



HELVETAS
BHUTAN



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STORIES from the MOUNTAINS

BY HUMANS OF THIMPHU

Introduction



Stories from a country where children sing and pray “Bang Dekyid Nyima Sharwa Sho” every morning with hope and pride, competing voices with each other as the yellow-orange white dragoned flag waves high in the sky.

Placed along the Wang-Chhu river with more than 114K+ humans residing is the capital city of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Protected by Genyen Jakpa Milan, Genyen Domchangpa and Ap Yartsaba, the city stands on the elevation of 2320m under the guidance and protection of His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.



About Humans of Thimphu

Humans of Thimphu is a storytelling space that highlights the lives of a wide scope of individuals that makes Thimphu the stunning and joyful city that it is. Our team focuses on telling stories from people that cover a wide range of amazing, successful, happy, inspiring, unique, sad, failure and relatable themes. We aspire to build a storytelling community that can share the spark of inspiration and bring positive changes in our society.



Pema Wangmo | 25

 Soe, Thimphu

“I studied in many different schools, both here in the village and in Southern towns until class 8. By then, most of my 5 siblings had either married and left home or were too young to help so I dropped out to help mom at home. My parents divorced when I was 6 and I presently live with my mother, stepfather, and one of my brothers. We have 5 dogs with us, they take care of our house and keep us company.

My favorite chore is herding cattle. We have around 30 cows and yaks. I enjoy taking them to the grazing lands and spending time there. I also like singing songs. I was married once but it didn't work out. I have a 2-year-old son. My mother was there for me when I separated from my husband with a baby in my arms. My brother had moved back home after separating from his own wife at the time too. He has a child too who is in class 2. We look after the kids as a family. I even go to the school to cook food at times because students' guardians have to take turns cooking the school meals.

There are only 9 students in the school at present. When I was studying, there were 15 students and 1 teacher. I think the decrease in number is because families are now sending their kids to other schools down south for better education. But the local school has 2 teachers now so I think education is good here too. I want to educate my son at this school when he gets old enough to start going to school. If he doesn't like studies, I think I will enroll him into the monk body. I say this because if kids cannot excel at studies it becomes difficult to get a job but as a monk, you always have a way of life and livelihood.

I don't regret not studying because I know why I left. I also like it here at the village and hardly leave to go to towns. I only go to Thimphu once a year for a family ritual. It is usually my mother who goes shopping if necessary.

I think it is okay if you cannot stay at school for any reason. Helping your parents, you can lead a very self-sustained life in the village and it is not too bad. After all, I think it is a person's heart that matters the most. And you can cultivate that anywhere."



Kencho Dorji

Gup (Elected head of Sub-district)

 Soe, Thimphu

“I first served as a gup at the age of 24 and now it’s been 22 years in the service. At the time, we didn’t have an election; rather we were selected based on our capabilities. Soon, the selection process was done through slipping cards with our names into a box and now, there is the electronic voting machine. Everything we need, His Majesty provides, which has significantly made our lives easier, despite our gewog being the smallest amongst 25 in the country. We have every facility such as electricity and mobile network except for the motor roads. But our livelihood is mainly derived from livestock and horse rearing so, at the moment, roads aren’t a serious need.

Furthermore, the Johmolhari trek in our village is very popular which brings endless tourists. At the same time, the covid had impacted our livelihood and still continues to do so, not only in our small village but the country as a whole. Regardless, our government is doing their best to bring about development, and I have hopes that things will turn out better.

Our village is located at a very high altitude. During the rainy season, the road gets ruined and during winter, the road would be blocked by snow and ice. It was only out of necessity, that every often a few yaks had to be slaughtered. Only after His Majesty allowed us highlanders to cultivate cordyceps in 2004, were we able to reduce the butchering of yaks. Even the educated youth are hesitant to carry out such acts, and most of them have abstained from eating meat.


If there is no income in our hands, we cannot stay idle. What others eat, we cannot savor and where others go, we cannot join. But now I can see so many changes in our village that have benefited us a lot. The king's benevolence has not only allowed us to survive, but our children can get education as well.

Thus, I'm serving to the best of my ability as a Gup and bridging the gap between government and people. I advise others to also work on their potential and give back to the country, King and the government. Every place has its own issues, even modern cities, so it's only natural that there be some community issues here too. We made makeshift stretchers to carry the sick, now we have hospitals at a walking distance.

Parents would advise us that unless we become a parent ourselves, we will never understand the real struggles and it's something you should heed to. I question myself whether they will repay their parents for their years of taking care of them. Apart from academics and manners, a parent's advice is also crucial."



Tshering Yangzom

 Soe, Thimphu

“As children, we had to walk all the way from Soe to our school in Drugyal, often camping on the road for days. Sometimes we would be left in the care of other people in the lowland while our parents returned. Getting an education was tough because our villages at that time didn’t have schools. Often, we stayed alone in huts made by our parents throughout the schooling years. Our parents would parcel groceries and if not, we’d buy from the store. The debts would then be paid by our father during his visits.

