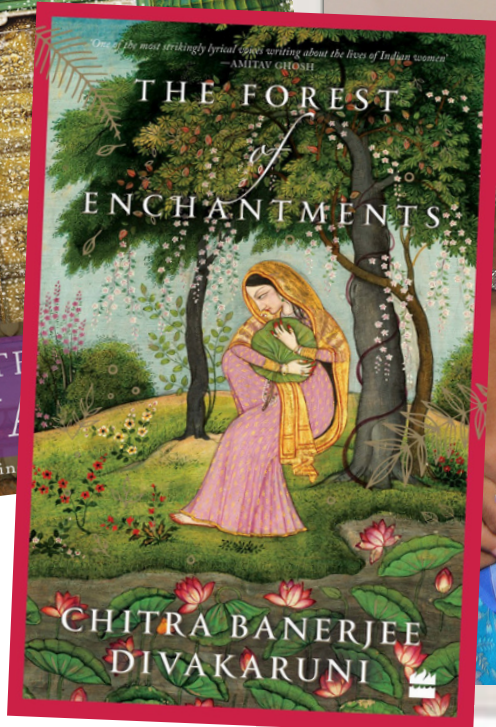
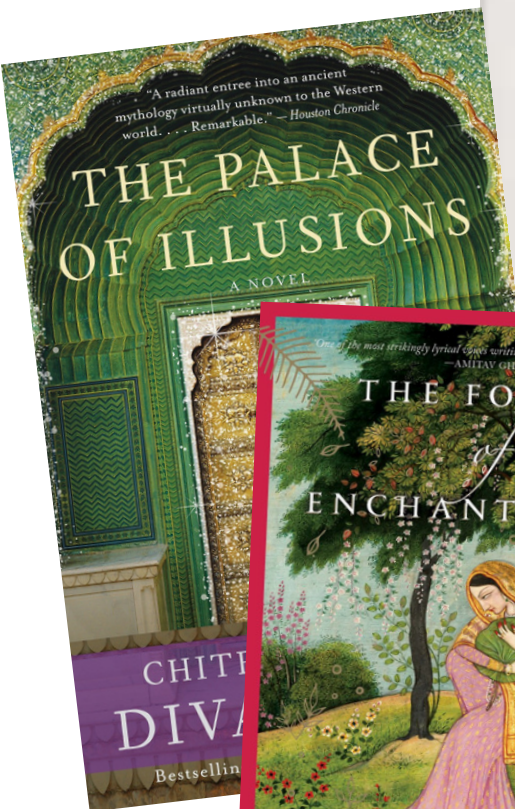
Is there anything else about your experience that you want to share?

Visiting and staying for nearly a year on the icy continent at the bottom of our planet has been a lifetime experience for me! How beautiful our planet is when untouched by humans! Climate change is causing melting of trillions of tons of ice sheets in Antarctica. After the expedition, when I returned to this part of the world, I have been sharing my Antarctic experiences with students at schools, colleges, and people in the society. I have been trying to do my bit to create awareness about it.





CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



First of all, congratulations on the success of your latest book *The Forest of Enchantment*. Your work has been loved across different age groups, globally. What inspired you to be a writer?

I was inspired by 3 things: moving to the USA when I was nineteen, the death of my grandfather, and my nonprofit work with domestic violence and trafficking.

When I moved to the US, I began to see more clearly—both the world in India that I had left behind, including many things I valued about my culture. The death of my grandfather made me aware of how fleeting memories are and how soon we forget. My community work with women made me aware of many silent problems that exist in our communities and how important it is to hear these stories and empathize with these lives. All these made me want to write and share my experiences.

Your work seems to have a central theme; Of women and understanding their identity in the backdrop of family, culture and geography. There are few notable writers who are doing good work in this. How important do you think it is, to be able to successfully deliver such stories?

It is very important to showcase the lives, challenges and triumphs of women, and to do so in a way that humanizes them and makes readers identify with them. I believe with such empathy, attitudes change for the better and thus readers' lives begin to transform. So many people have told me that they were inspired by the life of Draupadi depicted in *The Palace of Illusions* and Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*, even though these are characters from long ago. They told me these books gave them inspiration and allowed them to move forward in their own lives. So I know firsthand the importance of women's stories. And I, too, continue to be influenced and inspired by such stories.

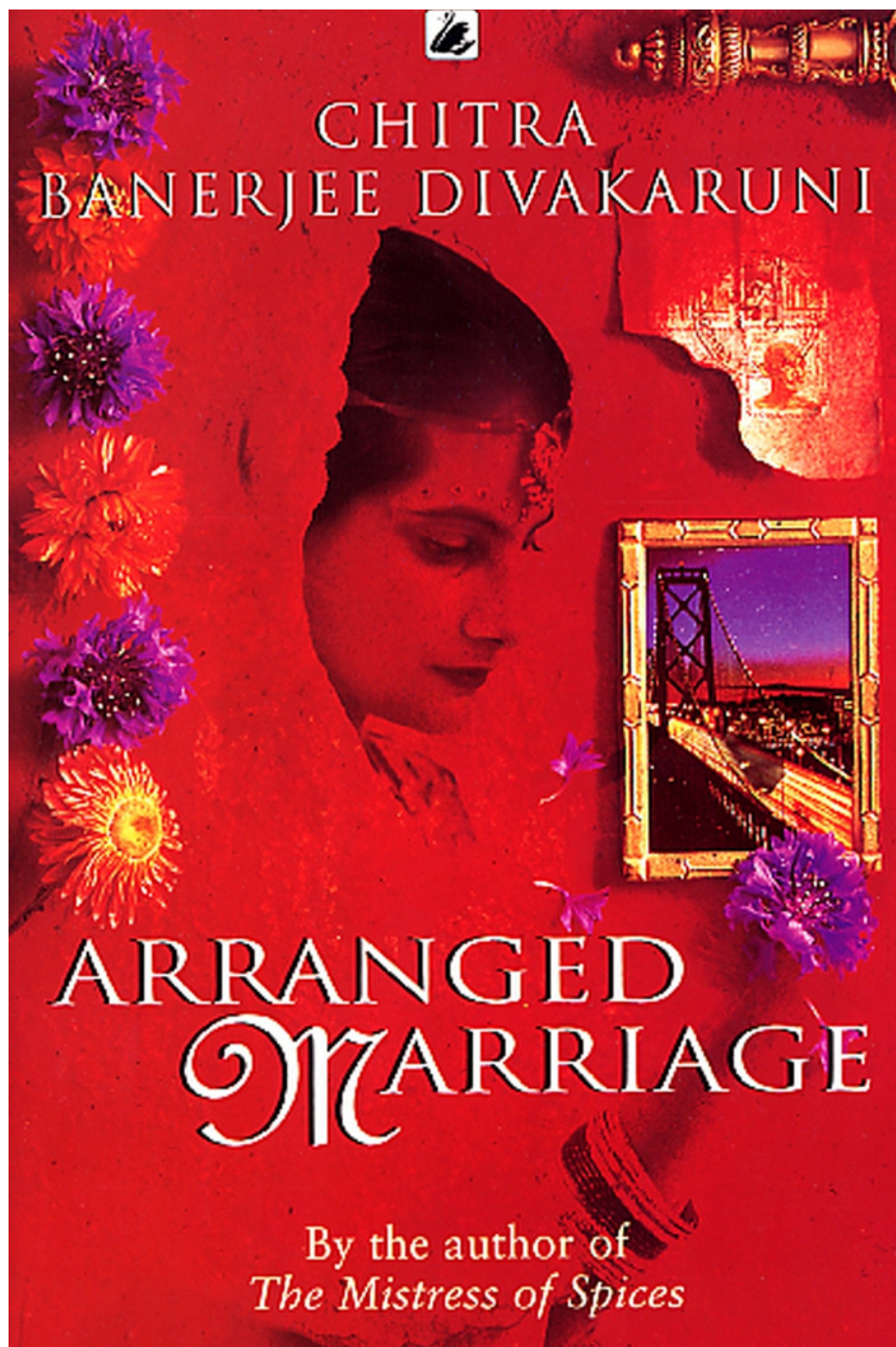
You were born in Bengal, a place that has given eminent writers whose works have been celebrated worldwide. Your name is a joyful addition to the already illustrious list. What has Bengal and Kolkata given you, taught you and how did it nurture you while you were growing up?

I grew up reading (in Bengali) the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Sharat Chandra, men who empathized deeply with the plight of women. Later I read Mahasweta Devi, Bani Basu and Mallika Sengupta, among others. All these books inspired me to write about women and gave me good role models. So I think the greatest gift Bengal has given me is the works of its writers.

Why do you believe that in this 21st century world, we still live in the shackles of patriarchy, something that should have been broken long back for an equal, liberal and just world?

There are many complicated reasons. I'll mention two. An important one is the lack of education for girls, which changes our thinking and gives us willpower and confidence. The other is financial independence for women, because without it women are at the mercy of others, including people in their own families. It is very important to work on these. I am happy that in my small way I support organizations like Pratham in India which focus on education as well as vocational training for women.





What is it in a human being that makes her want to express her emotions by penning down her thoughts, what we call poems. Do you believe, like many, that empathy is the most crucial trait to be a poet?

Empathy is important, yes. But observation skills and imagination are equally important. And self-honesty, because many times poems are about our own lives and our understanding of important events and challenges we have faced. Or they can be about nature, where observation and imagination are particularly important.

Your work also includes remarkably portrayed cross cultural references between India and the USA. Did that arrive out of your personal experience? In other words, was that a reflection of your own personal journey of a cultural shift? How was the reaction from the American public on this work?

In some ways, my cross-cultural stories come out of my personal experience, but more so out of my observation. Also listening. I like to listen when people discuss their lives and challenges. The overall reaction from the American public has been very good. I am grateful for all the positive reviews and awards, and some of the books have been on bestseller lists.

Writing stories from Mahabharata and Ramayana from the perspective of the female characters and protagonists. That was bold and made for a tremendous round of applause. How did you come up with the idea?

Thanks for the kind words! I have been impressed and fascinated by the stories of our epics ever since I was a little girl listening to my grandfather telling me these tales. As I grew up, I wondered more and more about the fascinating women characters in the epics, and I became aware of how little space was given to them. We knew their actions but not their thoughts or their hearts. Slowly the desire filled me to write about them, making them the heroines of their world. To really look at who they were and what they had to teach the contemporary women. They were certainly worth learning from, even when they did controversial things! I was worried, though, as to how people would react to this project. Surprisingly, the response has been immensely positive. I am grateful for that.

Your work has been touted as something that reverberates 'simplicity of the language' and is 'rooted in reality'. How important do you think such qualities are for good writing and for getting connected to the readers?

There are many kinds of writers. Each relate to life and to language and to their readers differently. I have always believed that clear, simple language is important. I wish to invite as many readers as possible into my books. I don't want them to be only for intellectual types. I like to read and write from the heart. When my mother was alive, I often thought, I want to write books that are accessible to her. (She was a wonderful, intelligent woman, but she did not have a formal English education, just what she picked up in the course of her life). I believe art should be inclusive, not exclusive.

Tell us how important it is to keep the cultural sanctity of literature festivals alive and running. What role do they play?

Literature festivals are SO important. They create excitement around books and ideas. They bring readers and writers together. They allow writers to have discourses with one another. I learn so much whenever I attend a litfest. I am so glad that India is having more and more festivals, and that some of these are in relatively remote places or smaller cities where people might not have otherwise had the exposure. I am glad to see, especially in India, that young people are excited about books. When I read from *Forest of Enchantments* in Jaipur, I was delighted to meet many high school and college students who had read my books. I would never have known about that otherwise.

A message that you would like to convey to the young and aspiring writers...

If writing is important to us, we must make time for it in our lives. This means we must simplify our lives to find time and energy to read and write. As writers, we need to read widely and read everyday. I recommend keeping a writer's notebook to jot down ideas that come to you while reading. It is also a good place to jot down sentences or techniques you are noticing as you read.

Try to write every day. It is also very helpful to have a few writer friends with whom you can share work. I still work with a writer's group. We meet on skype every month, share work, and learn from each other.





ANVITA DUTT

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



Tell us more about your journey?

It was a place called mountain- shadow. I was in the first standard. And my aunt gifted me two books of Russian fairy tales. My love affair with stories began there. I have devoured libraries as a child and I am still hungry for more. Everything I have read has led me to this point. As a human being and as a storyteller. My journey can be mapped, even in the future, by the milestones of books.

Good books. Great places. Thoughtful cinema. What else do you enjoy?

Food. Cooking it. Eating it. Serving it to friends. When I travel I don't sightsee like a tourist. I walk around finding places to eat at and bookshops to browse in.

Bulbbul has been receiving rave reviews. Did you expect it to become such a huge thing?

Well, I hoped for success. Everyone does. I wanted everyone who worked on the film and believed in it to feel validated. But the love and acceptance it has received is beyond expectations. The conversations it has sparked makes me feel really grateful because people got what I was trying to say through the film.

What about the criticism (and not the hate). Do you take them seriously, incorporating them as something useful?

From the time that it was a script and every stage thereafter I have offered the film for feedback. Criticism only makes you think harder to make it better. And it would be so arrogant to believe that I know everything. No one knows everything. You need feedback for perspective. So yes, even post release I have tried to take the criticism as productive feedback.

What made you enter the field of direction?

Writing Bulbbul did that. I had no plans for directing till I wrote this script. Once I did I knew I wanted to tell it myself. And there were friends, to whom I gave the script for feedback, who matter-of-factly said you are going to direct this. Including my producer Karnesh who accepted it without blinking and then went ahead and empowered me to make the film. And then everyone who came along and said 'yes' on this journey contributed to making me a director.

What is your biggest inspiration in directing movies?

Reading fiction. Specifically speculative fiction. Because it makes me imagine worlds and people that don't exist. And then to take that imagined moment and emotion and recreate it is the most exciting thing for me. To me the written word is more visual than even a film.



**What has been your biggest achievement till date?
The most satisfying moment in your career?**

The most satisfying moment in my career has been each and every day spent on making Bulbbul. My biggest achievement is that I can truly find joy in the smallest of things.

**Anvita Dutt, the lyricist or Anvita Dutt the filmmaker?
Which one do you prefer and why?**

Though both are facets of storytelling they are experientially different and very specific skill sets. I love both. I want to do both. Though if I had to choose then I would say the filmmaker. Because it is a culmination of sorts of every aspect of storytelling that I love. Be it art, music, photography, costumes or performance.



Speaking of lyricists, do you think the industry doesn't give much credit to them? What needs to change?

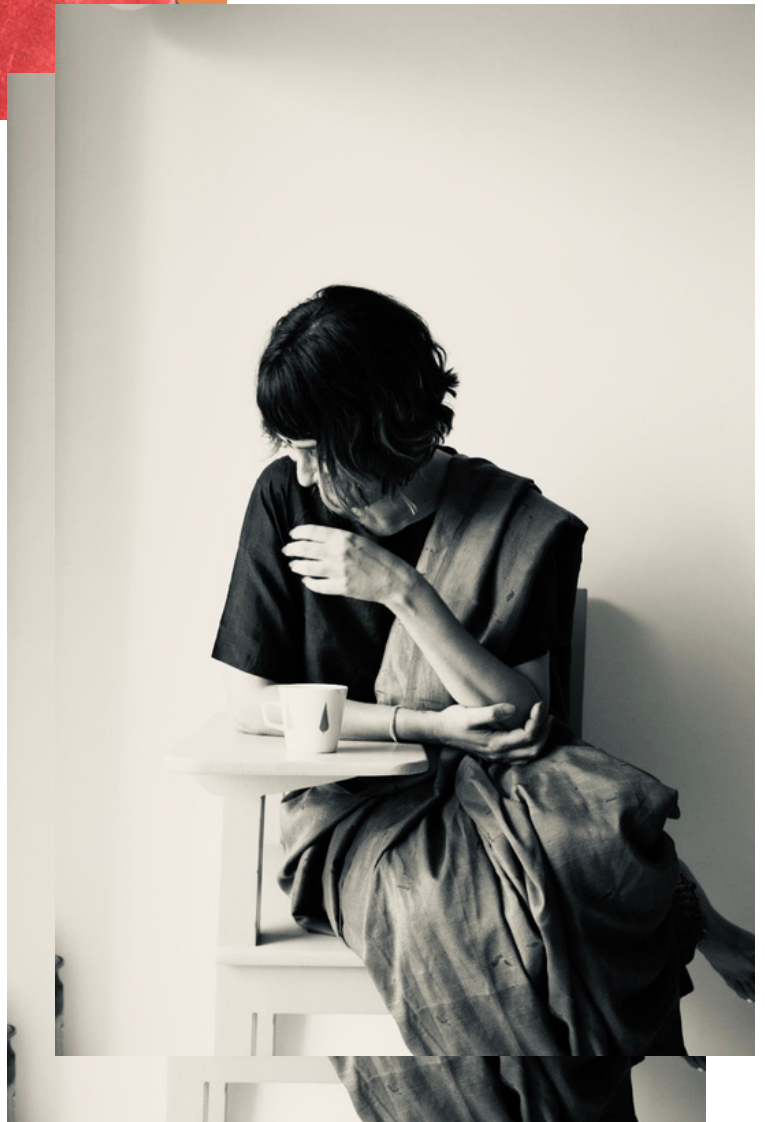
It's the mindset that needs to change. People need to understand that a song is not just the melody. It only becomes a song once the words come in. That the lyricist is an equal partner to the composer in the creation of a song.

