Growing up in Greater Bhutan, Scaling the Anthropogenic Stages of Life

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I need to make two clarifications at the very beginning of my lecture. First, this is not the first autobiographical lecture I have delivered; there have been a few, including one at this very hall some 6 or 7 years ago, but each time I looked at different facets of my life, or the same facet but differently. The present lecture, being delivered under the aegis of the Himalayan Centre for Environmental Humanities at RTC, attempts to focus on those aspects of my growing up which might have some relevance for Environmental Humanities. Second, the use of the expression "Greater Bhutan" might be intriguing for some of you, but it is quite common to use the word "greater" before nations that were once larger in territory than they are now, such as greater Nepal, greater Sikkim, greater Assam, and now greater Bhutan. I am not sure if anyone here has used the expression "greater Bhutan" in the past, but someone might surely like to do that in future, for it is a historical fact that Bhutan once, for more than one and a half century, included the whole of the present district of Kalimpong and substantial parts of the Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar districts of West Bengal. Whether or not Bhutan wants to get back these lost territories today is a question that will require another lecture.

In my lecture this afternoon, I will talk about the anthropogenic stages of my life (by which I mean environmental changes that are often negative, albeit it might have been unintentional on the part of human beings) in a village in Kalimpong called Tanek, a village through which passed dozens of mules every day except for a month or two during the winter. In other words, the Indo-Tibetan trade took place through my village from the time it started until it stopped in 1959, following the occupation

[1] This article is the transcript of a special lecture delivered by T.B. Subba for the Himalayan Centre for Environmental Universities on August 10, 2023. T.B. Subba served as the second Vice Chancellor of Sikkim University. Earlier, he was Head of Anthropology Department and Dean of School of Human and Environmental Sciences, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

of Tibet by China. The cobbled road of about eight feet width was hardly twenty-five feet away from my house. This village also had an important role to play in the field of educational and economic development of Bhutan for almost three decades, from about 1960s to 1990s. The trade agent for Bhutan in Kolkata was Lawrence Sitling, a Lepcha from our village. He supplied almost everything the Royal Government of Bhutan needed, from pin to pan. The Education Director of Bhutan then was also from our village and my father was one of the first school headmasters to be appointed by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 1962. He was posted in Dogar (now renamed Zoka) Primary School in Shemgang (nowadays spelt as Zhemgang) district and remained there for another 25 years or so. He was once transferred to Haa and once to Paro, but both the times the villagers of Dogar met the concerned officials and got him posted back to Dogar in less than a month each.

I grew up in my grandparent's house in Tanek village from the time I was about two years old. I spent my entire school and college days under a kerosene lamp. So, till I left my village in January 1978 for doing my master's from the University of North Bengal in Siliguri, my mother and I woke up with the first crowing of the rooster. While I made fire and fried the leftover rice of last evening, she milked and fed the cow. She also gave something to the goats and the pig before she ate the fried rice and left for the nearby forest to collect fodder for the animals. After she left, I cooked food for all of us, including my younger sister and my mentally retarded brother, before leaving for school or college. Cooking food in the morning meant cooking rice and one vegetable and if there was no vegetable it meant making some chutney with whatever was available in the kitchen garden. The leftover rice of the morning was always fed to the fowls and dog, but the leftover rice of the evening was kept to be eaten as a pre-dawn snack. And getting ready for school took no time because there was no concept of brushing teeth or wearing shoes until I reached the ninth standard. I splashed some water on my face, ran my fingers through my hair and I was ready for the school the first of which was just about twenty-five feet away, across the cobbled road, and the second, a junior basic school, was located about two kilometers away in the adjacent village called Tashiding. The same chores continued till I completed my collegiate education.

On winter holidays, however, my daily routine was different. My mother and I woke up, fried the leftover rice, ate it and left for the forest. If there was no leftover rice, we

fried some dry maize or soyabean, carried them with us to eat as we walked down about one hour through the narrow footpath to reach the forest. The forest was a primary or virgin forest and it was well-endowed with varieties of plants, vegetables, tubers, mushrooms and fruits but we needed to go farther and deeper into it for fodder as the winter season advanced.

We would be back home when the sun was clearly visible in the sky, which took time because of a very tall mountain on the east blocking the morning sun. After eating our meal, we washed our utensils with ash, paddy husks or the sand from the nearby stream. And, we used the corn years for scrubbing the utensils. Then we carried dry cow dung to the field, spread them, and prepared the terraces for maize cultivation. We had no concept of chemical fertilizers then but the high yielding Japanese variety paddy was known, albeit we never sowed them because its grains were large and not tasty. As pesticides, we used to spray DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) powder. We got the powder in small amounts from the health department workers who went around the houses in the village spraying the same with the help of a manually pumped sprayer strapped on their back. Unlike today, the terraces in those days were left to recuperate for at least two months in the winter after paddy was harvested. We grew just two main crops in a year, maize as the summer crop and paddy as the winter crop. As subsidiary crops, maize used to be accompanied with long beans, cucumber, ginger, lady's finger, etc. and paddy used to be accompanied with soyabean on the terrace walls and black and brown lentils on the terrace edges. On the lands where no irrigation was possible, maize was planted as summer crop and finger millet and lentils as the main winter crops. The first harvest ritual, called *nuwagi* in Limbu language, was however organized only for paddy and not for other crops, not even for maize and millet. Paddy was offered along with the stem to our ancestors, forest deities, and to the creator of the universe called Tagera Ningmaphuma. This was usually done by the phedangma, or the Limbu shaman, but if he was not available, senior clan members knew how to make the offering of the new crop to various deities.