After 10th grade, I stopped studying. Instead I worked as a non-formal education teacher for 12 years. A parent’s guidance and advice is the best gift a child could receive. It literally paves the road that they would later take in life. My family wasn’t well-off, so my father sold dairy products and clothes he brought from Phuentsholing. Some days, we had to sell our yaks. My parents suggested I continue my studies but I had younger siblings to think about. I never got married, so not having a family of my own and working full time now is an advantage when it comes to looking after my parents.





My elder sister passed away due to appendicitis. She liked dressing up and putting on make-up. I'd visit her at the hospital and the first thing she said to me after the meeting was that I looked very pretty that day. She told me to help Apa (father) with the laundry, and that if we never see each other again, she asked me to look after her children. Two days later, she passed away at 4 am in the morning and that was her last wish. To this day, I am unmarried even though I'm 41. Her son is in college now and the twin girls are in high school.

In 2016, one of the BNEW officers persuaded non-formal educators to attend some workshops. I participated in the Gup (Village headperson) election, a decision molded from the dynamic encouragement of BNEW workers. The result however, did not favor me, so I went back to teaching. In the next election, I participated as a Mangmi (Community Representative). The Gedrung (Gup's Clerk) had already registered my name. My family supported the idea but my parents were against it. They believed that a Mangmi's responsibility wasn't easy: from being socially active along with the possibility of conflicts with others. Regardless, I got through the 1st round. In the 2nd round, I was up against my own azha, my mother's cousin. She wanted me to withdraw just to avoid hostility. Surprisingly the final result came out and I won Mangmi's post.

The responsibility is different now, there is enormous pressure. I have to oversee all official works of the Gup during his absence and issues in the community. Although I'm a woman, people's perspectives have changed. Gender isn't an indicator for your performance, it's your effort that matters the most, and I will make my own difference serving as a Mangmi."



Gomchen Cheng Nga la | 63

 Soe, Thimphu

“I came to conduct Rimdro (religious rituals) for two households here in Soe Village. When I arrived, the community here didn’t have a single religious personnel to conduct rituals. Being a gomchen (Lay-monk) I had to do my best to help them—so I stayed back. Serving the community here, days turned to weeks and now it’s almost a month. I live at Jang go thang, Paro in a Tshamkhang (Hermit’s residence). I am 63 years old.

I became a monk at 5, and till the age of 36, I continued the life of a monk. In the monastery, I served various posts. In my early 20s, I went to make Toms (ritual cake) for a household in my village. Astonished, the head Lama (Abbot) asked who the Toms were made by. After the people confirmed that it was me, he informed me that the Tango Monastery also needed a Tom maker, and if I was interested in joining Tango to study.


Then, I informed my head at my dratshang (Monks Resident); he encouraged me to go to Tango if that was what I really wanted. After that, I studied for 4 years at Tango. Due to my past karma, I couldn't continue as a monk. I became a gomchen and went to Samtse as a teacher at a dratshang. After some time at Samtse, I went to study astrology at Trongsa and spent two years there. I got married after a few years, and now I have two children who have grown and become independent. After I separated from my wife, I decided to lead a solitary life and entered into a Tshamkhang.

When I got the call to go to Soe, before starting the long arduous journey, I prayed that whatever I do benefits the people there. I try to do all the Rimdros that come from my astrology, and we have a head lama here who does the other Rimdros. Compared to the olden days, we now have a road till Shana. But it was hard for me to walk due to old age. For others it takes a day, but I took two days to reach here. I think it's not a sign that the road is long but a sign that life is getting shorter.

I am going back tomorrow and I am happy as I have done my duty in helping the people here.”



Tashi Lhamo

 Soe, Thimphu

“I was the Tshogpa (elected village representative) for 5 years in the local government and I got elected again in the third term by my people’s support. The inspiration to step forward as a woman leader came from a program I attended by BNEW whose director is a lady whom I knew very well. They informed me that the number of women participants in any activity is always low, so we should focus on maximizing women’s potential. The work on training and educating women was carried out before the second term in 2016 to encourage women’s leadership.

As a child, there were no schools in our village, so we had to go to Drugyal to study from where I completed grade 8. During the time, it was mandatory for at least one daughter of the house to stay back home, and help with the chores allowing other daughters to study along with the sons. So my brother and I—being the youngest daughter—were fortunate enough to be able to study while my 2 elder sisters were kept back at home. In Drugyal, we often had to change our houses, living with people we knew since there were no boarding facilities.

The cordyceps collection wasn't popular at the time though we still heard about it, leaving people with hardly any income. Regarding this situation, His Majesty the Fourth King granted us, highlanders, the permission to collect and sell cordyceps via auctions both locally and internationally. The sudden flow of money immensely benefited the community. The changes were significant, children could now attend school instead of working in the fields, increasing the number of yearly admissions. People now own lands and houses in Paro, while earlier families had to share a crowded land.