Lastly, share an excerpt of a poem that you believe is close to your heart.

There are so many. But here are two.

'When the ocean surges, don't let me just hear it. Let it splash inside my chest!' - Rumi

'The time will come when, with elation you will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat. You will love again the stranger who was your self.' - Derek Walcott





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D H I N G R A



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

How did you get the motivation to start Le 15 cafe. Tell us more about your journey.

My earliest baking memory is of making brownies with my aunt when I was 6 years old. In all my 22 years, I had eaten enough pineapple cakes and Dutch truffle pastries to last me a lifetime, but never tried a macaron. I was in culinary school in Paris when I tried my first macaron and it was love at first bite. I knew then that I would move back to India and try to make them.

At the time, there were not any stand-alone pastry shops in India, except maybe with the exception of one or two. I wanted to bring that culture to India, and set up Le 15, which had been my dream. I was in love with macarons and had never tasted one in India and made it my mission to make and serve them.

Le 15 took off in 2010. It has been a long journey – one of the most satisfying ones so far, and there's a lot to look forward to in the future.

A chef. An entrepreneur. An author. You are living the millennials' dream. How did everything come about?

I've always been very motivated and hardworking. I'm grateful that I get to wear many hats every single day. I always knew I would run my own business and I saw an opportunity in the dessert space. Being an author was always a dream – I wished to write books that I could use as a baker at home.

What was the motivation behind the concept of European styled cafes?

Ever since I was 14-15 years old, it has always been my dream to have a cafe of my own. It's always been somewhere on my mind. But like all dreams, this one too took its time. Things came together after the launch of the patisserie and Le15 Café, Colaba became our flagship Café.

You have received outright praise for the fact that you didn't cut down on the salaries of your staff during lockdown. A big heart or a professional courtesy?

We definitely did reduce salaries during lockdown. It's not possible to run operations for 5 months without any revenue and still continue at 100% expenses. We released our Cafe Cookbook to help us with costs to help our cafe team that we had to let go and to keep paying our team through lockdown.

Your personal favourite pastry? And your “go to” food.

Dal Khichdi is my go to comfort food, but chocolate is the ultimate stress buster! I can binge on a classic chocolate chip cookie anytime of the day.



What were the interiors of Le15 cafe inspired by?

When we started Le15 Café, we wanted our guests to have the Parisian experience, right here in Mumbai. The interiors were intended to make you feel like you were in a different place. A little bit of peace in the middle of chaos.

The best bakery and cafe in India and abroad that you have visited?

I will have to say Le15 in India (you can't ask me this question!). I have way too many favourites in Paris and Tokyo but my favourite cafe is the Confeitaria Colombo in Rio De Janeiro.

Why the Parisian style bakery? Do you personally believe it's the best?

After I moved back to India, I was clear on one thing, I wanted to recreate a piece of my life in Paris. To make wonderful desserts, using the best ingredients I could find and serve happiness in a box. And that is how Le 15 (named for the 15th arrondissement in Paris, the neighbourhood where I lived) was born. I tried my first macaron in Paris and knew instantly that this would be the piece of Paris I would bring back to India with me.

How much do you believe is family support important for a profession as unconventional as yours and in a country where jobs still mean only engineers, doctors and lawyers?

I have been very fortunate to have my family support me throughout this journey. I wouldn't be able to achieve this without them. I think it's important for parents to see the right potential in their children and then support them.



You are such a big star and a voice for the youth. Yet you have kept yourself completely out from any discussion related to the social or political scenario of the country. Was that deliberate?

There are certain topics I feel very strongly about and I am very vocal about them - women's rights, education for all, LGBTQ rights and do my best to support those who need me.

What's the most essential thing in business or entrepreneurship?

When I started Le15, I was 23 years old. Everything that I know today is what I have learned over the years. I feel learning is one of the most important aspects of a business. As a leader, I still learn something new each day.

Any plans of making your cafe chain global any sooner?

I have some really interesting plans for growing Le15. Stay tuned!

What has been your biggest achievement till date? The most satisfying moment in your career?

Last year I met my idol, Pierre Herme on my trip to Paris. We talked about the pastry scenario in India, and he told me he wants to make a vegan macaron and asked me tips on making an eggless macaron, that moment is one of my most cherished moments.

'The pastry expert' *HINDUSTAN TIMES*



POOJA DHINGRA

The BIG BOOK *of* TREATS

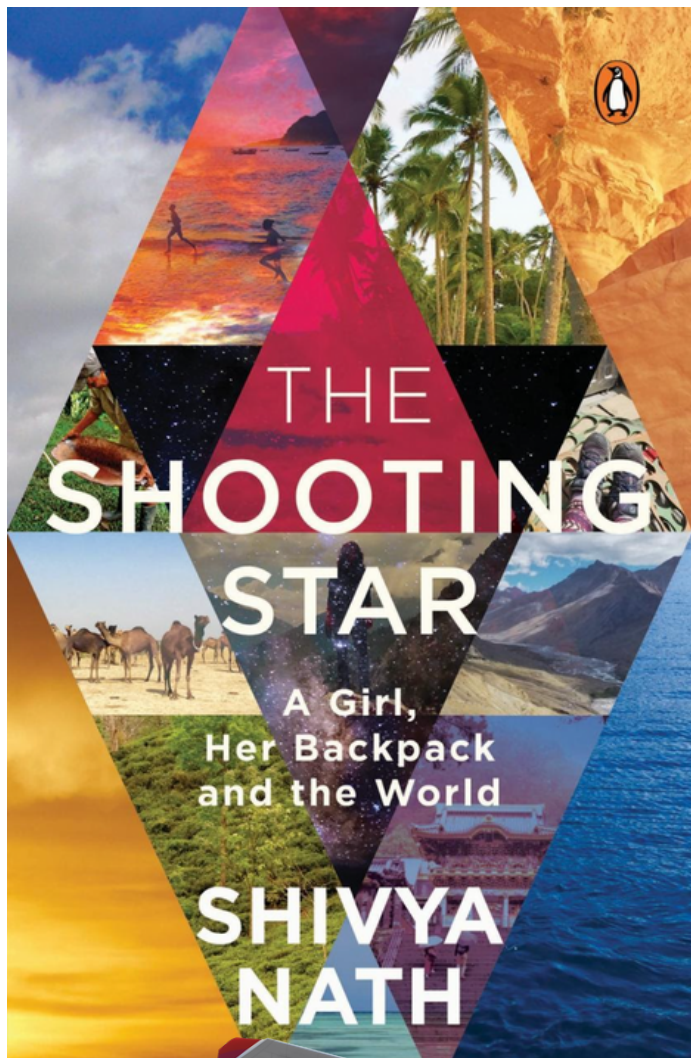
The *ultimate* guide
to *baking* from
India's favourite pastry chef

'She [has] changed the face of
desserts in the country'

COSMOPOLITAN

Little girls with dreams,
become women with a
vision.

- POOJA DHINGRA



TRA

VEL



S H I V Y A
N A T H



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



You have travelled so much and seen the world so intricately that you might as well be a nomad. The most obvious question - what convinced you to travel the world?

I grew up in a protective Indian family in Dehradun, a valley at the base of the Himalayas, and spent my childhood wondering what lay beyond the mountains I could see from my rooftop. Upon finishing high school, I went to Singapore to study, with big dreams and a big student loan. As luck would have it, I graduated in the middle of the financial recession of 2009, when most companies I wanted to work with had ceased hiring. I landed a job with the Singapore Tourism Board, where my experiments with social media began, and I first began following the journey of travel writers / bloggers around the world. It was impossible to tame my restless cubicle-bound soul, so in 2011, I took a 2 month unpaid sabbatical from work. I went flash-packing across Western Europe with a friend, and volunteer-travelled by myself in the high Himalayas of India. In those two months, I saw, experienced and lived more than I ever had before. Within a week of my return to work, I decided to quit my first and only corporate job with a dream of travelling the world on my own terms.

Your new project, Voices of Rural India is picking up steam and picking accolades for telling the most unlikely stories. How do you envision it forward?

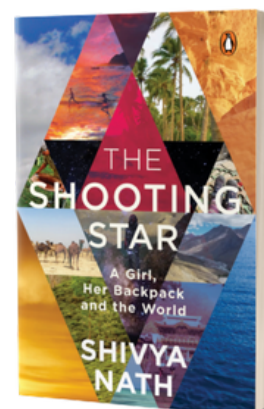
Voices of Rural India is an effort to turn this unprecedented pandemic into an opportunity to create alternate livelihoods by upgrading digital skills in rural India, while also preserving grassroots knowledge that is slowly disappearing.

Voices of Rural India is a not-for-profit digital initiative that hopes to revolutionize storytelling, by hosting curated stories by rural storytellers - in written, photo or video format. Unlike most existing online platforms, the stories of rural India are told directly by local storytellers.

In the short-term, Voices of Rural India is creating a revenue stream for affected communities through digital journalism. In the long run, it aims to develop digital storytelling skills at the grassroots level, along with becoming a repository of local culture and knowledge, documented in local voices. We are currently working with rural communities in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Maharashtra and Gujarat, through on-ground community-based tourism organisations like Global Himalayan Expedition, Himalayan Ecotourism, Himalayan Ark, Spiti Ecosphere and Grassroutes Journeys. The initiative is supported by the Digital Empowerment Foundation. We're eagerly looking forward to a post-Covid world, where we can physically travel to visit the communities we're virtually working with, conduct digital storytelling workshops, identify local talent and hopefully bridge some of the gaping urban-rural digital divide.

Your favourite place so far? You can give multiple answers of course.

There's so much to love about so many places! I love my home country India, because despite its challenges, nowhere comes close to the diversity of natural beauty, food and culture it offers. It's perhaps one of the few places in the world where strangers are the quickest to become friends. Other than that, I feel a deep connection to Guatemala, Bhutan, Georgia and Iran.



Your passion for environmental protection and climate change issues is also noteworthy. What do you think should be the biggest change that can make mankind save itself?

Unlearning.

The more I slow travel around the world, the more I unlearn conventional ways of doing things. And that's exactly what we need on a massive scale – politically, economically and individually.

We need to unlearn our reliance on fossil fuels, the issues based on which we elect our leaders, the way we treat some animals as friends and others as food (speciesism), the way we measure development and so on.

A deep unlearning will (hopefully) allow us to re-establish a world driven by mindfulness and compassion, rather than money.

Your book 'A Shooting Star' is a bestseller. Along with the travelogue, it is also about a spiritual journey one undertakes. Do you thus agree with the phrase that humans can better understand oneself and another with more communication and a better experience of diversity?



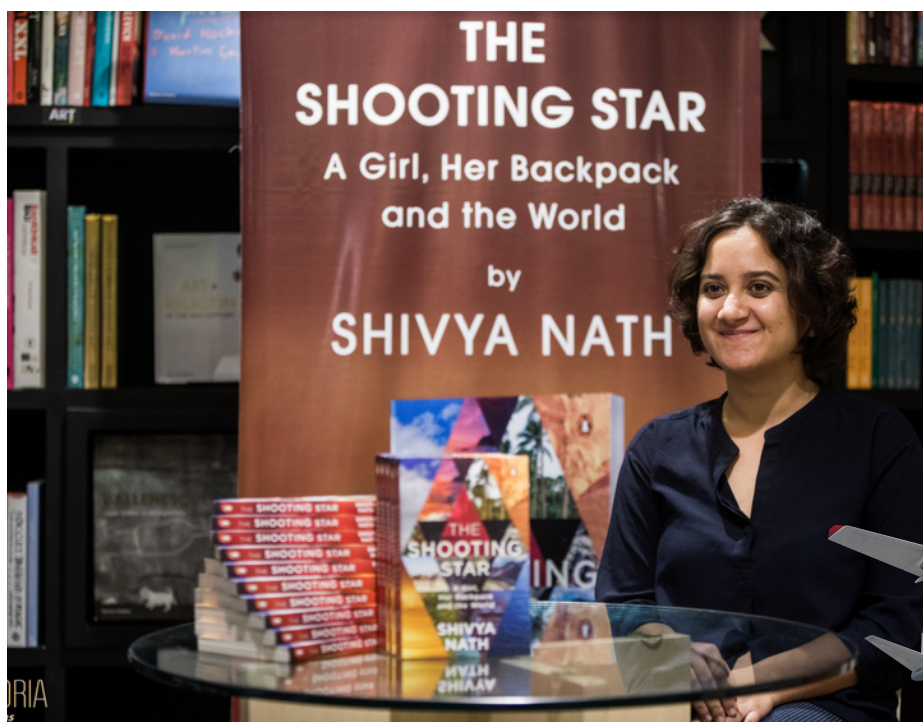
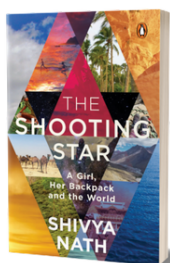
The Shooting Star charts my battles and adventures from the cubicle to the road, and from small-town India to remote corners of the globe. I write candidly about my struggles of transitioning from an average Indian girl to a free soul, who wanted to live on her own terms, explore the world meaningfully and smash stereotypes along the way. I write about my relationships, battles, triumphs and life-changing encounters, and how I tried to conquer my deepest fears.

There's no doubt that travelling is as much an inner journey as a physical one.

Tell us about a time when you were travelling alone and felt challenged?

After traveling safely and adventurously through some of Central America's more notorious countries (like Honduras, labelled 'the most violent place on earth'), I had pretty much let my guard down in Costa Rica. On a hurriedly hailed cab ride to the airport to impulsively catch a flight to the Pacific Coast, the cabbie and I chatted like long lost friends. Closer to the airport, he told me we'd get stuck in traffic so it's better to drop off a street before and walk; I agreed without thinking twice. When we arrived, I paid him and got off the cab, only to see him grabbing my small bag – the one with my passport, laptop and everything precious – asking for more money or he'd take off with it. I had the equivalent of 50\$ in my pocket and gave it to him, shivering at the idea of being left alone without my valuables. In retrospect, there were a lot of hints I didn't catch; he asked me if I had family in the country, or if I had a local SIM card – pointed questions that should have made

me wary. I felt shaken up for days, refused to trust anyone else I met along the way, and found solace in places crowded with other tourists, much unlike my usual travel style. It really wasn't about the money I lost, but the trust I lost, and it took me months to rebuild it.





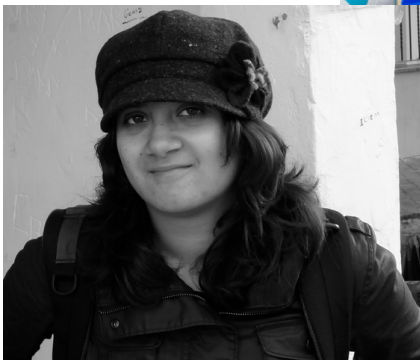
What has been your biggest achievement till date? The most satisfying moment in your career?

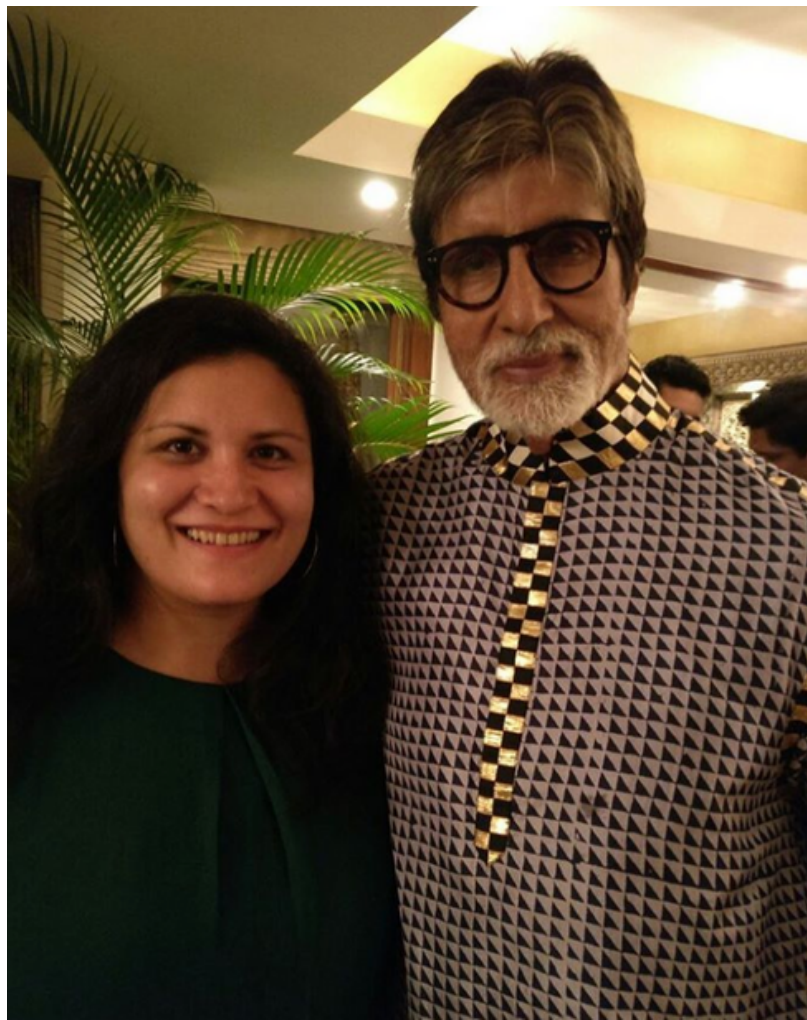
There have been many satisfying moments on this journey: Publishing my first book and seeing it become a national bestseller in just over a month of release; recognition, awards and international features for my work to promote responsible, immersive travel; launching a clothing collection inspired by The Shooting Star that raises funds to grow forests in my home state Uttarakhand; and most recently, co-founding Voices of Rural India to challenge the way digital storytelling is typically done in India. But I think I feel the deepest satisfaction when a reader reaches out to me to share how my work has played a role in inspiring them to make different life or travel choices.