Come evening and I often needed to go and call a phedangma for my ailing younger brother. The distance between my home and his was hardly 150 meters but there were two haunted places I needed to cross. One was very near my home and the other one was near his. The haunted place near my home was known for the occasional

sightings of *murkhutta*, a skeletal ghost which was so tall that its head touched the sky and the one near his home was known for *mandre bhoot* or a ghost that came rolling down in the form of a bamboo mat. I heaved a sigh of relief if the phedangma asked me to wait because I didn't like to pass through those two haunted places alone. When I passed through those places alone at night, I felt goose bumps on my back and I invariably walked fast looking back over my shoulders just to make sure that no ghost was following me.

This stage of my life was almost completely governed by nature. I slept when it was dark and got up when the rooster indicated that it was time to get up. I actively participated, as the shaman's assistant, in the collection of materials for erection of a temporary place of worship, and accompanying the shaman in his ritual dances. Once he was possessed and instructed the audience around him what should be done next, he would return to this world. The temporary altar would be dismantled soon after the ritual was over and in no time, there would be any trace of it. In the death rituals, however, dismantling of the altar was a serious matter and it followed a *mundhum* or an oral tradition. In the Limbu tradition that we followed, there was no permanent place of worship and there was no waste creation. Even the old and discarded torch light or the radio were used for various purposes. The used and rusted nails were also straightened and reused. There were no plastics then.

When I started going to a town school, I was just about 11 years old. I covered a distance of about fourteen kilometers every single day, except on Sundays. I walked barefoot till I reached the ninth standard, but that was not an issue. In fact, I would have loved to continue walking barefoot even after reaching the ninth standard because the shoes I wore after reaching the ninth standard were so uncomfortable that I opened them soon after I started the narrow footpath leading down to my home. The shoes were always one size larger so that I could continue to wear them even when my feet would grow. But I often had blisters in my feet that made walking with shoes more a pain than a pleasure. The shoes would also get wet due to the overgrown grass on the footpaths.

What changed majorly after I started going to a town school was my exposure to communism when I was just about 14 years of age. I joined the 'auxiliary group' classes every Sunday afternoon with others who were mostly my cousins and

classificatory uncles. One Ramashankar Prasad came from the town to teach us about Marxism and Leninism. The evening classes were held in the house of one Relon Lepcha, the eldest son of once perhaps the richest man in the village. In a period of about one year or so after I became a member of the auxiliary group, I had begun to think more about social and economic issues of our society than about the shaman or the ghost. I think I still felt scared of the ghost if I was passing through a burial ground or haunted place alone at night, but I pretended not to be scared. After all, I was a comrade and my ideals for fighting against exploitation and suppression were too important to worry about ghosts. It was only after I became an adult and fully understood what the Marxists in my village were doing, I gradually dissociated myself from the Communist Party of India (Marxist). When the Left Front, representing a number of left parties, formed the government in West Bengal in 1977, with Jyoti Basu as its chief minister, I left the party for good.

My association with nature began to weaken when I started going to the college which was located farther away from my school by about two kilometers. I not only began to think critically of the state government and the CPI (M) party but often made my opinions known to anyone who cared to listen to me. I still went to the forest during the winter vacation, but more to collect firewood for the rainy season than fodder for animals. Collecting firewood needed a *dao* and an axe. While the forest guards would at times excuse a grass-cutter, they never excused someone with an axe and *dao*. But I had grown big enough to know the ways of the forest and how to evade the forest guards. In some winters, instead of collecting firewood from the nearby forest I felled some live trees from our own land, cut them into pieces and carried them home in a bamboo wicker basket. If I loved to read comics when I was younger I began to read Marxist literature. All this drew me away from the activities that were directly associated with nature.

Yet I was one of the saddest and angriest persons when the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation, established soon after the Left Front government was formed, clear-felled the primary forest below our village in 1978 and instead planted teak saplings. This resulted in cracks in our paddy fields and houses, and even sinking was visible in some places. However, not many villagers agreed with me when I argued that our lands and houses were cracking because of the clear-felling of the trees below our village. The reason for their disagreement was not so much as

me having left the ruling party as it was their loyalty to the newly formed government, as some of them were direct beneficiaries because their party was the biggest coalition partner in the government. The terrace walls not only began to require frequent repairs, but the crops also began to be affected with more insects around. Yet the villagers did not rise in revolt.