In 2000, after grade 8, I worked as a telephone operator for two years in Lingzhi. My work was to listen to the message and write it down on the typewriter, file the letters and then hand it over to the delivery man from Bhutan Post. The delivery man brought the letters back, and then, I'd note down the receiver's address and deliver it to them again. After the end of the contract, I got married to my current husband who works in tourism.

BNEW gave us women a lot of encouragement to step forward. With the training they provided, we were able to confidently step into a male dominated field to strive for leadership. When I am done with work, I go back home to my kids and husband in Thimphu. This term's candidates in our village are almost all women with 3 Tshogpas and a Mangmi, so I believe that we can make notable changes or a significant impact in society within these 5 years."



Pema Tenzin

 Soe, Thimphu

“From 2003 to 2010, I served as the Gewog Tshogpa (Elected representative) without any payment but it gave me exemption from the mandatory labor tax. Thereafter, I quit participating in the community elections due to the feeling of inadequacy in my own level of literacy. Moreover, I wanted to pass on the opportunity to those more capable. However, there was still a vacant post in Tshogpa’s seat, under the Chiwog Dotabi thang and eventually, I decided to fill the post again. The payment was less and so was the workload. From 2011 onwards, I got fair payment. As a young man, I served the government and later on I had plans such as becoming a porter for the tourists which is not impossible now due to the outbreak of covid. With old age, working in construction sites took a toll on my body. Thus, the only option left was to become a Tshogpa again.

During my service, we had to travel places through rough roads which left me with sore knees. Back in the days, the lack of cellphone services forced us to venture out during the night to pass on information. Now it’s possible with just a phone call. When people get bedridden, we’d have to carry them on a stretcher made out of wood, and camp the night out due to the great distance even to the nearest hospital. The post, however high the standard, did not get me much salary.

The importance of education didn't hit me as a child, so all I could study was till 2nd grade. But now, I am really learning its essence as everything has to be done with the aid of education. All I thought of doing was combing out the fur from the cattles and making thread out of it. If I had at least studied till 6th grade, I would have been able to do some of the basics myself instead of relying on someone who can read and write without any hesitation. If someone comes forward asking to educate me, I'm still interested to learn. I can read and write basic words but often I feel like I'm missing something. The Dzongkha Yargay Tshogdu's head requested the Dzongda, if each Tshogpa could have a computer.

Our role encompasses helping out the community people. Once, during a visit to the hospital in Thimphu, the prescription in my hand was seen by one of the Dessups in the area and without any hesitation, he guided me to the place I needed to go. Similarly, my duty is to be prepared in helping the people without holding back. Now we have electricity in our village and helicopters for medical emergencies all because of the government of the People's Democratic Party.

My wife got sick, and I had to use the helicopter service paying 25,000 for each ride. While she was admitted in the hospital, the election came up leaving me no choice but to come by the chopper again. The medical officer in my village was absent during the time, and thus my wife could not be observed and termed as critical enough to be given their flight service for free. So we had no choice but to pay for the ride. We hope that this rule will be changed soon, since one's illness can never be predicted. After the vote, I was worried if I would win, if not I wouldn't be able to recover the heavy payment made for the flight services. By god's grace however, I won the votes and became the village Tshogpa again."



Tashi Norbu | 57

 Soe, Thimphu

“When I was young, life in the highlands was plagued by an unfair system of rich folks who owned all our yaks; we were merely caretakers who got almost nothing in return. They lived in Paro, owning lands there and hired us to raise the yaks in the tough terrains and weathers of highlands. In exchange, they gave us food rations. The produce from yaks were all taken by the owners. The poor people had hardly any rights, and their lives depended on the moods of their masters; we could be fired from the services anytime, and sometimes given very little rations to sustain.

My parents were poor, and had nine children. Raising us through this system seemed like a nightmare now—there was never enough food for the family.

My wife had a daughter from her previous marriage, and we were raising yaks for the owners from the lower lands. They came to inspect a few times a year, and took all the cheese and butters, leaving nothing for us. That kind of life didn't feel unfair until our daughter fell ill one day. She suffered for two days, and all the while, we were in fear of leaving the camp to take her to the hospital in town. The owners could take offense, and may even take the yaks away from us.

When the child got very sick, we decided to take her to the hospital on our back. However, she didn't make it through the arduous journey.

This left us in deep suffering, and triggered us to leave this unfair life behind. We moved to the lower grounds and found a place to start a new life. There was no one living here except for an old couple. The land on which we built our house belonged to the state. We could be evicted any time, and this was always a fear.

After a few years, the notice for us to move finally came. I started visiting the government offices with letters, and we were allowed to continue staying for a few more years. Soon, the development and reforms came to our village.

My family was given the legal ownership of the land we lived on, and life hereon was much better. To fund my children's education, I started with one horse and became a porter for tourists. Slowly, I could buy more horses and put all my children through high school.