Travelling, that too alone is still considered a taboo for women in large parts of India. What do you think will change that?

As more of us choose to travel solo and share our stories online or offline, change is bound to happen. While female solo travellers are still considered an anomaly in some parts of India and the world, there's a lot more chatter, acceptance and encouragement online now.

Living with a Quichua family in Ecuador





VEERA KAPUR E E

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

What encouraged you to enter the field of costume design? Tell us more about your journey.

My journey in costume design started in 2004. I started first as an assistant director in 2003, very soon I realised my passion was in costumes, it fascinated me to create.

I started assisting film costume designers like the amazing Dolly Ahluwalia and Himani Dehlvi. Shoojit Sircar has also been my guru who encouraged me to do costumes and gave me some amazing opportunities.

Which film has been the favourite work of yours?

To decide which has been my favourite work is very difficult, it is almost like choosing your favourite child. All the films I have worked on mean a lot to me. Each one of them have taught me varied nuances of costume designing and have been very fulfilling professionally. But if I must pick and choose then there are 3 films which are a little extra special to me. The first is Piku. It had to be very simple and sometimes that it self is a challenge. It was a wonderful experience to create the look and the love it got was overwhelming. The other two films are Phillauri and Bulbbul. Both again very special to me. I got the opportunity to study a period of a beautiful era gone by and to do a period film was a long time wish that came true. I got to create beautiful old world looks and live that time through these stories.

What do you want to achieve in your costume design field?

What I would love to achieve in the field of costume design is respect for the costume department and to develop a better understanding of how important and integral a part of film making costume design is. Costume designing is a very understated art, it is supposed to bring out the character without saying a word.

Just one look and the costumes should spell out who this person is. There is a lot of research, a lot of curating, a lot of sweat and a lot of back and forth and I wish we could share this aspect of film making more elaborately in order to celebrate this beautiful art. They say clothes make a statement but costumes tell a story and I couldn't agree more.

Your talent has been praised by words like “bringing an unconventional yet a relatable dressing vigour”, clothes which are down to earth and not very extravagant, a comfortable girl next door look without losing that hint of sophistication. Do you believe you have set a benchmark in costume designing?

I don't feel I've set a benchmark in costume designing for films. I feel I've tried my best to be true to the character I style and for me that style being effortless and real is very integral. I feel immense gratitude for every single time work has come by.

The satisfaction you get when your idea of creating is received as it was intended by the script is a creative high that's unmatched. It makes you want to push the creative boundaries more and more and work even harder the next time

You tried your hands on acting in Bulbbul (2020). Do you plan to carry that forward?

Acting in Bulbbul was something I immensely enjoyed and would love to try again. It

definitely interests me and gives me a better understanding of characters. Its an art form closely intertwined with my passion so I would love to explore it further. Costume designing is still considered taboo for men in large parts of this country.

Costume designing is still considered taboo for men in large parts of this country. What will play a role in breaking the stereotype of 'Women only industry'?

Costume designing as an occupation for men is not a taboo anymore. The last few years has seen a great change. Some of the most successful designers are men. Their success has definitely helped change the mindset in smaller towns as well.





How much do you believe in the fact that dressing sense characterises a person, and that it's a reflection of who and how the person is?

For me dressing sense definitely characterises a person. Dressing up is a discipline for me, the choices we make the way we dress up helps understands a person's taste and interests.

What has been your biggest achievement till date? The most satisfying moment in your career?

The moment that has stayed with me forever is being nominated for Piku. That to me was a big achievement and a memory I cherish dearly. A character I relate with and a simplicity in style.



While working on movies like Madras Café, how much of a research do you have to undertake. How does the whole thing come about?

Big budget thrillers with different characters playing different roles and thus different set of etiquettes. The research for films like madras cafe is very crucial to the process. I am very involved in the research. From books to going through hundreds of pictures a lot goes into research. I have recently finished working on a project called Sardar Udham Singh which also involved a lot of research. In Period films the first and the most important step is research.

What advice would you give to the youth who want to enter the costume design industry?

The most important advice I can share with the youth wanting to join the industry is be focused and true to yourself. It is very important to have an opinion but more important to understand the character you are styling and the vision of the director, bringing it all together is the goal. Film making is successful when it all comes together well and for that we need that our work stands out while merging with the bigger picture of what the script demands. We need to step out of our comfort zone, be flexible with our chain of thoughts and yet be persistent and motivated to give our best. Magic happens when you don't give up so keep creating the look and keep at it.





R B A T R A D H I K S H A H



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

'Radhikas Fine Teas' is a well-known and acknowledged brand in the urban sphere. How did it come about? Was the initial motivation?

Opportunity and passion are what I call the defining moment that lead to the beginning of my tea journey. I belong to a family that has left their professions pursuing their love for writing or entrepreneur dreams. From my father to my brother, thus that bug was not far from me. (My brother Ritesh Batra left a thriving career abroad and wrote, directed and cast a beautiful movie like Lunchbox)

To watch my mom brew a perfect cup of chai each day, painstakingly from the leaf she chose to the herb that went into it, to the final topping of milk, to the covering with a lid. While dad being in the merchant navy got us the most sort after leaves from China, Japan, Korea and Sri Lanka. Most of my families decisions were made over tea, the etiquette to the brewing to the sourcing all of it was very innate. Thus, even though I was a rising star at TRENT (Tata retail) as young as 26, I simply gave it all up, for the love of tea, finally inspired to get started. It was 2003 and I was also a young mom, my daughter Shloka was born then, I took the plunge to take a sabbatical in order to research my idea well.



2003 to 2005 was the time I took to make a solid connection with the tea industry be it tea plantations or their owners. Being a new mom didn't deter me from any of the challenges that were to come. With an infant in tow I used my father's shipping contacts as language was a barrier in the orient. I did homestays in the tea gardens and woke up at 5 am with the pluckers. We had the common love for the leaf although we never comprehended each other's language.



China's Longjing leaf was a treat as that's their green tea, that is the most sipped. I went to the source of it in Hangzhou and studied the whole process well.

Meeting the owner of the world's most respected tea gardens, Mr. Sanjay Bansal who is known as the father of organic gardens Darjeeling and Assam in India. The Lanka pristine gardens of Nuwar Eliya, where I trained under the tea board chairman Mr. Mel on learning the various origins and flushes of tea. These were some of my achievements that overcame the challenges. Which makes my brand unique as it's run by my first hand education in the tea gardens at the same time, well networked and sourced teas without any middlemen.

With all my contacts and sourcing abilities, I launched a humble store in 2006 called Teacup in quaint cozy Bandra. By 2011 we were invited by Godrej Natures Basket to host our tea ceremonies.

Our appreciation got the category to improve sales. By then they were keen we launch as a signature brand. 2013 we launched as a line up of 13 Darjeeling Loose leaves and within no time their top selling beverage across 36 stores, All India. The journey has indeed been incredible, today we are available on Amazon, Nykaa, Goqii, Qtrove and our own site Radhikas Fine Teas in addition to the fine dining and restaurants and spas we cater to.



#SheMeansBusiness



Your products are one hundred percent organic. How important is it to keep them so, both scientifically and for business?

It's very important for us to be clear of our vision: every leaf has a purpose.

A purpose to infuse each cup with well-being and healthy benefits, come what may. Unfortunately, this isn't possible with conventional teas and that is something I won't compromise on.

We have two gardens dedicated to the brand, Jamguri in Assam and Sivitar in Darjeeling. These are 100% certified, organic gardens along with Fairtrade. Which means that not only is the leaf treated with love and care so are the hands that pluck and process them. The tea journey, from the tea gardens to your teacup is pure and devoid of dust, chemicals or preservatives. We pay a premium for all of this and yet come at reasonable rates to the customer. Scientifically being biodynamic is a process that has been strengthened decade after decade, by our plantation partners.

They have converted 25 sick gardens into healthy ones and these gardens are revered for their practices worldwide. Even if other tea brands come and go in pretty packs or marketing claims or huge social media followers our commitment to quality and being sustainable from the leaf to the pack continues.

You have travelled places, understanding and acquiring knowledge about the different types of tea grown. How important do you think it is to also meet and understand different cultures along the way? Does this excite you and how?

There are 3 top producers of the world's best teas, ie India, China and Srilanka. Besides that, each country has its own tea culture.

Travel is a teacher for me, I realised that the USA loved our traditional practices, from be it what dadima says, to yoga and wellness. Keeping this in mind we launched bestsellers like Turmeric Tulsi Mulathi chai, Mukhwas tea, Almond Kahwa tea.

Thai infuse a lot of their bakery and patisserie with the butterfly blue tea, it not only looks good with its pretty hues but also is an anti-aging tea. This led to us bringing the tisane ten years ago and supplying it to most of the fine dining in our country.

China's Silver Needle Leaf and Oolong variants are super healthy and have always been our top sellers.



Your advice to the young minds who want to transform their ideas into a successful business venture.

Follow your dreams with 100% passion and obsession of seeing it through. Dedication and hard work go hand in hand. You will face failure and even lazy and messy days. But the end of it will be a journey that is yours and for sure a success.

How do you think people can experience the best tea that there is to experience? What's the best way to drink tea?

Tea is just not a cup of chai or green tea as shown in most media or our habits as usual. For me as a sommelier it's taking it a notch higher by explaining its nuances and beautiful anatomy. Thus, for people to experience the best tea we pioneered the art of tea in 2006. These were titled as Tea Ceremonies and to date we have done over 1000s across hotels, fine dining, corporates, theatre, art, fashion and more. This entails appreciating each leaf be it white, green, oolong or black and all its facets. This aids in people experiencing the leaf in its best form.

How do you keep a perfect balance between work and family life?

I believe when you have a vision as simple as mine and that is to spread the charms of teas come what may, it gets all those around you to aid the process beautifully. As an entrepreneur each day is a new challenge, sometimes with suppliers and sometimes at home be it ageing parents who were your rock but now need you or growing teenager, but then if there isn't chaos I don't thrive as great.

The concept of a superwoman might be overrated for some, but for me it's apt.

I have worked very hard and with God's grace my family and team have been super supportive to help me reach this far.

Balance of course is the only option or else the other is to hang up your boots and chill. As far as I know I have been very ambitious yet rooted to being very family oriented

From driving my little one to all her sports to drama classes to even taking her to my meets it's been one ride and much more to come.





PALLAVI SHARMA

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

You have worked extensively in the field of law for the last 10-12 years. What inspired you into this profession in the first place?

A career in Law is intellectually challenging, financially rewarding & personally fulfilling. For me personal fulfillment is most important. ... Law is also about rights, justice & understanding of human behavior & society. I choose Law because it helps me in improving my standard of thoughts, skills & knowledge.

Your work in various cases and across different provisions of the Constitution has made you an avid observant of the court, be it District or Supreme Court. What do you think needs to change for a better justice delivery system in India?

To redress the situation, we need to have a bottom-up approach. The principal problem is with the district courts where lakhs of litigants come into contact with the justice delivery system. Unless the problems of these courts are addressed, other temporary changes and ad hoc reforms at the Supreme Court and High Courts will have no bearing on the system, and the average litigant will continue to suffer “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

Here are some suggestions to improve the legal system: First, improve the district courts both in terms of infrastructure and man power. Second, identify the number of pending cases and the status of each case at the district level and try to ease the bottle neck in disposing off the matters. Third, case and court management must be encouraged and embedded in the justice delivery system.(We at All India Reporter, Nagpur is developing Court Management System and once developed and applied will benefit lakhs of people in India)



Describe your experience of working in corporate law firms?

I had worked in top law firms in India before I went on to open my own chamber. It was my work experience in law firms which helped me shape up. The strict discipline and time frames helped in delivering the best. The constant war footing work helped in thinking out of the box. One thing about the larger firms is that it feels like there is constant competition to get ahead and competition always brings out best in any person.

Your new venture, an NGO, working for delivering justice to acid attack victims is both commendable and brave. Can you shed some more light into this noble deed?

I think it is very important that we as lawyers should serve the society sometimes selflessly.

The demon of acid attack is plaguing our society a lot and girls or women who are its victims are often silenced or not supported at all either at level of family or at the judiciary.

Apart from legal help, what they need is medical treatment and counselling to get back their lost self confidence and accepting the changed physical look. It is a very long and slow process since physical recovery is slow.

After the recovery process comes the legal battle. Most of the victims are not financially sound to start the legal process, and there is where, we as lawyers step in and try to help as much as we can till the end. During the long legal battles, the victim girl or woman needs not only moral boosting but also legal counselling at every stage. The entire process is not an easy one, but we try to make it as simple as possible for the victims.



What do you think should be done to increase women's representation in the profession of law (in India), which is right now disproportionately low?

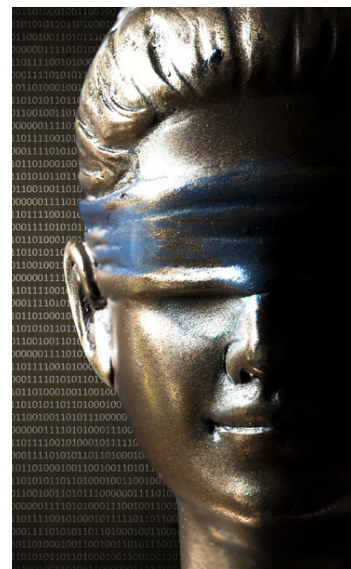
First is the need to bring about a qualitative improvement in the participation of women as legal professionals, i.e., ensuring enough number of cases and a financially rewarding career to them. The second problem of family pressure to opt out after marriage is expected to fade once women lawyers' practice sees this qualitative improvement, i.e. improvement in terms of the number and nature of cases as well as earnings, which would go a long way in changing the attitudes of husbands and in-laws. Third and the most serious issue is gender discrimination, including sexual harassment. In fact, the apprehension of such harassment is likely to be a major reason for women opting out of the profession themselves, or being compelled by their family members to do so. Gender discrimination is a widespread problem, not specific to the legal profession. However, the nature of the legal profession, as contrasted with the professions considered 'safe' for women, like school teaching and medicine, does make it seem more prone to harassment. Nevertheless, while a strict enforcement of the anti-harassment provisions of the law will help make the profession more conducive to women, ultimately even this problem will be resolved only with a qualitative improvement in the practice of women lawyers.

The role of ethics and morality in a lawyer's professional life. Is it null and void as many in the profession preach?

The similarities and differences between ethics, morality and law is complex and a matter of considerable disagreement. Some have argued that law properly targets immoral or unethical conduct. Those who defend the liberal view that law should not be used to prohibit immoral conduct that does not harm others need not be legal positivists. While liberals want to restrict the law from forcing certain moral or religious codes of conduct on citizens, they do support the use of law to impose one particular moral conception that holds that all individuals have liberty, interests and rights and that it is wrong to violate these rights by causing harm to others.

There is a genuine tension between the desire not to use the law to impose a particular moral code on everyone and the desire that law accord with justice. Many defenders of punishment, often labelled retributivists, argue that the primary purpose of punishing those who break the law is not to deter crime or rehabilitate the offender, but to met out justice; the criminal has violated society's conception of right, and punishment vindicates right and expresses society's condemnation. Sentences generally are set to match the culpability of the criminal. If the law is separate from morality, as some positivists contend, many versions of retribution, and many features of the criminal law, may be incoherent.

You have been an advocate of human rights while also speaking up for the rights of women, students and the mentally challenged. How important do you believe it is, for the youth in this country to rise up for any wrong that is happening?



I strongly believe that the youth in the country is already very sensitized about the issues happening around them. This is seen from numerous Public Interest Litigations being filed by students or newly inducted advocates in various High Courts in the Country or for that matter in Hon'ble Supreme Court.