In early 1980s, the villagers had started to grow some cash crops like cucumber, ladies' finger, chilies etc. while others had switched over from staple crops to floriculture. The cultivation of gladioli was particularly profitable, as its propagation was easily scalable and the cultivators could sell the cut flowers as well as the bulbs. The streams that used to have some water even in the dry winter began to be totally dry because the upstream villagers extracted every drop of water for irrigating their flower beds or vegetable gardens. The downstream villagers had no alternative but to buy polythene pipes to draw water from farther distances in the upstream areas. As a result, the streams began to be clotted with polythene pipes, much resembling the water pipes in the drains of urban areas.

Some of the irrigated lands began to be abandoned, as paddy cultivation was no longer worth all the hard work and expenditure on food and wage of the labourers. I also noticed the change in the labour exchange system between my school and university days. During my school days there were two forms of labour exchange: *parma* where two families worked on each other's land and *hoori* where several families worked on their lands by rotation. Both the forms of labour exchange were reciprocal and did not involve any cash payment, although they needed to be provided food once during mid-day. Such forms of labour exchange virtually stopped in the 1980s and it was replaced by a system of payment in cash. There were two main reasons for this change. One, many youths who participated in such reciprocal exchange of labour had now begun to go to schools and colleges, thereby being available only during the lean agricultural season in the winter. Two, the school drop-out or illiterate youths of the village went out of the village to work in non-agricultural sectors like infrastructure and security services, which made it difficult for them to return to their village even during the peak agricultural seasons. Where they were available, they demanded food, drink and a much higher wage than generally paid to them. All this made cultivation cost-ineffective, leading to abandonment of cultivable lands in the village.

In the meantime, my village began to see more houses built along the old cobbled mule road that was made motorable. With more and more water scarcity in the town, many town people began to settle in the villages where the water crisis was not as severe as in the town. Soon, the number of houses doubled up, which led to the drying up of the old spring sources of water much earlier in the winter than before. Sporadic conflicts were also reported over "stealing" of water by one family or the other.

By early 1980s, water had already become a scarce resource to be controlled and even weaponized by those who owned the perennial sources of water. The maintenance of the houses and terraces had also become increasingly challenging. More and more men were in the habit of drinking factory-made alcoholic beverages and smoking cigarettes. While chewing tobacco was quite common during my school days, smoking was rare except by elderly men and women, but they always smoked tobacco wrapped in corn ears.

Why am I making you listen to my story of growing up in a village located in former Bhutan? What messages am I trying to pass on to you students in particular? What is your "take away" from my story?

Well, first of all, my story may inspire some youths of humble background like me to be achievers. We all need inspiration to do something big. If I, in spite of such a background and average intelligence, could become a vice-chancellor of a central university, a member of advisory boards of several national institutions, editorial board member of several international journals of repute, etc. there is no reason why you can't be one like me. You might not choose to become what I became, but you might achieve something even bigger in your own areas of choice, be it poetry, fiction, music, sports, academics, and what have you.
Secondly, my story also in a way highlights the need to reorient our Humanities and Social Sciences to engage with issues like climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation, as the matter has been festered for too long. The elected governments give only lip-service to the warnings by the scientists on climate change, although their claims are not always based so much on science as on scientism, or a belief that science alone, with the help of its so-called scientific methods, can achieve

full grasp of human reality and solve human problems like poverty, disease, inequality, pollution, and food safety. However, science alone is not adequate to understand human intricacies; we need a multi-disciplinary approach to understand them. Actually, as the postmodernists argue, if science has solved some problems, it has also created other problems. While we show our concern about the health of Mother Earth, write articles and present papers at conferences on the theme we should also do our bit to help the earth regain her health by making local or community level interventions. It was, for instance, our choice to use the DDT as pesticide in our village. We could have also stopped, or at least tried to stop, the clear-felling of the primary forest below our village by using the political capital we had. The setting of the forest on fire after clear-felling and extraction of the trees was also something that we could have perhaps prevented. But we did nothing to stop what we perhaps could.

Writing an essay in 2020 titled "The Great Unraveling" Joelle Gergis of the ANU Fenner School of Environment and Society makes a passionate argument that simply being concerned about the dying planetary system is not enough. We need to grieve it like the death of someone in our own family and respond to it emotionally, using our emotion as the new tool or resource to fight against what she calls "sociopathic disregard for all life on Earth". She also mentions how psychologists are willing to acknowledge "personal and collective grief" as the only way out of the mess we are in.

Finally, a word about climate change. Scientists have told us for too long that climate change is responsible for global warming, which in turn is held responsible for numerous other negative changes on the earth. But is climate change the only reason for global warming? Are there no other factors responsible for global warming? Are we not abdicating ourselves, our community, and our government's role in global warming, as my story of growing up has indicated? Is the climate change debate not wasting a lot of its time and energy on the politics of blame game between the northern and southern countries? I think it is time we from Humanities and Social Sciences start scrutinizing our own role, our societal role, our governments' role and start taking corrective steps if we want to stop pushing our planet towards a certain death. We should stop waiting for climate change experts to bring down global warming. After all, such experts depend on the elected governments for

implementation of the policies whereas the elected governments need to provide energy, the biggest polluter, to their citizens no matter how.

Thank you for your patient hearing.

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