We informed our Gups (Local Government leaders) about the practice of yak owners and the exploitation that poor people go through. The matter was taken up to higher authorities. His Majesty ordered the ban of citizens from owning any yaks unless they were a resident in the highlands, giving our people the right to own and reap the benefits of raising their own yaks. Furthermore, His Majesty's most precious gift to us is the access to harvest cordyceps which fetches good income, massively improving the lives of the highlanders."



Phub Dem | 33

 Soe, Thimphu

“I was already serving as a Tshogpa before. I studied at Lingzhi as there were no schools at Soe at that time. There were a total of 80-90 students during my time. It was a boarding school, so I stayed in the dorm. I’d say that the challenge we had at that time was going home and the journey back to school. We had to cross hills and the journey was tough. I would come home only during vacations so I used to miss my family a lot.

As a student, I was an average performer but I enjoyed learning dzongkha. I discontinued school after grade 5, as my mother was alone with my younger brother at home. It fell on me to help her, and I left school. My father passed away but long before that, he divorced my mother and went separate ways. During my mother’s time, we had to earn our living through our yaks. There wasn’t any collection of cordyceps as we have now. After leaving school, I spent my time herding the yaks we had.

Once, I did have a heart of going back to school but the thought of leaving my mother and younger brother stopped me. However, I could read and use numbers, and those skills helped me compete and serve my community as a Tshogpa.

I married a long time back and back at my time, we didn't have any hospitals to give birth. The nearest place we had to go was Paro. Women here gave birth in a traditional manner, but now everyone goes to the hospital. Although we have a Basic Health Unit (BHU) here, everyone prefers the hospital at Paro. Since it's quite far and entails traveling on foot, pregnant women start moving to Paro early, and remain there for the delivery.

I recently went to Thimphu to attend a workshop. It was for three days, and taught mainly about the duties and responsibilities of the local government leaders. We have a road till Shana and from there we have to walk to get home. It is my 4th month since I got elected as the Tshogpa. I was already pregnant during the election campaign, but I still traveled to share my manifestos with the people. My father was a Tshogpa too. Just after a day of getting elected, he passed away. There was no one who wanted to take the role and hence, it made me compete for the post instead.

When I competed in 2016, I was the only candidate. It was a vote of Yes or No. Almost all had voted yes. I was around 25 years old. There was no gender discrimination as such here, but often women would be discouraged to compete for roles like local governments in Bhutan. Most common mindset was 'Amtshu gi dhi bay mitshu' (Women can't do it)."



Karma Dorji | 50

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“My first wife died and left me with a son. He is 28 years old now, and living as a monk. From my second wife, I have two kids: the older one completed high school, and the younger is in grade ten. When I was a child, I learned Dzongkha from my parents and never had any formal education. I have been serving as a Tshogpa for the past eight years and recently got re-elected. Apart from this, I’m also in the Cordyceps business for extra income.

My lack of education often hampers my work as I am not skilled in English. So, I tell youths to invest in their studies and learn as much as they can. Honestly, I never had any great interest in politics but I wanted to serve my country. That’s how I ended up taking part in the local government election. Although I have never faced any major issues, at times it is difficult as everyone wants their needs to be prioritized. As a Tshogpa, I work to communicate with people about the village problems and the plans that are implemented to solve them.

There have been many changes in my village since I was first elected. Back then, people lacked awareness on the importance of sanitation and hygiene. Now we have electricity and running water in every household. Another major change is the increased women's participation in the local government. It is important for women to step up and take equal roles in representing the population, and I always motivate them to take part in politics.

When covid struck, our income from the tourism industry was greatly hampered. Tourists used to visit our village and we could earn a good deal of money by providing them with services such as food and transportation. However, our village did not face any major crisis, and I am happy to say that no one was infected with Covid. The government was kind enough to supply us with vegetables and other rations which were enough to get by. After completing my five years, I plan not to participate again. I am old and have served for a long time. Moreover, there are many youths today who are more knowledgeable; they could take such jobs to serve our village better. I would go back to my village life and look after yaks.

As a Tshogpa and senior citizen, it breaks my heart to see our youths waste their life by indulging in alcohol and drugs. I want them to refrain from such unhealthy habits, and focus on their education and always listen to their parents' advice"



Angay Chencho Pem | 65

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“Compared to the olden days, life here has become comfortable - we have paths and means to bring food and stuff in. We had almost nothing growing up.

I married at the age of 19 and had 3 kids. I have 2 sons now, and one daughter passed away a year ago. She fell ill at night and in the morning she passed away. She was around 30 yrs old and had 2 babies. I look after the babies. We used to live in the same house and the responsibility to raise the kids is mine now. It is difficult and there aren't any nannies. Her father and I watch the kids.


We just put one of them in school. We don't have a lot of yaks like others and Agay (Grandpa) is in the village, looking after them. Phojas (Men) look after the animals. Although the school has a boarding facility right from primary level, we couldn't put my grandchild there.