One such example I would like to quote here is of the law student named Shreya Singhal. In 2012, Shreya filed Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court of India, against the section 66A of the Information and Technology Act and in 2015, the Court struck down Section 66A of Information Technology Act, 2000. This was hailed as a major step in the country's quest for freedom of speech and expression

'Details matter' as many say in a profession like law. And you especially have an eye for the tiniest and the intricate of details in any case, as seen from your interviews and videos. How did that sharpness come about? Why does that matter to win a situation?

The habit of reading the brief from cover to cover was inculcated in me by my senior, Shri Soli Sorabjee, former Attorney General of India. He always emphasized on reading every word in the brief so as to not miss any factual detail whether small or big since it helped to build on the case to be presented before the Hon'ble Court. Only when we master the facts then only we can apply the law properly was his teaching. His training is applied by me everyday in each and every case and may be that the reason I am able to get my clients the desired results in most of the cases.



'Contempt by court' seems to be the biggest debate/discussion happening in the country this year involving the Judiciary. Your thoughts on the same? Do you think it's a necessary evil?

Any democratic society must have effective systems of checks and balances. Apart from the separation of powers and the rule of law, a proper legal system must be maintained and promoted. The peace and harmony in society depends on the existence of such mechanisms and the confidence, members of society have in the system of adjudicating disputes and obtaining justice. It is the very foundation of our society.



The law of contempt of court is a necessary evil. It is required to ensure that the mechanism of adjudicating disputes and everything connected with it is not deflected or interfered with. Contempt of court is that broad offence that incorporates all breaches of the rules that must be followed to ensure that these mechanisms, properly called the administration of justice, are not in any way interfered with or jeopardized.

As clearly stated by Salmon LJ:
The sole purpose of proceeding for contempt is to give our courts power effectively to protect the rights of the public by ensuring that the administration of justice shall not be obstructed or prevented. This power to commit for what is inappropriately called 'contempt of court' is sui generis and has from time immemorial reposed in a judge for the protection of the public.

Do you think lawyers should be actively involved in both the spheres, on litigating in high stake cases as well as speaking up for the legally disadvantaged at the same time, just like yourself?

It is quite true that successful Advocates should also do some matters for legally and financially disadvantaged so that the faith in the system of justice is always alive. Justice should be seen to be done and justice should not be for only 'rich'.

Like me, many lawyers are empanelled with the legal aid societies working in various courts and apart from that many also do matters of the clients who approach directly and cannot pay. Vide such a system, some sort of balance is tried to be maintained between private cases and cases of legally and financially disadvantaged.

Hope many more lawyers adopt this system.

What has been your biggest achievement till date? The most satisfying moment in your career?

One of such achievement was to get 1200 constables appointed as sub-inspectors in the State of Uttar Pradesh by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in the year 2017(W.P(C) No.45 of 2016: Raghuraj Singh vs. State of Uttar Pradesh). It was a big moment for me since such appointments on such large scale vide an order by Hon'ble Supreme Court in the State of Uttar Pradesh was happening for the first time in a decade.

The most satisfying moment is always the moment when you get a favorable order for a client till date. The happiness on the face of the client still brightens my day. The feeling is still unmatched/unparalleled.

A message to that young Indian girl who wishes to be a lawyer someday in the highest courts of the country...

No doubt it's a male dominated profession but hard work and sheer persistence can help you make your place there. There is no substitute to hard work and only and only your hard work will help you sail through the tough times and make you reach where you aspire to be.

Not always a 'god father' is needed, your own confidence, hard work and principles can take you places not only in this profession but infact in any profession for that matter. Always be honest to oneself and have realistic goals which are achievable.





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INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

Tell us more about your journey? How did you end up starting Outline India?

A few years into research, I realized how poor the quality of data in the social sector was. When I was in academia, before I set up Outline India, I had spent several months cleaning data. Even though we had spent tonnes of money outsourcing the data collection to a big professional firm and burnt the midnight oil building manuals, training surveyors, formatting and revising survey tools, the quality of data received was bad. It was worrisome to think that we were building our social schemes and launching interventions based on research that, in turn, was built on fraudulent and often unreliable data. It was at this point that I thought of setting up a company to change the way data collection is done in India and bring in accountability, authenticity and incentives. I thought of combining the thrill of business with the impact of working at the grassroots towards social outcomes.

Data is the new oil'. Still, why do you think the interest and the adaptation of data-driven research has been slow in India?

We are currently at a stage where everyone agrees that to bring about large-scale social change, we need strong data-backed policies. However, this is something I tell everyone, India is an ocean. Things need and deserve time. We are a country that's about 65% rural and a majority of us still live in India's villages. We often forget that. Most of us still use the internet intermittently, and as women and kids we barely get to express our opinions online or otherwise. One therefore has to travel, traverse and trek miles and mountains to reach the right respondents. Field work is tough. Getting the right data points is tougher!

But times are changing, data is increasingly being accorded its due importance and with organisations such as ours I believe that young firms are adopting the right mix of research techniques towards actionable insights. We need research to enable decisions for policymakers, philanthropists,

'CSRs. It's not about producing papers or op eds (which are, of course, needed in a different context), it's about affecting hard core change that translates into more kids going to schools or more women giving birth in a hospital (India has some of the lowest institutional birth numbers for instance).

To know the problem, you really have to be there in the field with the people. How much do you agree on that?

We are a country of over 1.3 billion people but only about 60 percent of our population is online. The actual figure is, of course, much lower. This means that close to 550 million people are not online, most of whom live in rural and remote parts of India. How do we reach them? These are also the most vulnerable groups and a superset, not subset, of our population towards whom a majority of our social schemes and policies are directed.



When I came back to India after completing my education abroad, I worked on a World Bank funded project on improving the quality of education in rural areas. That job taught me everything I know today. It took me to the heartlands of India, it showed me what India looks like 100 kilometers away from our home. My mentor, who was also my boss, told me - data means nothing, until you've been to the field. One has to know the story behind the numbers.

You have to see the look on peoples' faces as they recount their lives, laughter, tragedy and needs, and share their innermost desires and problems. It's not a linear equation. Research demands that one look at data in a wholesome manner - numbers, stories, context, community, maps - there's so much more. And that's why field missions are crucial to the policy puzzle.

I like to push my team, my researchers, to figure things out. I think it builds character; when you hike down a hill for 5 hours to reach a village of 60 people for data collection. It changes you; when you abandon your car as there are no roads and walk to a remote tribal community in 43 degree heat.

When we are on a field mission, there is uncertainty; there are no clean washrooms or sanitised meals, or fall backs. That is when you realize that the rows of data in the Excel sheet are more than just numbers. They represent stories of pain and hardship. They represent people.

How important do you think is visualising the analysed data?

Visualizing data is giving life to numbers. Each data point communicates a social challenge and a unique story. It helps cut through the noise. It helps policymakers, governments and funders understand complex problems, design the right social schemes, figure out what is going well and where, or what is going off-track and by how much - all in a 20 second time window with one graph. Data should be consumable irrespective of your professional training; visualisation is therefore key.

Are you ready to venture into topics like climate change with your organization?

We have actually worked a fair bit on energy, specifically, clean energy solutions. We did a project funded by the Tata Trusts a few years back and then another project for the Tufts University. In Tamil Nadu and in Karnataka, we worked with a European funder to figure how auto rickshaws could cut their emissions and studied the demand for clean-tech.

Climate change as a subject will dominate our news and lives for the next 4 decades. Data-driven solutions will be pivotal in our war against the climate crisis and Outline India, with our pan-India field presence, has the bandwidth to capture and measure needs, track experiments and thereby, support the work of startups, investors and innovators. Data and predictive analytics can help inform climate change policies and drive action and advocacy accordingly. As an organisation, we can help.

Your views on data privacy. Do you think it's a necessary evil?

Data privacy, in my opinion, is not a necessary evil, it is a necessity. Organizations that collect data have a responsibility to ensure that it is not misused in any way. We are mere custodians of data. We owe the people we survey full disclosure around their rights.

Also, the multilaterals or CSRs who commission research surveys to us, entrust us with the responsibility of gathering sensitive information about peoples' finances, healthcare conditions, opinion on political parties or governance. We shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that we store, use and disseminate information responsibly. Our work has the potential to commence, pause or put an end to social programs and debates at scale. We understand that.

We, therefore, think that India's Data Bill is a step in the right direction. Of course, it will go through its motions and evolve in due course. But the Indian government has done a good job of looping in all stakeholders to submit their views and concerns on what the Bill should look like.

While data has helped organizations make informed decisions, solve problems more efficiently and understand their stakeholders better, the appetite for data should be balanced with efforts to protect it. Organizations need to be transparent about what data

they are collecting, who they are sharing it with and what it is being used for.



What has been your biggest achievement to date? The most satisfying moment in your career?

There is no one moment, the entire journey of Outline India has been a climb, and one that our entire team is proud of.

We have worked across 26 states in India and in Nepal, in about 10,000+ villages, and we have reached over 5 million people. We have generated 1,000s of man-days of employment across fieldworkers, coordinators, supervisors, transcribers and data entry operators who are often individuals with high school education and/or little or no college education. And we did this all on our own. We are bootstrapped and a continuously growing organisation.

We have helped education programs scale to different states to include more girls and children with special needs across the North East, Tamil Nadu and Bihar. We have helped public schools figure out how many washrooms they need, so as to ensure girls don't drop out when they hit puberty across Jharkhand, UP, Bihar and Rajasthan. Our work with panchayats in Bengal focused on their risk-taking abilities to make decisions at the community level; we worked for three years on the subject of child labor; we helped an amazing partner that makes cartoon content, which is the most watched content in India, figure out what content to broadcast nationally such that young children will learn about banks; we helped figure out what cerelac substitutes can be afforded by young mothers for their children when they have limited financial resources; we've worked with numerous farmers in MP to teach them about fertilisers and the incentives available from the government to improve productivity. Our work has translated into decisions for so many people and it makes us incredibly happy to know this.





What other fronts need to be improved along with evidence-based policymaking for better governance and effective social impact?

Good governance depends not only on good policy but also the implementation of those policies effectively. In addition to evidence-based policymaking, good governance demands efficient mechanisms and procedures to enable the government, market and civil society to build on each other's strengths. Public sector capacity building and the rule of law are also crucial for sustaining long term social impact.



What is your message to women who want to enter the field of data. What are 3 tips you will give them?

Don't let the quick successes, crazy funding headlines, and Facebook feeds make you feel low. There is no secret ingredient. It will get lonely and challenging, and you will have to wake up day after day, whether you are sick or you are running low on money, and put in more work. If you can do that, things will work out! They always do.



Track your metrics, again started by monitoring grants given to NGOs and their work.

Do you believe transparency increases efficiency?

Definitely. Lack of transparency, other than being a corruption risk, also slows down the flow of capital into the social sector. Funders, donors and philanthropists struggle to figure out where to put their money. Even if they order a survey (an evaluation or audit) or any other data collection exercise, it's often only once a year, there is no process for continuous monitoring. By the time they get this data, the money has already been spent. It's counter-intuitive. If we use technology to make collection and reporting of impact metrics cheaper as well as recycle that information, we can change how things work in the development sector. If we can ensure that NGOs know that their work is being monitored throughout the year, it will push them to do a better job and amplify transparency.

But times are changing, data is increasingly being accorded its due importance and with organisations such as ours I believe that young firms are adopting the right mix of research techniques towards actionable insights. We need research to enable decisions for policymakers, philanthropists, CSRs. It's not about producing papers or op eds (which are, of course, needed in a different context), it's about affecting hard core change that translates into more kids going to schools or more women giving birth in a hospital (India has some of the lowest institutional birth numbers for instance).



S H R E Y A S I
S I N G H

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



'Think, Solve, Communicate, Collaborate, Lead'; this has been your company's go-to mantra. What are the intricacies that lie within each of these principles, to actually make them work?

At the workplace, essentially what people expect from you is that you will get the job done. What does it mean to get the job done? It means I give you an opportunity and you have to make it happen. To do that, you need to know how to approach a problem and to solve it systematically. So, the first big habit is how you Solve. To be able to solve something, you need to have a certain level of thinking. So, Think is another habit that we've included. And once you Think and Solve in today's day and age, you can't do it all by yourself. You have to deal with the outside world. You have to Collaborate with others, so that's another habit. Being able to Communicate is the fourth habit. And then finally, our contention is that while you can Think, Solve, Communicate and, Collaborate, what ultimately gets in the way is you're not self-motivated. If you're not driving yourself or producing results, then these habits will remain undiscovered or unpolished. Therefore, you need to learn how to Lead yourself.

And for each of these five Habits, we've created five sets of skills. For each of these, we have created a four to eight-hour course that you can take online. So, there are 25 courses.

What was your initial motivation on building Harappa Education, now one of India's most sought after education portals on development of human resources?

Origin stories are always messy, but I'll do my best to summarize Harappa's. I was first introduced to higher education a couple of years before we founded the company and this experience convinced me about education being an honest, gratifying space of work, where you have the joy of seeing people transform right before you. It also showed me how great a business opportunity higher education is, given how broken and limited the larger system is in India.

During this period, Pramath Raj Sinha, the Co-founder and Chairman of Harappa, encouraged me to look at online learning. We agreed that we won't simply become a distributor of existing educational courses already being taught in colleges, and that we won't foray into the technical or skills-based domain space. So, we narrowed down on a range of social, cognitive, and behavioral skills that we feel are crucial for professional success and personal growth and decided to curate a curriculum around these.

What are the courses that you feel have been the most desired by the users? What new courses are you planning to bring?

As an online learning institution that emphasizes foundational skills, we believe in helping people embrace change and become resilient. With this in mind, we opened free access to our course on Embracing Change. More than 100,000 people have signed up for the course since we opened it up on March 16, with an overall course rating of 4.6/5.

Speaking Effectively is also a bestseller with an overall course rating of 4.5/5. We have a growing cadre of more than 2,500 learners on the course.



Books and people that have inspired you.

5 Books

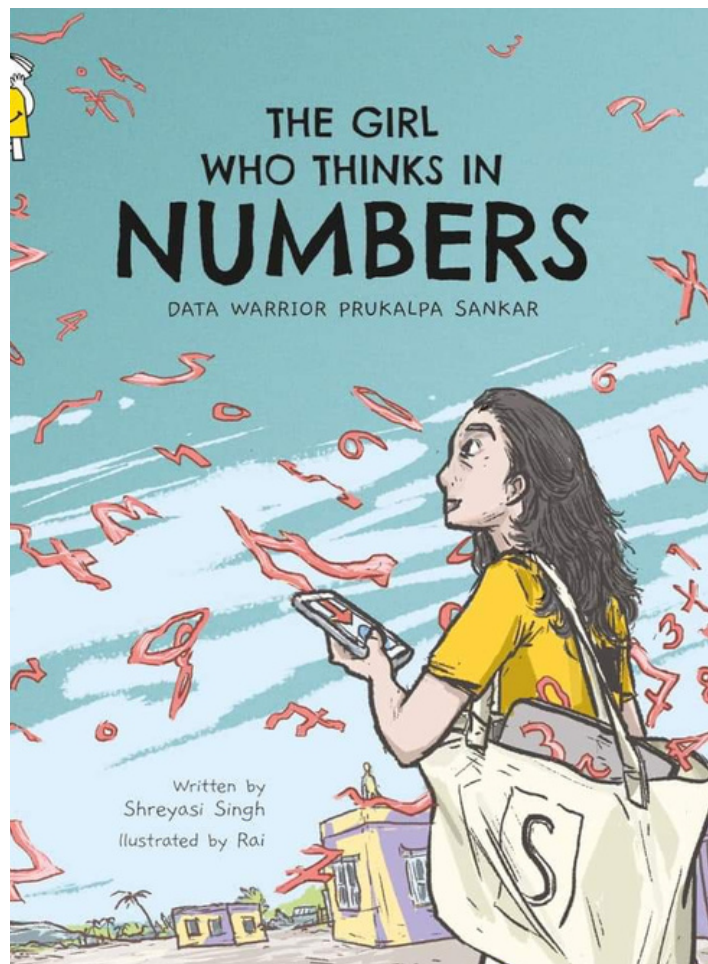
- Em and the Big Hoom, Jerry Pinto
- To Kill A Mockingbird, Harper Lee
- Cuckold, Kiran Nagarkar
- Kartography, Kamila Shamsie
- Americanah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

5 women

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Author & Speaker
- Arundhati Ghose, Former IFS officer
- Jacqueline Novogratz, Founder, Acumen Fund
- Monika Halan, Writer & Personal Finance Expert
- Reese Witherspoon, Actor & Producer, Hello Sunshine

Do you aspire to delve more into R&D on Psychology in your company, seeing that your courses revolve around cognitive and behavioral patterns?

Our pedagogical approach is rooted in academic research, expert insight and behavioral science. We have built an academically rigorous, IP-rich curriculum supported by a proprietary assessment engine that delivers deep insights to enrich young professionals with the skills they need to succeed.



But that's not all. We're using a lot of behavior science in making the courses engaging, nudging them to complete these courses and creating new habits. Almost 90% of our learners complete their courses—something we're really proud of.

What are the lessons you learned from your previous profession as a journalist?

As a journalist, you are always meeting experts at the top of their field, and you are a layman to most situations so you learn to ask a lot of basic questions that anybody would. I think that has served me really well as a founder and CEO, because I can't know everything about everything, but the art of asking questions is a powerful skill that journalism has certainly helped me acquire.

Your book *The Wealth Wallahs* was a huge hit. Do you plan to write something again soon?

Last year, I managed to write a book for children, published by Pratham. Called *The Girl Who Thinks In Numbers*, It was based on the real-life story of a woman entrepreneur, who runs a data business. The book has been translated into 32+ languages and gone into schools and rural libraries across the breadth of India. I love the practice of entrepreneurship: it's what my journalism was about. I am sure I will write a book on my lived experience of building Harappa - but have no idea when that is likely to be! I would also absolutely love to have an entire set of children's books on women entrepreneurs to add to my first one.



Your advice to aspiring entrepreneurs.

As an entrepreneur myself, I would urge young people to always follow their own ambition. When I wrote a personal vision statement for myself and realized that I wanted to build something of scale and impact, it became my guiding principle. You must also keep in mind that the journey of an entrepreneur is not an easy one. The emotional highs and lows are insufficiently understood and one has to be prepared for that. Finally, enjoy the process. Ensure that you find joy in at least 50% of the work you do every day.

How do you think COVID-19 is going to change the workplace scenario? Do you believe work from home will deliver the equal desired output as in working inside the office premises?

Businesses have already experienced a mandatory work-from-home model, and many are moving towards a blended model of working, where people are neither all WFH nor all at work.

These uncertain times are leaving everyone feeling stressed and anxious. It's important for leaders to put processes in place for regular check-ins. Informal events and team get-togethers are core to the office experience.

For the next year or so, when large gatherings seem unlikely, architecting rituals of joy and fun will need the most innovation so that people's experience of work isn't a monotony of calls.

In the long run, leaders will need to reimagine several things: the workplace itself, work timings, productivity rhythms, frequency and quality of communication.

Lastly, you have said from time to time that your company's focus is on creating a better curriculum and not an outright marketplace. How important do you think it is to focus on excellence? Do you believe good work always amounts to good money?

We see ourselves as an online university. We're an institution being built online rather than in the physical world. Our curriculum is innovative and proprietary. While other platforms may have four, six or ten thousand courses on different topics, we have focused on a certain set of skills, on which we would like to claim expertise and impact.

We walk the talk by focusing on excellence. We do that by ensuring our content is research-driven and engaging. We're working on optimizing every step of a learner's journey with Harappa so that they have an excellent experience from start to finish.



P O W E R
W O M E N
F R O M
B H U T A N





Power Women from Bhutan

- Tandin Bidha
- Namgay Zam
- Tshering Denkar
- Ugyen Choden
- Dechen Wangmo
- Choni Selden
- Kunzang Choden Roder
- Acharya Namgyel Lhamo
- Kyelsang Choeden
- Namgay Om



TANDIN BIDHA

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

31 movie titles in your name spreading across different genres. Also, a two time National Award winner for Boom Batha Chenmi Renzi and for Chi Sem Chi Lu. People and critics alike seem to love your versatility. How did it all start? Did you imagine being the most recognised face in the industry and achieving an illustrious career in a short span?

It all started when I was helping my mother out in her restaurant. A well known director of Bhutan walked in, he saw me and something clicked. He immediately told me that he wanted to cast me in a film because I looked like an actress. I did not know anything about acting then because Bhutan does not have an acting school. I waited to get a call from him for 3 months. There was no call. One day he called me and gave me a role as a supporting actress. Even if I wasn't the lead in the first film, it meant a lot to me and I decided to take it up. I then got many leading roles. I am truly grateful to my stars for aligning at the right time. I have given acting my best shot and I work really hard to be where I am.

Do you plan to carry forward that persona and art international anytime?

I am open to everything. I have never once thought that I can or cannot do this. I don't plan my life like that. I generally see where life is going, let opportunities come my way, and when something clicks, I do it.



Being open to things is the key to being successful, don't shut any doors in life till you are sure that it isn't for you, till then navigate and explore life through.

How important do you believe it is, to have a good work dynamic and a mutual understanding between an actor and a director? Do you personally think a good director helps an actor grow?

I believe that a movie is never about one person, it is about the entire crew. We all mutually depend on each other to get things done. I don't believe that a single person can create or take credit for a movie alone, it takes an army of people to do it. I am grateful to my crew and everyone working on the same team as me for working really hard behind everything that goes in. I believe that good actors and good directors help each other in numerous ways. All relationships should be mutual and everything is centric on growth.

You seem to have a very positive and optimistic approach towards life and towards work. Despite all the fame and fortune, you lead a very 'normal' simplistic lifestyle. What fuels that inside you?

Most of the people of Bhutan are very simple. We all believe in living a life filled with the sentiment of community.

I am an actress on screen and a human above anything. I believe in leading a simple life because that is all that counts. I enjoy spending time with my son. I also like reading in my free time. In Bhutan, for showing my films in theatres, I have also been to counters to sell my own film tickets. I deeply love Bhutan because I can be myself here.





You have been an avid reader of some really interesting books ranging from soul searching, inspirational women, The Buddha, the Mitch Albomesque emotional sort. Tell us more about some other books that you would recommend everyone should read in their lifetime. What is the book you are currently reading?

I really love reading books. I went through a divorce a few years ago and I was in a really dark phase of my life that time. I felt disconnected with the world. However, one day I picked up a book and I started reading it. After that, I have read so many books because I feel like books hold the key to life. I have also started a book cafe in Bhutan because I want the youth to read more books and get all the knowledge out there. I really love books and I recommend the youth to read books everywhere.

You have also travelled a lot. Your favourite destination so far and why is it special?

The more I travel, the more I realise how great Bhutan is. I love Bhutan the most.



I have been to several countries worldwide, but I really love Bhutan the most. People here may not have dominos or burger outlets, but we are really in touch with ourselves and we love this country a lot. The more I travel, the deeper my appreciation grows for Bhutan.

Aamir Khan from India has always been a champion of rights in the national and international arena. You met him in one such similar event. What did you discuss? What other actors, male and female, do you look upto in India? If given a chance and if an amazing script comes your way, would you be interested to be a part of an Indian project?

I would love to work with actors in India. I met Aamir Khan at an event in Bhutan. I went to him and I told him that I'm his biggest fan. He was very humble and he told me more about his work. It was a great conversation. I respect him a lot.

OTT platforms are taking over the world. Do you think cinema in Bhutan can reach more people through this medium?

I believe that Bhutan has some wonderful stories which need to be shared with more people across the world. We do not have a film school so most of the people here are very raw in the film domain.

However, we are all willing to learn and explore new avenues. I think Netflix is a great platform to share stories of Bhutan with other people. However, there are certain restrictions on the platform regarding quality of

filmmaking, which Bhutan will have to match if we want our films there. Overall, I really would love for our country to have some representation on Netflix. I would love to take a lead in that domain. I really want our stories to be shared with the world

What message would you like to give your fans who look up to you and your work?

I want to tell everyone that do not let go of your dreams even if it looks like it may never happen. It will happen when your stars align. I want to tell the youth to hold on to their dreams strongly and to keep working hard for it. If you work hard, one day, your efforts will be recognised. Never let go of your dreams.



SONAM & DEBAR



N A M G A Y
Z A M



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



In an age when journalism, in countries worldwide and India, has begun to cater more to capitalistic and government interests, how difficult do you find it to stick to a code of ethics?

It isn't easy, this is why I am now independent. I found a way out, but my choice isn't one that is viable for many journalists. Having said that, it isn't journalists who find it difficult to stick to the code, it's the media houses we work for that make it difficult for journalists to be ethical. I know of friends and colleagues who try very hard to remain ethical in an environment that is not at all conducive, and I have so much respect and admiration for their perseverance. I am not like them. I am impatient, stubborn, and leave before I am sickened by the compromises I'd have to make.

Are journalists trained in ethics? Where exactly is the gap or flaw in the kind of education they receive?

Not many journalists the world over are trained in ethics. I think it is necessary for journalists to study ethics. Those of us who study journalism are taught ethics, but not many journalists have studied journalism and not everyone who studies ethics becomes a journalist. The lack or minimal consideration for ethics is the reason we have yellow journalism. I'm frankly suffering from "breaking news" fatigue. Every new Covid-19 case is breaking news these days – I'm just glad to be sitting this one out and not reporting from a mainstream newsroom. I genuinely believe that journalists need to be trained in ethics – it influences our work in a positive way.

The Journalists's Association of Bhutan (JAB) (of which I am the Executive Director) has also partnered with a private media institute (Bhutan Media and Communications Institute) to teach the country's first Multimedia Journalism diploma course that has an entire module on journalism ethics.

Ethics is personally very important to me.

What motivated you to become a journalist?

It happened by accident. It began with a love for talking, I think, in hindsight. I loved radio and radio jockeys as a kid, having grown up in Nepal where radio was huge. I was offered a job at the country's first private radio station straight out of college, then it was TV, and journalism. It's my love for telling stories that has kept me in journalism despite having received various offers to change my profession. I grew up thinking I'd be a diplomat or a UN employee – people who know me know how ill suited I am for both these professions.

What has been the most interesting project you worked on so far?

It definitely was producing and hosting an entire daily live show on a regional football tournament while I was at the national broadcaster (BBS) several years ago. The show was received very well. It was a ton of hard work and sweat, but an endeavour I'm extremely proud of till this day. Such a show had been produced for the first time at BBS, so it was a matter of pride for everyone involved. It was a team of men led by me.

Even with the tide of modernization and liberalization, in most societies capitalism has proliferated in a way that is antithetical to freedom of press. Do you think we need to teach the importance and value of free press to children in school itself?

Now that's a thought. I'd never considered teaching children. I'm completely in support of having children understand the value of free press. Bhutan's Constitution guarantees freedom of the press too. It's wonderful.

In your view, does a journalist feel the pressure to make sacrifices in order to work ethically? If yes, of what kind?

It's often financial and social sacrifices. You lose financial opportunities because you're blacklisted and you lose friends, even family because you've stepped on too many toes. It's especially difficult for journalists in small societies like in Bhutan, Maldives, etc.



You spoke about the importance of consent in sexual relationships in a Ted Talk Video. How much willingness to accept this need of starting an honest conversation about the importance of consent, do you find in people of Bhutan?

Oh! At first, the general reaction online was that I was making a mountain out of a molehill. But it resonated with so many Bhutanese, and continues to resonate among a lot of young Bhutanese. There are students who do my entire talk at college events. Consent isn't as widely discussed and prioritised as it should be – I hope this changes, sooner than later. There's a lot of literature and content online on consent and many woke young people, but we aren't having an honest conversation on consent with each other.

Considering that most media houses depend on corporate giants for funding, how difficult is it to develop an ethical code of conduct in the profession and standardize it?

Bhutanese media rely more on government funding than corporate funding. We haven't had too much government interference in the media, instead media houses are encouraged to have a code of conduct. Many do have their own codes. JAB also has a code of conduct developed in consultation with journalists. The government here is supportive of standardising the code in our profession too. For instance, it's the government body, Bhutan Infocomm and Media Authority, that funded JAB's endeavour to have a standard code of ethics for Bhutanese journalists.



How much awareness do you find in the workspaces of Bhutan and media-houses regarding the need to inculcate gender-sensitivity and equitable representation of women in the workplace?

Gender mainstreaming is being done at the institutional and national levels in Bhutan. While we have no issues such as equal pay, we do face a certain number of challenges due to gender-neutral policies. Bhutanese women are definitely among the more emancipated in the region, but we need more representation in politics and at the executive levels. It's still a boy's club at the top right now. There is a certain degree of awareness – often enough for tokenism, but not enough for equitable opportunity. I'm optimistic that institutional gender mainstreaming will result in increased gender-sensitivity and equitable opportunities for Bhutanese women.

What is the status of mental health awareness in your country? Does the concept of GNH translate to the need of making mental health services like therapy and counselling accessible, recognized at the ground level?

Mental health awareness was abysmal just a few years ago. There is still a great deal of stigma surrounding mental health. Mental health services received very little financial priority from the government. I say government because Bhutan has universal healthcare and no private clinics offering psychological/psychiatric services. Psychological well-being is one of the main domains under GNH. Mental health is recognised as being important, but mental health really took on national importance during the pandemic.

A national mental health taskforce was instituted upon Royal command, becoming a major health service. Tobacco which is banned in Bhutan was made available during lockdown to address the mental health of those suffering from addiction. Now it can be bought legally instead of illegally. Mental health reasons outweighed even legal reasons. Access to mental health services has improved dramatically in spite of and because of the pandemic. As a mental health advocate, it is gratifying to see all of this happening.

However, the stigma remains. Mental illnesses are invisible because the suffering is usually in secret. Talking about mental health, some global surveys indicate that men are a lot more likely to die from suicides, compared to women. This has been linked to toxic social norms of masculinity that shame boys and men from expressing emotions. Have you observed this in your social environment too?

We have recorded the same in Bhutan. More men die from suicide than women. Psychiatrists I've spoken to usually attribute this to toxic masculinity as you have rightly pointed out. Add to that, a lack of mental health awareness and you have a recipe for tragedy. A lot of progress has been made in the last couple of years with regard to mental health, but more needs to be done. We even have a group of volunteers (me being the only non-medical person) comprising psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors called Mind Over Matter Bhutan on Facebook and Instagram in an effort to connect with Bhutanese everywhere. We turned four on World Suicide Prevention Day (Sept. 10) and have managed to avert several suicides over the last few years of our existence.



T S H E R I N G D E N K A R

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA





How and When did you become a travel blogger?

I vividly recall my first solo trip in early 2018 when I bade goodbye to apprehensive friends as I boarded a local bus to Phobjikha valley alone, with a one-way ticket!

As the bus winded along the gorgeous green mountains, I felt myself connecting with the wanderer within. I quickly made new friends, felt determined to chart her path, and ended up staying longer than planned. And I have not looked back since. Phobjikha became my first of many, many solo travel adventures across Bhutan. Seeking refuge wherever I found it, connecting with locals, and going deeper wherever I went.

As I was traveling around Bhutan, I documented the journey both in the form of travel blogs and vlogs. Ever since I have never stopped exploring nooks and corners of Bhutan and that made me the first Bhutanese solo travel blogger.

You seem to be specifically fond of hiking. When did your tryst with hiking start?

I love Mountains I am obsessed with the Mountains. Hiking into the woods and trekking to far-flung mountains in Bhutan has become an addiction to me. The Adrenaline rush, the surreal nature eyes feast and the green energy one acquire from mother nature is not only therapeutic but also enriching lifelong experience. Moreover, whether you are looking for a day hike or a grueling 31-day adventure, Bhutan has it all. Pristine mountain lakes, imposing glaciers and some of the world's most endangered species await you in the mountainous amphitheater of the Himalayas. So far I have trekked to almost all the popular trekking trails in Bhutan however I am yet to conquer the mountains of Snowman Trek. For now, I am only dreaming of doing a snowman trek.

Tell us about your most memorable travel experience

I often get asked this question. Well of many places I have been to, a sojourn to these places and mountains have been distinctively memorable to me. Different places had a different identity and essence to feel, people from a different region in Bhutan have different stories to tell, the tales of the places were unique from its neighborhood, the difference was exactly what made me travel to these places, and that exactly why I don't have a particular answer to choose the most fulfilling journey. One of the memorable experiences is naming the baby Yak- Denkar. A yak a born the morning I couch-surfed in one of the nomad huts in Haa. I adopted Yak Denkar. Today she is 2 years old. Every time I find myself going back to the mountains in Haa to my Yak Denkar. There are many beautiful anecdotes. To know more you need to follow my page. I often get asked this question. Well, of many places I have been to, a sojourn to these places and mountains have been distinctively memorable to me. Different places have a different identity and essence to feel, people from the different regions have different stories to tell, the tales of the places were unique from its neighborhood, the difference was exactly what made me travel to these places and that is exactly why I don't have a particular answer to choose the most fulfilling journey.





How has your family shaped your dreams and aspirations?

Today what I have become is all because of my parents. My parents and sister are the biggest cheerleaders in my life. They have always wanted me to do whatever I wished for in life but under the condition that I serve my King, country and people. Meaning-making difference and impacting lives. Today when my parents see Bhutanese folks hiking and trekking seeking inspiration from Denkers Getaway, they cry tears of joy.

Did you discover some unknown facts about and values about your country while traveling?

A unique culture and tradition, individual attitude, and high moral values are among several fundamental values that contribute to the Bhutanese identity. It embodies within it the uniqueness of different regions, races, dress codes, languages, practices, religions, and the country. As I delved deeper into the far-flung region, living with the local people blending in with their culture and tradition I have learned or say discovered unknown facts about my own country. For example, death rituals in one of the indigenous communities left me fascinated, some languages of indigenous tribes in Bhutan can also sound like English, in Bhutan, there are numerous dialects and most of the Bhutanese are multilingual.

Does traveling alone ever make you feel lonely?