He doesn't like being with anyone—even his father. That's why I have to be here. They call me Aie (Mother). It's difficult for me to walk back to my village as it takes more than 3 hours for us. I wish for the kid to study and make something of himself.

We have healthcare facilities here, but for childbirth, and other serious treatments, we go to Thimphu. If it is too dire, they also call the helicopter. However, most of the time we go on horseback. Earlier, everything happened here and we had people even die from childbirth. I don't scold the kid so much unless he creates too much trouble for me. The kid knows his mother is dead, but he is strong.”



Pema Tenzin | 21

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“I was born in Mongar, in the far eastern district of Bhutan. My dad was in the Army, and all my childhood, we had to move to different places due to his work. Finally, we settled in Thimphu where I completed my high school education. After grade 12, my marks were pretty decent but somehow, I couldn’t get any government scholarship for college. Dejected, I decided to find a job.

I applied to a few places, and got selected for a position in the cottage and small scale industries (CSI). I was thrilled with the idea of getting paid soon and becoming independent. However, the frequent lockdowns deferred our placement. Finally, after months of waiting, I got selected for Lingzhi. Although the place was far and remote, I was excited to start working.

Walking from Paro, it took us three days to reach here. I never knew a hardship of this scale, where walking a full day through harsh weather and terrain still doesn't guarantee reaching your destination.

However, I love my job here. We help the local community with basic banking services and facilities. In my own way, I'm serving the country in the area of rural development. My younger brother is in grade two. Until he graduates grade 10, I promised to not get married. I want to support my family."



Kinga Choden

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“I teach general education here in Lingzhi Primary School. My profession allows me to learn something new every day. It gives me the inspiration to wake up and make a change in the lives of my students. Initially, I got the opportunity to teach in the east but I exchanged it with another teacher and came here instead. I knew where Lingzhi was; it was a remote place, but I remember it being a picturesque valley with grand mountains from movies and pictures I had seen. I somehow gravitated towards the site.

The first year, I stayed with the principal who was a lady—the only other female teacher at the time. Despite the freezing weather, the people’s warmth made up for it and despite some differences in the way they lived, life in Lingzhi was going well.


When I first arrived here in 2016, the conditions were poor, with no proper staff quarters and electricity, and an unstable phone network. New teachers suffer emotionally and mentally usually in the beginning, but I was here by choice and I didn't go through anything harrowing as such. We too need exposure, so I do wish to visit a different place now. When I'm not engaged with the students, I walk around the valley, exploring on my own. When students leave for the festival holidays, it gets quiet and lonely here. In winter, it's difficult to get fresh vegetables but we collect them from the school greenhouse during summer time. With covid, our school was closed down for a year. We had to print the books and deliver them to our students despite the unfavourable weather and engage them in group chats online.

Students here do fall behind in some areas compared to those in cities due to a lack of public exposure. Their vocabulary would falter leading to difficulty in understanding a concept. Regardless, I know we can and do make a difference in their lives; this is our aim as teachers. The huge difference I saw was that boarding students from the age of 6 learn to take care of themselves. It leaves me feeling both amazed as well as pitiful for them. The seed of independence, unfortunately, is sown in them long before they even get to be a child. Being the only female teacher here, I closely monitor my female students, teaching them about sexual awareness and menstrual hygiene. I plan on going for further studies in the future related to education.

I encourage teachers to give remote places like Lingzhi a try. Anybody can stay in town and make a living, the real challenge lies in making it in a place where even living itself is a test of the will. The difference you can make out here is significant, especially to the students here."



Samdrup | 35

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“My first job was in a TV cable firm where I worked for three years. Unlike today, during my time we didn’t receive any training to work as technicians. We had to learn on the job, and gradually built our skills through experience. In 2006, I joined Bhutan telecom; this time, we received a training of eight days, and I made the most out of them.

After a year, I was transferred to Lingzhi. Today, it takes only two days to reach Lingzhi due to the extension of the road. Back then, it took a minimum of three days to complete the journey.

When I arrived here, I was only 18. The Gewog (sub-district) had only three telephones: one each in the school, Gewog administration office, and a public booth. People were charged Nu.10 for a phone call, and when the machines broke down, it was my job to travel to Thimphu to buy spare parts for repairs. By 2010, 2G mobile phones reached the Gewog. However, they could only be used for making calls with no internet connection.

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Back then, Lingzhi hardly had any people, and I never felt at home. There were times when I took leave from work to go to my village due to extreme homesickness. I would remain there for up to three months at times.

After five years, I was about to get a job transfer. However, I met my wife who was from Lingzhi. Despite coming from two different cultures, we were happily accepted by our families. We have two kids now. My wife is a hard working woman, just like the people of her community. Embracing the hardships and risks, she collects cordyceps every year which adds to our income. It

It has been 13 years since I first arrived in Lingzhi and now this is my home. Although winter can be harsh for us, summer can cast a spell on everybody - such is the beauty of Lingzhi. I could not ask for a better place than Lingzhi where I found family and home.”