The more time I spent on the road alone, the stronger my self-confidence grew. Loneliness untangles and focuses my thoughts, although they always start muddled. Once or twice I discovered I am not missing someone I should be, which answered a question I was too scared to ask at home. Loneliness taught me how I like to spend my time. Understanding my own pace, rhythms, and preferences have impacted every corner of my life, including where and how I live. We so rarely have time to be still, to be with ourselves. Traveling solo gives that gift however yes I do get lonely sometimes and every time I feel lonely I hit the road to another destination. Sometimes It's all about escaping.

Do you think there is an added challenge of being a woman traveler?

Absolutely No! I have trekked to places and spent nights at highland with the nomads and yak herders in corners of Bhutan both solo and accompanied by male guides. One time I remember waking up, sharing a nomad tent with five yak herders while trekking to Nuptsonapata. I never felt intimidated by the absence of girl partners, I felt safe and much cared for by the male friends.

I genuinely feel like travel does not breach genders, be it a man or a woman traveler. At the end of the day, how you look at the world or vice versa solely depends on how you travel. As long as you are an ethical and mindful traveler you are good to go to any corner of the world. You just need to blend with the people and the place.

What makes Bhutan an attractive destination for international tourists?

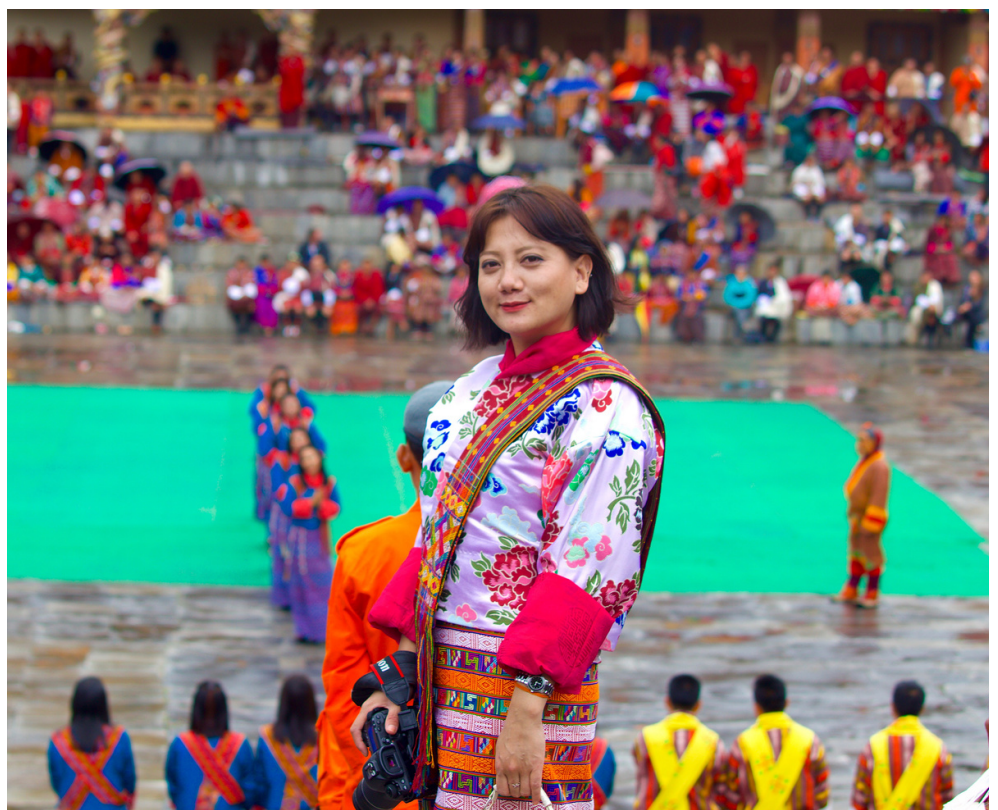
Bhutan is known to the rest of the world as a carbon negative country, a place where Gross National Happiness was born, where Royal Families are admired deeply by its people. Our dynamic and visionary kings of Bhutan are Bhutanese inspirational figures. His majesty the king of Bhutan is my idol and the only figure I look up to for inspiration and motivation to serve my country diligently.

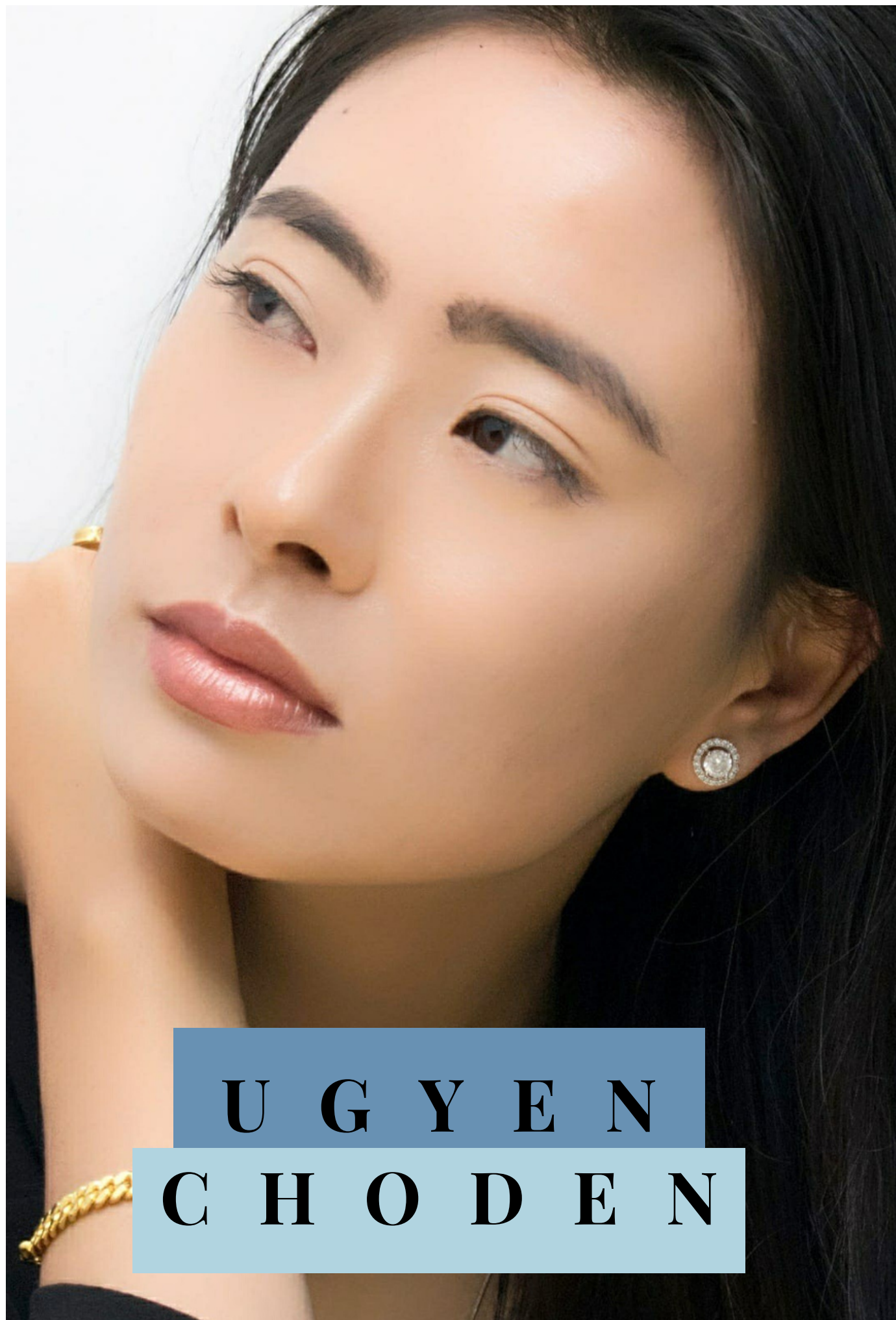
Traveling to Bhutan is one of the means of cultural communication. It produces social and cultural benefits to tourists exploring Bhutan. Aspiring travelers must trek in Bhutan. Perhaps it should be in the bucket-list of every mountain lover. Bhutan is one of the best mountaineering destinations. The mountains and its tales will fascinate you and enrich your knowledge about the locality, spirituality, and natural topography.

. Does traveling to distant and scenic locations enable you to stay constantly in touch with nature? Has this changed how you view urban life?

Well, Bhutan is a garden. Bhutan is covered with more than 70% of forest coverage. We live very much in harmony with nature. Almost all Bhutanese wake up to mountains across their window. We are surrounded by forest. However, trekking up to the mountains is an exclusive experience.

After trekking 2-3 days up to the mountains the only people you will meet on the trails will be nomadic shepherds. There is none of the posh lodges or the Illy coffee you can find on the treks campsite. You will find nothing but only peace and tranquility.





U G Y E N
C H O D E N

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



It has been really a great honour and a matter of prestige to be able to work in the Nepali films. As a matter of fact, Nepal's film industry is soaring in terms of technical aspects. It was in the year 2019 that I first featured in a music video known by the name, 'Gori Gori.' After the music video got released on social media, I've been offered another good opportunity to act in a mega feature film project, '2 Numbari.' The shoot as of now has come to a halt due to the Covid-19 protocol.

Bollywood is one of the biggest film industries in the world. People across the world envy the bollywood. Even in Bhutan, including myself, people do watch Hindi films on a regular basis. Owing to the huge popularity of the industry, I think many actors, film directors and singers would undoubtedly love to work in bollywood. As of now, I don't have any plans as such to work in India. But should I be given a chance to work, I would straightaway agree to the terms without a second thought.

Which is one actor from India with whom you want work and why?

The Indian film industry has numerous highly talented actors. Each actor has its own acting uniqueness and talents by an innate acquisition. When it comes to my choice of an actor, it will be my lifetime achievement if ever I get to work with Amir Khan. In terms of acting talents, I must say that Amir Khan is a different actor in the bollywood. What I like about Amir Khan as an actor is his choice to carefully act in a film in a year. I think this is one of the many reasons that make him appear special.

How did your journey in acting start? Please tell us more about how you got your first ever film?

In retrospection, ever since I first got introduced on a big screen, my acting journey has sailed well thus far. To act someday has always been my dream. Even during those juvenile days, it was not a rare case to see myself fantasizing as an actor on a silver screen. I must say my dream to become an actor then lived on.

Many years had passed and I was already working in one of the travel agents. Although not to say that I gave up on becoming an actor. I was in a music studio when I first met film director, Mr. Wangchuk Talop and his producer, Mr. Pema Tshering. They were already looking for a girl who would be best fit for the role of Phuchu Zam in their film, 'Loksho, the undying love of Pemai Tshewang Tashi.' So, they asked me if I would be interested to take up the role. Undoubtedly, I agreed to act in the film.

You have worked on films in Nepal as well. Any plans to work on other international films? Maybe in India?





You have worked on films in both Nepal and Bhutan. Do you prefer working on films in Nepal or Bhutan? Where do you think the audience loves you more?

This is an intelligent question that would certainly want an honest answer. Well, as being Bhutan's citizen by natural birth, and also due to my strong sense of belonging to my country, I must say that my preference would be in Bhutan.

I think this would not be only in my case to prefer working in one's own home country. Having said that, the aforementioned views do not mean I don't prefer to work in the Nepali films. I am already so much moved by the huge support showered upon me by the Nepali people. It is of a paramount importance that being an actor, one must be able to adapt to any kinds of cultural behaviors beyond boundary. If we take the instance of the present cinema scenario across the world, as deemed fit by the story, there are actors who work both in and outside other countries too.



It is my assumption that they would also prefer to work in their own countries. When it comes to the fan base, audiences have their own unique choices and likings. And it differs from one person to another person. I may be a Bhutanese actor but there may be Bhutanese who would love more of the outside actors than me. Should I take into consideration the reactions on my posts on social media, it appears that I have more audiences who follow me in Bhutan than in Nepal.

Have you ever met the King of Bhutan? What was it like? What will you tell him if you ever meet him?

Our King, His Majesty the fifth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is respectfully referred to as the 'People's King.'

How fortunate and privileged we are to be born in Bhutan that we often get a precious opportunity to meet with His Majesty! I think words do not suffice to describe the feelings when we get the opportunity to meet with His Majesty. But in a simple term I would say, "Meeting the God in a human form and also a life time achievement."

Hmm...We believe that the commoners' merits do not come at par the King's immeasurable merits. As a gesture of a high reverence to such great personality, we do not even dare to look up. I think only if His Majesty wishes to command then would I dare to speak up. And that would certainly be an unforgettable moment in my life!





Which of your film roles was the most challenging for you? Please tell us more about it.

Ever since I took up the acting career, I have been extremely fortunate to have landed up taking challenging roles. At least in Bhutan, as the dialogues have to be delivered in our language, Dzongkha, I did not face much difficulty. However, in other acting aspects such as maintaining a consistency in emotional build-up, striving to perfectly represent the said character on the screenplay and other things, I have had my own share of challenges. Of all the roles I have taken up until now, the one in the Nepali film, 2 Numbari has been the most challenging one. To be able to speak the Nepali language perfectly has been the toughest thing. In Nepal, to be well versed in the language, I had to take a month course to learn Nepali language.

Out of all the countries that you have travelled internationally, which one is your favorite and why?

It is a wondrous thing that many people have their dreams to travel and explore around the world. Some travel to a far from the madding crowd Himalayan Kingdom like Bhutan. Some travel to the famous pilgrimage sites such as the Bodh Gaya in India and the sacred Lhasa in Tibet (China).

I for one also have a keen interest to travel around the world. I have been really fortunate to have traveled to many beautiful cities. Of all the countries I have traveled till now, I personally loved being able to be a part of the Cannes 71st International Film Festival in France. I think getting to walk through the glamorous Red Carpet gave me the most unforgettable memory. It is also partly due to the film expositions and also due to the fact that the high profile actors such as Penelop Cruz, Margot Robbie, Brad Pitt and Leonardo Di Caprio also attended the prestigious film festival.

How do you think Bhutan's cinema can reach the rest of the world? Bhutan's stories are very different. How can they be shown to people worldwide?

Bhutan is a small country rich in culture and traditions. It is also one of the few countries left undestroyed by the fast paced modern developments. Our rich folktales and other unheard stories have enabled the filmmakers to make films that can travel across the border. Our uniquely attractive dress, enchanting landscape and giant mountains can directly identify that the film belongs to Bhutan. I think being able to create a film identity is immensely important. Now, what do we lack? Honestly speaking, the film industries outside of Bhutan should give a high regard and also make things easier for our films to reach to the rest of the world. If film training and education is of utmost importance, then almost all the actors and filmmakers in Bhutan are self taught and have learnt through practical experiences. I must put an extra emphasis to say that such training must be catered to the filmmakers in Bhutan. This might extremely help in uplifting the technical skills. Hopefully, in a decade or more, films from Bhutan might reach the rest of the world. And it won't be a surprise anymore should one of the films make it to the Academy Awards.





D E C H E N
W A N G M O

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



**What inspired you to be a civil servant in Bhutan?
How did your journey start?**

As a fresh graduate of Sherubtse College in 2011, like the majority of university graduates, I had a primary dream to join Civil Service which means an aspiring civil servant will have to pass the highly competitive Bhutan Civil Service Examination (BCSE) from which only a handful gets selected out of thousands every year.

As I sat for the BCSE 2011, I got through the entrance exam as well as the final exam and secured 31st position out of 36 slots announced for general and administrative category. Next we were put through rigorous one year training - Postgraduate Diploma in Public Administration at the Royal Institute of Management in Thimphu in 2012.

In January of 2013, I was appointed as an Assistant Human Resource Officer and assigned to serve in one of the Western District Administration of Chhukha, where I would work for the next three and half years.

How do you combine your love for giving back to society as a civil servant and your love for singing?

In civil service I feel that giving back to society takes the form of diligence, integrity, selfness and accountability in performing the roles every day. When performing each job role, I must ensure I do not fail at my duty remembering that each role I perform is going one step further in fulfilling the vision of our Kings and leaders, for service to the nation.

Whereas through singing, I have used the platform in voicing social messages and at fundraiser events and for social causes. For creating awareness on menstrual health, hygiene and stigma during the observation of International World Menstrual Hygiene Day, on 8th March 2019, I contributed to be the female vocalist. I also sang a theme song which conveys a message to the public on waste management. Chik Chuen, a virtual concert on National TV to entertain the public during the pandemic beside volunteering to perform for events like for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

What is your advice to young women who want to be a civil servant in Bhutan?

Young women must be well aware of the opportunities and the challenges of being a woman in civil service. There is still a lot of work to do in breaking the persisting glass ceiling. They must be willing to question the status quos, develop the ability to say no and believe in raising voices, and never feel that their voices are insignificant. Indeed the new generation of women civil servants must stand at the forefront of strategies in creating women empowerment and addressing deeply rooted traditional cultural barriers. Aspiring young women must be prepared to turn the tables and make sure they make it to the decision making tables to bring equal representation in policy making, keeping in mind that only women understand women's issues in society. We cannot be complacent that the other gender or genders will take off women's issues.

What was the most challenging point in your career as a civil servant? A situation which required you to think deeply perhaps?