Dechen Wangchuk | 21

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“When I graduated High school, I didn’t have any clear goal or ambition. So, when the admission call from the teaching college came through, I joined the Samtse college of education. My only hobby was to travel, and somehow, I realized that traveling is possible in any job. For the next 3 years, I studied hard and even traveled when opportunity presented itself. It was during our teaching practice that Covid happened, and the schools we were placed at were shut down. For the first time, I got drawn to community service, and joining Dessung was on my list. I signed up but there seems to be some reservation from our college since we haven’t graduated yet.

My friends and I joined and completed our training nonetheless, and started serving as Dessups. The schools were still closed and classes were manageable, so I went for border duties. It was an eye opening experience, as my concept of borders was changed completely. In the name of boundaries, there were no walls and fences, and in most places, not even a proper demarcation. Our job was to man the borders and make sure that no one entered or left to prevent COVID influx in the country. After college, I appeared for my civil service examination and on the day of the result, I was working for the National Day celebration. Later, when I got to see the result, I had topped my class. My joy knew no bounds.

As a topper, my only wish was to get placed in a good school to start my career as a teacher. When the District Education Officer (DEO) called, I was told that my option was Lingzhi. This gave a huge push back on my motivation, as Lingzhi Primary school was not where I expected to go—It was remote and far away. I felt dejected, and started considering other career options. Days turned into weeks, and somehow, my mind slowly started accepting this fate. Maybe it was meant to be, and after researching and watching a few movies, I decided to go to Lingzhi.

I called the DEO and this time, I was presented with another option. The second school was in the outskirts of Thimphu but it was modern and closer to civilization—one that didn't include trekking for days like Lingzhi. If I was still that same person before, I'd have jumped at this opportunity, but my mind was already made up.


I met up with a few teachers from Lingzhi at Thimphu and inquired about the preparation and life in the highland. When the time to leave neared, I started preparing my body for the long trek by jogging and exercising.

I left with the teachers and staff of Lingzhi school, and started our journey from Paro. It took a whole day of walking to reach Soe Gewog, where we rested for a day, before setting off for Lingzhi. The hardest part of the journey had only begun now. Crossing mountains and high passes, I faced difficulty breathing and was scared of getting altitude sick; fortunately, none of that happened.

Lingzhi Primary school was getting upgraded to a lower secondary school, and teachers were in a shortage here. I teach Geography and English here and love my job, though it's challenging. The students in the school have poor grasp of the English language, though they can excel in other subjects. Seeing that, I am determined to work hard and ensure that my students learn English well and are prepared to face the world beyond these mountains and villages.”



Dhendrup | 78

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“I was born and raised here in Zomlithang, and I never got married. We were 5 siblings and now, my eldest brother is my only living sibling. I stay with my brother’s grandchildren. I never got any formal education; in fact the only education I knew was Yak herding. Growing up, the only dream we ever had was to get warm clothes and meals on time. Until I was 30, I never stepped outside my village. The only time I could really travel was to procure rations. I did go to Bodhgaya for pilgrimage once.


The good weather in a place like ours brings joy and making a living gets easier. Lately, I realized that aging is a depressing thing. Often, I switch between the feelings of existential crisis and also being grateful for being alive.

I have heard about the corona virus and how infectious it is. But I haven’t seen and heard of people here getting it. We were leading a normal life, though some people were suffering from flu. However, the livelihood of our people were affected due to the absence of tourists.

I don’t have any advice as such but I think if one can pursue education, it is always good for them. Even if one cannot pursue higher education, they can still start a small business or do some agriculture work.”



Tandin Tshewang

 Lingzhi, Thimphu

“After high school, I took a diploma in community health. My first posting was in Lingzhi Primary Health Centre (PHC). The first few months I found it hard to adjust to rural life. The biggest change was the weather conditions of Lingzhi and the lack of motor roads. Most places in Bhutan had roads, and hence this is what sets places like Lingzhi apart from others.

After a few months, I started adapting and even came to like the place. Compared to the urban areas, the nature and environment were serene here. However, the biggest obstacles were getting food and other necessities. It takes anywhere from two to five days to get one’s food supplies from the nearest road point. Due to the harsh weather, not many varieties of vegetables and food were available.

During my arrival in 2018, the government and the community had already initiated campaigns to build toilets. A few years before, due to the remoteness of the place, people did not feel the need to have clean toilets. As health workers, it fell on us to support the initiative of the government by raising awareness. My predecessors had done well, and by the time I arrived, 90 % of the households had pit toilets. However, more work needed to be done. The pit toilets were notorious for spreading diseases through flies. We created awareness on having covers to prevent flies, and it helped people to understand.

Many households started installing modern toilets, and the government gave full support to the people. All the building materials that are not locally available including timbers, were provided by the government - free of cost. The people only had to bear the transportation cost for the materials from the nearest road points. This brought enormous changes in improving the hygiene and sanitation of the Lingzhi valley.

The population in Lingzhi is scarce and for a newcomer, civil servants such as the teachers become your sole friends. However, during the school breaks, health workers have to remain in the village and it gets very lonely sometimes.”



Phub Thinley | 87

 Naro, Thimphu

“I was born and raised in Chendebji, Trongsa. During my time, there were no public schools. At 15, I started serving Her Royal Majesty the Late Gyelyum Phuntsho Choden. A year later, I came to Dechencholing palace as Tozey (apprentice). The palace was surrounded by brown Oaks and paddy fields. It was while serving in the palace that I traveled to Naro Gewog and met my wife. I was already 37 by then. During those days, there were only four households in Naro Gewog.

After the completion of Thimphu - Trongsa highway, I decided to resign and settle down with my family in Naro. For nine years, I served as Gup (Elected sub-district head). After that, I was appointed as the Rig-sungpa (village Forester) for 16 years; the role, though not as same as a Forest Ranger entailed looking after the forest and its animals, and preventing illegal Cordyceps collection. I am 87 years old now and my son took the role of Forester after my resignation.

My biggest achievement as a Gup could be in improving the tourism in the Gewog. I'd encourage people to render their service to the tourists, and it helped a lot in terms of generating some income for the community. Over the years, my wife and I had seven children, but three of them succumbed to some unknown illness and improper births. During those days, there was no hospital in the entire Thimphu Dzongkhag. Later, a BHU (Basic Health Unit) was established in Langjophakha and slowly more Hospitals were introduced. My wife died at the age of 52. Nowadays, people are lucky to be parents as their newborns can receive all the important medical care."



Zomba Lhamo | 33

 Naro, Thimphu

“Growing up, our village didn’t have electricity and roads. I have 9 siblings. My parents were Yak herders and they even made their living by collecting medicinal plants and Cordyceps. My parents started collecting Cordyceps when I was in 10th grade. Once, I did think about quitting school to assist my parents with cordyceps. But then I had second thoughts. I realized that Education was important. We cannot rely solely on collecting Cordyceps alone. My parents supported us to study from whatever they made from the Cordyceps auction. Cordyceps helped the highlanders to generate a good income. Soon, we had solar power but it relied heavily on the weather. Now, we have stable electricity and a new farm road; It feels like a big change in Naro Gewog.

As a child, I used to be attracted to the life in the towns, especially the electricity and the plenty of shops they had. I was good at studies but English was a tough subject for all of us. After completing highschool, I got married and for 5 years I was a homemaker. I gave birth to our child and In 2019, I started working as a Non Formal Education instructor in Naro Gewog. To me, it was a homecoming from the city. As an NFE instructor, we teach people based on their convenience with time.

During winter all the people would migrate to Paro, and I have to move with them as well to continue our lessons. In Paro, I rent a house and an empty space for classrooms. In summer, back in the village I go door-to-door for the lessons. Being a woman, it's really difficult to travel sometimes. I receive different varieties of students. Some are dropout students from class 6, some are former monks, some villagers and I have a student who is 60 years old. I feel happy that I am serving my village and the community I was brought up in - It's an opportunity. NFE helps a lot of those who stopped studying before and those who never went to school.

Now some of my students are Tshogpa and even Mangyup. I feel proud when I see my students taking leadership responsibilities after completing the NFE course. Initially, some people didn't even know the alphabet. Now, they can even read and write, and some are shaping the narratives of our communities as local government leaders.”



Jigme Namgyal | 24

 Naro, Thimphu

“I was born and raised in Naro. I have 3 siblings - 2 younger brothers, and an elder sister. I didn't go to school and I work as a farmer in my village, collecting cordyceps. I lost my father at a young age and have been raised by my mother. Our land has been a gift from His Majesty and it has helped us immensely.

Nowadays it's very difficult to buy even a small plot of land and I am extremely grateful to His Majesty for providing my family with 13 decimals of land on which we have built a home. From a young age, I was taking care of the Yaks and have been raised with them. We didn't even have enough food since there were many of us at home. Now there is a vast difference compared to a life I knew as a child. We couldn't even go to Thimphu and Paro easily in the olden days but now, it is much easier.

I strongly feel that young, educated individuals should be more proactive and participate in the local elections. For people like us, it is difficult to participate due to our educational qualifications. I go and collect cordyceps every year, even when the availability is limited. I spend a month picking cordyceps since it is the time allotted by the government to prevent exhausting this precious resource.

COVID-19 has really impacted my livelihood. My main source of income Cordyceps allowed me to earn money, but with the pandemic, there was a substantial decrease in sales. However, I have noticed an increase in sales last year as compared to when the pandemic first started, and am hoping that it generates more income this year as well.

My life is much better now and I feel a lot happier. As someone who struggled a lot in his childhood, I now have enough good food to eat and making a living as well.”