By mid of 2016 I had sung for a couple of films and got to know most of the Music Directors, including working with the renowned filmmaker, Late Director Tshering Wangyal.

Amid the bustle, I received a message from Asian Development Bank-Japan Scholarship Program that I was selected to pursue a Masters Degree in Public Administration at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States.

Indeed this scholarship was everything I ever wanted in my academic and career pursuits however the pang of abruptly putting a full stop to a growing success in music was unavoidable. This episode was a difficult phase however with it I gained clarity, focus and direction of my long term priorities, it was challenging but enlightening.

Name a woman in Bhutan who you really look upto. Please tell us why.

Namgay Zam, Executive Director of Journalist's Association of Bhutan is another inspirational woman. For a young democracy in Bhutan, Namgay Zam has prudently exercised her freedom of speech and committed to being the voice of women, youth and ordinary people. Numerous times she fearlessly rattled the comforts of the status quo, relentlessly demanded justice on behalf of the people of lesser advantage, and demanded change on obsolete laws and policies. This makes her a powerful personality significantly contributing in progressing a young democracy.

Do you think that the GNH policy works in Bhutan? What do you love most about your country?

It credits the sacred GNH model due to which we not only enjoy a priceless pristine environment, we are also leading the world in terms of environmental conservation, and our cultural heritage is intact alongside accelerating infrastructure development, our communities are closely knit and traditional values are still strong. However we still have much work to do towards addressing the disparities in economic and social developments. We are constantly chaperoned in the rightful direction by our leaders. However I feel that core values of GNH must be conveyed in lay people's terms to ordinary citizens, because most ordinary people haven't understood it quite rightly.



As pointed out by Dr. Karma Phuntsho, the people's minds are not swayed towards extreme ideological inclinations. The Buddhist core values of fairness, justice and equity, compassion and service to others and the democratic principles have a great influence on the mindsets of millennials and youth and are free thinking.





Have you ever had the chance to meet the King? What did you say to him when you met him?

I have been fortunate to meet His Majesty ever since he was a Crown Prince and on many more occasions after that. As a grade five student, I attended Scouts National Jamboree at Tsirang, along with scouts from all over the country. His Majesty was the then Crown Prince and popularly known as Dasho Khesar. Dasho was the finest looking person with a warm exuberant personality, and we wouldn't stop talking about how Dasho stroked some of our cheeks and how he blew kisses to us as we were seeing him off the next day. I remember our hearts sank, and wished Dasho would stay a little longer with us. That experience of meeting our Crown Prince was precious and all of us felt a very special connection, a sort of an elder brotherly feeling.

If I meet His Majesty again, I will express my infinite gratitude and deepest respects for being the guiding light, for the selfless service, and for being a source of comfort and hope for the nation. Personally, His Majesty's speeches and wisdom is a priceless antidote to occasional loss of morale and direction.

Do you listen to Bollywood music? Which is your favourite Indian singer?

I love listening to Bollywood music. It offers a wide variety of rhythms and beats, dynamic vocal notes, vibrations and pitch play. I feel Bollywood songs provide a space for people to express, let out all kinds of emotions without fear of judgements.



Lata Mangeshkar and Arjit Singh are my favourites. Lata Mangeshkar's vocal is all melody and elegance, depth and flows with much ease. She rightfully reigned the Indian music Industry with the unparalleled vocal range, depth, feel, power and a pleasant element of shrill. And Arjit Singh for his soft and soulful voice. He has the power to immediately strike emotional cords of listeners. Seeing him open up every last atom of his being, effortless in his melodies yet full hearted does cast magic spells.

Please tell us more about the tribute you sang to His Holiness Dalai Lama

It was the dream of Tenzin Choegyal, founder of South India based Brothers Entertainment including artists from different parts of the world to produce a tribute song to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Therefore the the song Namsa Marpa & Yeshe Norbu Medley was produced which included vocals of Jeli Kayi and Tenzing Yangki from Arunachal Pradesh, Faishal Khan ashoor from Ladakh, Raju Lama from Nepal, Tenzin Dolma from US, Tenzin Choegyal from Canada and I from Bhutan. where each artist sings their part in his/her own dialect, with each artist featured in their native costumes to represent the people of diverse cultural backgrounds with a universal dream of peace and love. Therefore this song honours His Holiness for his timeless wisdom and contribution for world peace.



CHONI SELDEN

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



Tell us more about your journey and your show “Parentology”

My love for anchoring began when I part timed as a news reader for BBS at the age of 18. A year of prime-time news reading as the youngest news reader in Bhutan, and I went to pursue my studies in journalism in the USA. After which, I worked as an elementary teacher for a year and then became a TV anchor.

Parentology is a show that came into existence, because there was no one talking about being a modern Bhutanese parent and the struggles that come with it. There are thousands of parenting books and programs out there, but for a Bhutanese parent, there was none. No one had talked about how parenting was or is changing in Bhutan, there was no discussion or support for confused parents. This vacuum for information, comfort and support is what gave birth to Parentology.

What do you think needs to modernise about parenting in Bhutan?

One of the common struggles with parents these days is their lack of confidence in themselves, making them nervous parents.



This happens because the modern parent is torn between two if not more contrasting ways of parenting and she has no faith in herself as a parent because there are so many people telling her she isn't doing it right.

This cannot be good for the parent and their child. One thing I would like to suggest to my fellow Bhutanese parents is not completely copy paste the western parenting techniques, but to find a balance between the two.

How did your own journey of motherhood empower you?

I had a really difficult first year as a mother. With an overweight colic child and an injured wrist due to De Quervain tendonitis, I remember feeling my loneliest and most exhausted as a mother.

This is when I turned to social media to vent out and share my experience as a new struggling mom. What started as an outlet for my frustration, ended up providing comfort and support to other mothers as well. The enormous growth in my Instagram following is what led me to produce a BBS program titled Parentology, a program for rookie parents.

Becoming a mother brought me face to face with my weaknesses and shortcomings, but it sure as heck also let me see my strengths. Motherhood has certainly helped me see all the blessings in my life, but most importantly, it has empowered me to speak out about the strength, the challenges and the miracles women are capable of.

What are some of your personal key mantras for parenting?

I often find myself asking “why” or “why not?” Why do I need to give her a time out? Why am I angry at her for crying? Why shouldn't I let her play in water? Why is she whining so much? These questions usually simmer my emotions and help me reason out. And sometimes when my emotions are overwhelming me, I just walk to the other room or get some fresh air.



Be Consistent!

What are some suggestions you want to give for parenting during lockdown?

Have very few rules: so you are not constantly telling your child not to do something

Let the child be: Let her get bored and let her come up with what she wants to do. Boredom sparks creativity.

Water is as good a babysitter as TV. This is especially true if you have a toddler (make sure the water isn't too deep to pose any risk to your child)

Take it easy: Any stress on anyone in the house including yourself, could lead to a chain reaction of unhealthy pressure and communication at home. So do things you enjoy, and do not overwork yourself.

Do you think that parenting should work universally around the world or should there be cultural differences?

Parenting, albeit a universal phenomenon, varies a lot from one culture to the other.

While some new parents might assume cultural differences in child rearing as lagging or falling short, I believe it adds to the special making of your child. And the Bhutanese have such a rich culture and tradition to pass down to their children, it would almost be unfair to not raise them Bhutanese.

What are some other shows which you want to make, besides parenting? Other themes you want to explore maybe.

I once made a profile documentary on a partially blind singer, and that is still my most prized work. However, because Bhutan is at a very important turning point where we have the first generation of parents who are reading and learning about parenting, I have a lot of opportunity in making more programs on parenting. With specialization in child development studies in the near future, I hope to make more informative programs that will benefit this new generation of curious parents.

You have written about the way phones have created barriers in healthy parenting. Please tell us more about this.

If you are going to be on your phone when you are around your child, how will you have any quality time with them. What is worse is that your child will copy that behavior of burying his head in his phone and find it acceptable. Parents of today are fighting the biggest battle with their children regarding screen time. With a plethora of screen options (TV, Ipad, phone, video games) it is a tough battle to fight. With a little conscious effort from the parents' side, we could reduce the screen time for both the child & the parent, and also create quality, bonding time together.



How did you develop the confidence to be on screen? Is it something you were born with naturally?

As a child I was always on stage, doing dramas, dancing, debating and just being the most active student in all these extracurricular activities. That might have boosted my confidence to be on camera, but I still get nervous every time I go Live or appear in front of an audience.

Do you think it's important to raise our children feminist in today's world?

I want my daughter to know that she deserves the freedom to choose for herself and fight for herself. And if I have a son in the future, I would want him to know that both he and his sister are equal humans. They might look different, they will have different strengths and weaknesses, but no one human is smaller or lesser than the other.

Tell us more about what advice you will give to your daughter when she turns 18?

The world is your oyster: with hard work, commitment and passion, you will make yourself the happiest person.





K U N Z A N G C H O D E N R O D E R

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



Why did you choose to write books in English instead of Bhutanese?

I write in English because that was the medium of my entire education. At the time when I was ready for school, there were only traditional Buddhist monastic schools in my country which catered mainly to the boys. Around the same time the government of Bhutan had embarked on promoting modern education and was encouraging and facilitating children to go for modern western education. But there were hardly any modern schools in the country, so we were sent to schools in India under government sponsorships. I was sent to a convent school in Kalimpong, in West Bengal, where the medium of instruction was English. I had my entire education in English, beginning from primary to tertiary levels. So, you can see why I am more comfortable writing English. I would have loved to write in Dzongkha, the Bhutanese written language, but I do not have the capability to do so.

Tell us more about your parents and how they played a role in shaping your aspirations?

My parents were rather privileged landowners in the prevailing feudal system in a remote area of central Bhutan. At the time, in the 1950s, when I was growing up, Bhutanese society was an oral society and literacy was limited to a few members of the society. Literacy and education at that time were seen as being synonymous with religion. Both my parents were literate and also progressive in some ways and probably understood the importance of secular modern education. In 1962, remarkably, even when modern western education was so new in Bhutan and education for girls was unheard of, my parents sent me with my older brother to schools in India taking advantage of the Royal government of Bhutan's education scheme. Unfortunately just a few years into my educational journey in India both my parents died so I cannot say that had had a direct role in shaping my aspirations but I most definitely see it as their influence and their blessings that brought me to where I am today. I feel very confident that they would have been very supportive of my life's choices.

Tell us more about your journey. How did your interest in writing begin?

I always enjoyed reading and writing. Already in school I liked writing essays and stories and I did not even see class assignments for essays and stories as burdensome. I often kept journals and diaries. I started to write seriously when I was in my early thirties only after I had my children. I started to record the Bhutanese folktales which I had heard in my childhood for them. At the time I began recording the folktales I was living in the USA. I suppose my children were what some people would have called "third culture kids", because I was Bhutanese, my husband was Swiss whose cultural heritage was European and we were living in the USA, a third country /culture. I realized that my children were getting quite confused as to who they were. They often asked, "We are not Americans, who are we?" Knowing that I would be returning back to Bhutan I wanted them to stay familiar with my Bhutanese culture. The stories I heard in my childhood were so important to me.



Your daughter has made videos of you narrating your books this lockdown and has posted them for children stuck at home. What about your books do you think resonates with the youth?

My early childhood years were spent in an oral society where we had no books to read. But it was a vibrant oral society, and the oral tradition was thriving, we learned everything by word of mouth. We listened to stories and told stories. I strongly feel that we must never lose the art of storytelling and we owe it to our children to keep this tradition alive in the face of the fast changing world. So when my daughter, who is a filmmaker and very hands-on mother of her young three year old daughter decided to record and share videos of storytelling for children under lockdown I was very happy to participate and share my stories with children around the country. My daughter was inspired to do this, because through her personal experience she saw the need for young children to be engaged in some innovative and creative ways that were relevant and meaningful for the Bhutanese children.

I loved being able to tell my stories to my little granddaughter which were shared with so many other children in the country digitally.

What was your first ever book about? Why is the setting of your first book North India?

My first book was not Circle of Karma, the one published by Zubaan/ Penguin India in 2005. My first book was published in Thailand in 1994.

The Circle of Karma starts in Bhutan and then the protagonist Tsomo, propelled by familial circumstances goes and lives in parts of Northern India because these were the parts of India that Bhutanese pilgrims/ travelers in those days, late 1950s and 1960s were familiar with and had contacts in these parts of India. Many of the Bhutanese pilgrims were attracted to these parts of India because of the holy Buddhist sites. These pilgrims were following the Buddhist teachers who had escaped the Chinese takeover of Tibet and were living in India. Bhutanese in these parts of India (northern India) lived in and experienced India from their quite distinct Bhutanese/ Buddhist, enclaves as my protagonist did.

What is your advice to the youth who wants to become a writer?

I am often asked to meet and talk with youth, particularly school and college students. I always tell them that one has to read as much as they can and then write. Reading provides the broad base from where a potential writer can go on a writing journey. I also tell them that everybody can write but not everybody gets published. But they must not lose heart and give up, but just the process of writing itself should be enjoyed. Writing is also a discipline and you have to dedicate time and energy. Young people should be confident but also be humble, for no piece of writing is a one- time complete masterpiece, one has to be ready to work and rework on their ideas and language again and again to perfect whatever you write. Take critiques of others with gratitude and humility.

What are some of the books which have inspired you?

In my early school days, I began by reading Enid Blyton then I moved on to books that were available in the school library. The schools I went to had well-stocked libraries, so I was lucky to get access to a variety of books. Thinking back now, my school days, favorites were books by Pearl S. Buck, Louisa M. Alcott and Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and many more. Now presently I do not have one favorite, but I like Anne Patchette, Anne Tyler, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and many more.



Are there any authors in India who you have read extensively?

I grew up reading mostly western authors because I was brought up in an Anglo /Indian educational system. It was much later in my life that I began to consciously read Indian authors from the region and I really enjoy reading Rohinton Mistry, who is a fine writer and I like that he writes with such understanding and detail about the small Parsee Community in India. I relate to him because I also write exclusively about my own small Bhutanese community. I have had the good fortune to know Namita Gokhale personally through her tremendous work that she is involved in promoting literature globally. She was also responsible for starting the Mountain Echoes, a literature festival in Bhutan which went on for ten years. Through her initiative and efforts Bhutanese writers had the opportunity to meet, interact and share thoughts with international and Indian writers over those ten years. Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* was a book I loved.

Your daughter is a director in Bhutan. Would you like to see any of your books being turned into a film?

Yes, I hope one day she will choose to make one of my stories into a film. My daughter is a serious and dedicated film maker.

I am so proud of what she does, she conceives and conceptualizes her stories, she writes her scripts, funds, raises and directs and edits her productions, so she is all in all a one woman show. She sees filmmaking as an art form before it being a commercial venture. Of course, I am like most mothers totally biased, but she is a woman, who someday other women will look up to as a role model. She started with short films and documentaries and has also ventured into commercial film or two. Definitely, if she would one day decide to turn one of my stories into a movie, I would be really honored.





A C H A R A Y A N A M G Y E L L H A M O

INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



What does it exactly mean to be a nun? How would you explain it to a person unaware of the concept?

In short I would say nuns are the one who are renounced from worldly life. In brief nuns are commonly renounced and transformed from four worldly things namely; name, dress, figure and motivation. Through transforming worldly name to Dharma name, worldly dress to Dharma dress, worldly figure to Dharma figure by shaving hair and by giving up worldly motivation to Dharma motivation become a nun.

Could you tell us how the desire to become a nun took birth in you?

I decided that I want to become a nun very early in life, as a five-year old, when I was a little girl. I believe it to be a result of my past karma, that I thought to choose this path at such a young age. It feels like a blessing to have developed the willingness to adopt this path on my own. It almost feels like a divine ploy that I was fortunate to be blessed with.

What's life like, on a typical day for a nun, in your organization?

Nuns actually lead a very busy life. We attend classes and training in a number of activities in order to learn how to fulfil our duties.

There are a lot of workshops and sessions in our routine that we undergo, and then we have visitors. Friends and relatives are very eager to get to know more about us, and wish to acquire knowledge and wisdom from us.

You have spoken about the need to stick to traditional Buddhist values and culture in an age of increasing modernization. What anxieties do you have, regarding the beliefs and thoughts of youth in your country?

I feel that it goes both ways. Nuns, in the 21st century, need to get comfortable with operating technology if they have to survive in today's world. However, youth also needs to appreciate its rich tradition and culture, and everything that it has to offer. The Buddha's path is the path of peace, love and kindness. These values are essential to live a happy and fulfilled life.

What are the highlights of your life?

I believe that the efforts which I expended in order to improve the living conditions of nuns is the best and most noble cause that I have adopted in life. I currently work with Bhutan Nuns Foundation in Thimphu, the capital city. The primary motive of our organization is to enhance the educational opportunities and economic living conditions of nuns. I also try my best to challenge the stigma that nuns, due to their commitment to a simple lifestyle, do not have the need for a modern 21st century education.

I think that it is very important for nuns to get access to a quality education and finish it successfully.

Did you ever get a chance to meet the King of Bhutan?

Yes, in 2016 I had the honour of meeting him during a conference. He had invited us to the palace. He was very invested and concerned about the health and living conditions of nuns. It was a very touching and memorable experience.

Could you tell us more about the reform in the living conditions of nuns that you have brought about, in your lifetime?

Nunneries in the past used to be situated in hilly regions and even basic needs such as access to water or washrooms was difficult to get. These days the situation is much better. Nunneries in remote areas still face a lot of difficulties, but the ones in urban areas have started having decent living conditions.



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What inspires a girl or woman to become a nun?

For me, it was the calling of my inner self. Many girls get inspired by their aunts, female relatives, or any other woman role-model whose life looks promising to them. For some women, some kind of upheaval in their personal life, such as an unfortunate accident, financial losses, or a divorce have also played a role in their eventual decision to renounce worldly life and become a nun. I respect all such motivations, but I personally feel that an individual's own determination is the best source of motivation to adopt and lead this kind of life.

Has your family impacted your formation of dreams, vision and identity for yourself, and if yes, in what ways?

I have 4 older brothers. My family was initially surprised and took it humorously when I told them as a little girl that I wanted to become a nun. But they were eventually very happy with this decision, and the fact that I chose to walk on the Buddha path; which is a path of tranquillity, wisdom and compassion.

What role do you think, spirituality can play, in cautioning people about politics based on hatred and division in society?

Spirituality teaches you the value of kindness and compassion. You learn to put the needs of the other person above your own. It teaches you to be less selfish, and think about the greater good of the world and society. A spiritual thought process is built on the virtue of selflessness and genuine love for humankind. Such a thought-process would naturally counter all the hateful and divisive tendencies in politics that has affected this world.



What purposes and aspirations do you hold for yourself, at your current stage of accomplishments in life?

I want to do more to improve the living conditions of nuns. I feel that these women and girls, who come to nunneries, need to be better educated about the importance of health, and their own bodies, without any shame. They need a role-model whom they can relate to. I wish to reduce the dominance of monks in the administration of nunneries, for only an insider is capable of truly understanding the needs and wishes of nuns, in entirety. Only a nun can truly inspire, lead and motivate other nuns to believe in themselves, and what they do, and the significance that they possess in the society.

I wish to do more for my fellow nuns and improve their lives, during my lifetime.



KYELSANG CHOEDEN



i fear living,
more than i fear death.
[we die only once
at death.
but we die
daily
even before we are
buried
while
living.]



remind yourself that
you're here for a reason
only this season.

do not just exist
you're here for a purpose
not to play circus.

-KyelC

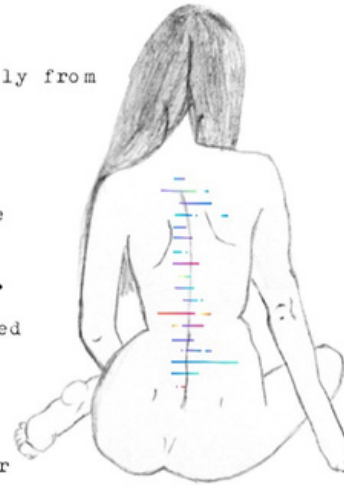


INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA



girl was born

he started covering
 herself
 he day she bled
 er first.
 he covered her thighs,
 er legs, her body entirely from
 atching glances.
 as accused
 or dressing too short,
 oo tight
 or being too emotional,
 oo sensitive, too fragile
 oo-something!
 eceived stares because
 er cleavage was showing.
 as raped.
 et in silence, she covered
 er face because
 he was now
 disgrace to her family,
 to the society.
 arried babies of men
 ho came seeking only her
 ody.
 er womb cried tears
 or disrespect it received.



-Kyel

any years have gone,
 any more to come,
 gain, a girl will be born
 nd she will write
 ore stories of unspeakable abuses
 hat had been done
 > a girl
 ho was on a journey
 > becoming
 woman.

Tell us more about poetry in Bhutan and how it is different from poetry across the world?

Bhutan has a rich traditional composition of ballads in varied forms: Lozé, written in metrical verses dressed with metaphor and figures of speech usually recounting lives of legends from the past. Tsangmos are yet another popular Bhutanese oral tradition and in olden times were sung almost daily by people as they went about their everyday events. As a child I have witnessed women on their rice terraces while tending to their crops converse in Tsangmos.

I have read that there is one that describes an event from history, some are instructions on morality and spirituality composed by religious divinities and personalities and few memoirs and records of musings hand-down by people from the past especially elders.

Nearly every culture on every country and continent has produced its own unique poetic form, whether it comes in the form of a song, spoken word or printed literature, the essence of writing poetry remains the same everywhere-They rhyme and use metaphors and are in line breaks. Their rich imageries and metaphors arouse not just mental images/ pictures but deep sensations and emotions. They are all poets' expression of their feelings and emotions about their happiness; desire; betrayal; anger; hardships; and in general reflection of who they are and what they believe in.

When did you start writing poetry? What was your first poem about?

Poetry found me when I was fifteen. I was experiencing a chronic illness and was fearful that my body would fail me at any given moment; I grew most attached to the idea of death. If my memory still serves me right, "death" and "kuenchogsum" were the first few complete poems that I wrote. During this period, I encountered a new connection to poetry, it was comforting to find words to articulate a traumatic experience. Poetry sort of healed me.

What are some of your favorite poems?

I have so many favorites. It's like everyone is writing a part of my story and it's amazing how in tune some random poems are with whatever is going on in my life or sometimes mind at that moment. 'The Daffodils' by William Wordsworth will always be my favorite because it was the first poem I was introduced to as part of the curriculum in school, even more so because the poem talks about the beauty of nature and I am always drawn to subjects that talk about nature. I am a huge fan of Maya Angelou, love all her poems-each one leaves me teary-eyed. 'Phenomenal Woman' and 'Still I Rise' are some of my favorites of hers.



Why do you use illustrations for your poems? Is it because words cannot express what images can?

I started sharing my writings by the end of 2015. Initially, they were mostly cataloging feelings and sensations and emotions so everyone understood my poetry differently. Some even said it was confusing because so much was hidden beneath those words. I started simplifying my poems, more like unmasking myself to open up completely. It was also then I realized how important it was to not just think literally – but also think symbolically, thematically, and illustratively if you need to connect to people more deeply.

Illustrations complement words best and engage readers for all ages. They make words come to life in our imagination. It's always either my own or my best friend Yu Jianing's illustrations that goes with my poems.

Most of your artwork features women? Why is that? Is it a move towards women empowerment in some way?

Almost all of my poems feature female figures/ faces probably because I am more comfortable/familiar with female features. Also, because I am a female–could be a feminine thing for me, an attempt to express my femininity. I personally find a woman's body fascinating, it's like there's this entire set of galaxies summarized into a human body and you could do wonders with the hair and clothes and curves and colors when it comes to drawing females– I do have an eye of da Vinci haha. The same could be the reason why most artists both male and female take women as their subjects. And in some way, yes! A poetic pace toward women empowerment.

Do you believe that words can solely be used to express sentiments?

YES! To be honest, from where I come, I never knew the purpose of those combinations of letters and words or thought I would be a poetry person. I didn't realize how healing writing could be, but today I know how empowering it can be to connect to people who you never met, who have left, who are with us through words. I began to use words as a record keeper to my everyday events, as a note taker, as a witness to life's tragedy and separation and hardships.

Words have helped heal me. And today as I write more and more, every day, I find myself connecting to people from all walks of life, exchanging more than just words, feelings that unite us and help us heal and lift each other up.

Do you believe that art can be separated from the artist? How much of the real you can we find in your poems and illustrations?

I think it's impossible to separate art from the artist. For as much as we like to be drawn to the art at the first sight, in the long run every art work is deeply imbued to the personal details of an artist's life. I personally do not separate myself from my work so a critical approach to separate art from the artist to me seems murky. My poetry speaks of who I am as a person and projects ideas that I stand for and truly believe in. If you have read all my poetry, you know me almost completely.

Who is your favorite poet from India? Why do you like their work?

Rabindranath Tagore, is my all-time favorite indian poet. Besides one of his vastly read and discussed poems "Where the mind is without fear", I was also drawn to "Chandalika", a sensitive story he wrote about the caste system in Hindu society. He was a realist– inspired from observing the lives of ordinary people in ordinary situations. His poetry, music and stories were all so rich in their thoughts, introspection and reflection of life. Because his work made me believe that Poetry can spring from us naturally in times of need– I now actually find myself frequently moved to write a poem in times of extremity.

what is it like to be in love?
 with a place. with a dress.
 with rain. with a trip. with crayons.
 with food. with your hair.
 with a song. with a book. with coffee.
 with everything. with nothing at all.
 what's it like to
 be in love?
 when you're
 not chained
 to stay?
 when you can
 choose
 what to love,
 how much to love,
 how long to love.
 what's it like to be in love
 with your freedom?

-KyeIC



it's time to tell our children
 that it's okay
 to fail in math. to come second in class.
 to not know as much as others do.
 it's time they knew that there are
 things greater than grades:
 character. contentment. humility. courage. compassion.
 kindness. gratitude. charity. integrity.
 it's time to not just tell them
 what to do
 but show them how it's done-
 by being patient with them. demonstrating
 the art of giving and sharing.
 speaking to them the
 language of right courage. of sacrifices.
 of hope. of selfless love.
 cultivating meaningful values in them.
 we need to show them
 how to communicate. how to listen.
 how to be graceful and soft and resilient.
 how to come out of themselves to see inside
 the heart of another.
 before we teach our children
 how to succeed and excel
 to be able to pay the bill
 on their own
 we need to teach them to feel
 because let us remind ourselves-
 we are raising humans
 not building machines.

-KyeIC



the borders were sealed. travels curtailed. movements capped.
 distancing enforced. businesses shut down. schools closed.
 livelihoods threatened.
 things were messier. with daily barrage of news and headlines
 getting noisier.
 and people teeming to stock essentials- the sight, scarier than
 the virus.
 markets busier, and then emptier, and quieter at once.
 fear-mongered by the waves of unimaginable
 coming from outside
 we shut doors to hide inside.
 the entire nation was thrown into a tailspin
 and in that moment, enclosed between high walls of despair,
 a voice came through.

 a voice, that lit-opened our hearts and minds from the dark.
 the voice of our protector. the nation's father.
 our King-the Siddhartha, of this era.
 comforting, reassuring, guiding, and leading us through, over
 and around the murk and mire of our situation helping us not
 only find our grips
 but also see the unbeatable strength that we all possess as
 humans first, as Bhutanese second.

 we witnessed a heroic response from individuals, hoteliers,
 restaurateurs, farmers, teachers, cab drivers, bankers, policy
 makers, service providers, spiritual practitioners
 assisting the green, the blue, the white, the orange guards of our
 nation.
 together, taking remarkable steps to turn the tide.
 our revenue, even. our resources, constraint.
 but our attention to citizen's daily demands and efforts to slow
 the contagion, constant.

we might not make news on BBC
 for the world to see
 but our stories of success,
 applauded daily on BBS.

the virus is likely to remain for a while,
 so is, our unprecedented levels of coordination.

~kyeIC

Most of your poems are in English. Why is that? Do you want your poetry to reach people from across the world?

Writing poetry in English has helped me connect to people not just from Bhutan but across the world.

It serves as a medium, a voice to help as many people get access to the wisdom we already have and share which otherwise is limiting and difficult to experience in ordinary language. I do wish to reach out to as many hearts and souls across the world as I possibly can and so using the language that is most widely used- English in this case, is one of the ways to make it possible!

Is poetry a dying art in Bhutan? What can be done to keep the art alive?

Poetry is something that cannot die. It's a pursuit with no end. And only the ones who still read and write, know how very much of it is alive and how aptly it keeps us alive. Poetry will remain for as long as humankind continues to feel very deeply about themselves and others around them. Of course, we can always start a poetry community and organize a meet-up, set up poetry exhibitions, stage spoken-word poetry sessions not as a competition but with an objective to create awareness on freedom of self-expression because what I like to believe is there's no better or worse poet. Every writer who is brutally honest with his/her feelings is a poet. Now that we have easier access to all social media platforms, I see a lot of Bhutanese especially young students write poetry, mostly in free verse and they are all so amazing, each one unique in expression and projection. I see poetry only flourish in Bhutan.

N A O M G A Y



INTERVIEWED BY VIDHI BUBNA

Tell us more about your journey.

My journey so far... Well like many, it has been full of ups and down but I believed in 'behind every dark cloud there is a silver lining'. Here I begin- born in 1958, Ngathasang village, Monggar (eastern Bhutan). Because of the kindness of our government, after beginning my two years of primary education in my country, ten years of secondary education in Darjeeling and 3 years of college in Chandigarh Punjab university. So my 13 years of education was obtained in India.

I began my profession as English teacher at Samtse high school (5 years). Yes my interest in the teaching profession grew henceforth. Due to the kindness of my government I was offered a scholarship for teacher training, mostly in the UK (DipEd, PGCE, MATESOL).

My first assignment was headmistress to Monggar Junior High School, then as principal to Motithang High School. Then I hopped to many high schools as a Principal. The maximum years I spent were in Drugyel High School (Paro) as Principal (5 Years). Then I changed my profession as Director of Royal Institute of Management. Here my students were aspiring civil servants. After 5 years I transferred to College of Education, Paro as the Director. After 2 years, I resigned voluntarily, at the age of 50 years, to join the People's Democratic Party (PDP) when democracy was embraced by our government. Unfortunately our party did not win the first election. This was the biggest downfall in my career and journey of life and now, after 10 years of doing nothing I am here at Kharchu Monastery voluntarily teaching English to the monks.

When did you decide that you wanted to enter the teaching profession? What was your reaction like when you were chosen as a Principal?

After graduation, we had to complete six months of national service and my first place was to teach Khaling Higher Secondary School.

Our country's development minister then, HRH Ashi Dechen Wangmo Wangchuck, emphasized our country's need for school teachers. It was a good experience and I along with the majority of my graduate mates joined the government service as teachers. My reaction to becoming the first woman national principal of Motithang High School was - I was positive and confident and ready to accept the responsibility of a school head. My leadership experience was gained whilst attending the school in India.

I had worked in top law firms in India before I went on to open my own chamber. It was my work experience in law firms which helped me shape up. The strict discipline and time frames helped in delivering the best. The constant war footing work helped in thinking out of the box. One thing about the larger firms is that it feels like there is constant competition to get ahead and competition always brings out best in any person.

Your new venture, an NGO, working for delivering justice to acid attack victims is both commendable and brave. Can you shed some more light into this noble deed?

I think it is very important that we as lawyers should serve the society sometimes selflessly.

Why do you think there are not many women as Principals in the schools and universities in Bhutan?

Perhaps, most girls after completing schools stay behind to help their parents instead of pursuing higher studies. It is not whether they obtain pass or fail or that our community is gender biased,

that few girls attend schools. This was the picture of a few women in the early twentieth century. Nowadays women are at par with the men where positions in their occupation are concerned.

What are some things which you always teach your students?

Be thankful for the free education given by our government, self discipline to learn and not to lose hope but to try till you succeed, there is no end to learning.

In what ways do you think bridges can be created between India and Bhutan's education system?

Both countries have rich traditions and cultures and we should preserve at any cost. It is the education system that will curve the loss of these values. Hence, both countries need to visit the school curriculum for its relevance and the needs of our society. Compared to Bhutan India has made great progress and has advanced specially in the field of information and technology. Our country since time ago has been depending on India; hence most of the students go for further studies in India. Nowadays our students have been going abroad for further studies and for jobs. Here at this moment both countries need to study the relevance of the school curriculums and where necessary make changes to cater to the changing needs of their students.





What do you think Bhutan can teach the rest of the world?

Our leaders have given democracy to the people to voice their opinion and cater to the needs of the lowest section of the community. For Bhutan gross national happiness is more important than gross domestic product. Education is free and health facilities are free, these are the two basic needs that will make the people happy.

Do you think travelling is a good teacher? Please tell us about your travelling experiences and what you learned from them?

The few travels were mostly in India either during my studies and taking vacation from my job epically during winters. Taking my parents around to the holy sites in India makes us all happy. I realized that what you study in Indian history books becomes a reality when one travels to those historical places.

What are three things that you want to tell your students?

Respect for the teacher and elders, self discipline and love for your country.

What do you like most about the culture of Bhutan? What would you like to preserve about the culture?

Every year people gather around monasteries and dzongs to celebrate the religious festival called "Tshechu." Here relatives, friends and families gather together to witness the mask dances performed by the monks, local dances performed by the community people. They enjoy eating, dancing and celebrating together. The religious, sacred monuments and religious dances. The respect given to elders and strong family ties that exists should be maintained for with the changing time there are chances to disappear. Art and architecture that is unique should also be preserved.

What do you think needs to change about the education system in Bhutan? How can you bring about that change?

Education system should be relevant and cater to the needs of the country where employment needs are concerned. Where subjects taught are concerned, more books on the history and religion should form the curriculum taught in the schools at the same time, the education system should keep at par with the modern changes.



First Female Principal of Bhutanese School

Explore culture