Chokey Wangmo | 25

 Naro, Thimphu

“After graduating from Samtse College of Education in 2020, I came to Naro Gewog as a primary and general teacher. I grew up in Punakha. As a child, I wanted to become a doctor. I was good at studies too. Till class 10, I regularly topped my school. However, I had problems at home. My parents were getting a divorce and it impacted my education when I was in grade 11 and 12. I even wanted to give up on my education after class 12 since I got depressed. After the exams, I got a last-minute call to continue my education at Samtse college.

The movie Lunana: A Yak in a Classroom also really played a huge role in my decision since I could actually see how a teacher can make a difference, especially in a place where no one really wants to go. My aim is to help improve the students to be at par with students from the city. The main source of income for farmers here is collecting Cordyceps. However, whenever there is a shortage of hands, parents take their children out of school to help them. My goal is to prevent that from happening and help the children become lifelong learners and have good jobs and positions.”



Nima Tshering | 26

 Merak, Trashigang

“I’m from Sakteng Gewog and started my schooling there. I wanted to become an army officer but as I grew up, my ambition became more realistic. In middle school, I fell ill and started developing paralysis. My family did everything, from taking me to the city for treatment, to rituals and prayers at home. But nothing seemed to work. The worst of all was the doctors not being able to diagnose my illness. I took a break from school and did everything in my power to keep positive and mentally healthy.

But when I saw my peers return for their school breaks, I was heartbroken. My mental health took a dip; I felt helpless staying indoors all the time, and had numerous episodes of breaking down. Slowly, things changed and I was also recovering. I put my mind into going back to school and completing my high school.

After high school, I got into college and even qualified for a post graduate diploma in education. It’s my 11th month of working as a teacher in Merak.

I could have chosen to work in Sakteng, but there were a number of reasons that dissuaded me. I thought going back to my own village would be followed by different reactions from the people there. There would be expectation of me to participate in the agriculture and other day-to-day chores irrespective of my duty as teacher. Hence, Merak was a better option - it was closer to home and the culture. I could have chosen a school in an urban area - life in Merak and Sakteng has uncountable physical hardships. However, it is also peaceful and my mental states are at its best here.”



Kinzang Chopel | 39

 Merak, Trashigang

“Just before I met my wife in 2006, I’d wrecked my van taxi completely. I went to school only till class 8 and then started working as a conductor. I then went on to drive cars when I got my license. My father loaned me some money to buy a taxi, but I made many mistakes; I started drinking alcohol and got into a few accidents, including the one that left me having to start driving for other people again.

My wife had a shop at her village, and I eventually moved in with her. We only had Nu. 9000 between us but we borrowed money from people and the bank, and bought a Bolero pickup that cost Nu. 8 Lakhs. We were happy together, but we wanted kids. 9 years into our marriage, we still couldn’t conceive. We made countless trips to hospitals in the nearest district center and to the neighboring one, all in vain. We eventually went to the National Referral Hospital in Thimphu in search of an answer; My wife and I sold the Jersey cow her father had gifted us and used the money for the trip. We went to Chimi Lhakhang and prayed for a child.

7 months later, we conceived but had a miscarriage. This time, the hospital diagnosed her with Tuberculosis. This meant she would have to be on TB medication for a year and we didn't try for kids.

However, miraculously, things turned our way soon. We now have 3 children, the oldest of them is 11 years old. The day my daughter was born was the happiest day of my life. I used to drink a lot before her because I felt like I had nothing left to do in life. But I quit the day she was born.

It has been about 6 years since we moved to and settled in Merak. We don't own any land here, everything we have is rented. We run a shop and I drive my pick-up as a taxi. In earlier years, I got many trips due to very few cars here. Now things are different. I didn't like it here the first time we moved because of the weather and the unfamiliar language. But now I prefer this place over any other. What I like most is the sense of community people have here – you always have people to help when you need them.

Merak has developed a lot. The roads are in a really good condition, there are toilets everywhere, and people are more disciplined. The one problem we have now is water-supply. In the winters, water gets frozen. Apart from that, Merak is a pleasant place to live.

My only wish for the future is to be able to make and save enough money for my kids. I hope they study and do well. I couldn't because I was enrolled into school late and felt embarrassed being the oldest but least intelligent kid in class.

There are many people who suffer from infertility issues. I want to tell them to not lose hope—to go to hospitals, go to Lhakhangs. I was depressed when my wife and I couldn't have a baby. In these moments, she always took care of me. Now all I can hope for is to take care of her and our family.



Pema Wangmo

 Merak, Trashigang

“Prior to coming here, I worked at Aman Kora at Gangtey in the tourism sector. After the pandemic, I stayed with my sister at Thimphu. I’m the middle among seven of us in the family. Only my elder sister is illiterate and is a Yak herder. I interned at AmanKora in Thimphu and got selected to work in Gangtey after a three-month trial at Paro. The differences between Merak and Gantey are the language and some parts of the culture. The weather is the same though, both are freezing cold.

I always dreamed of becoming a teacher and I’d never dreamed of joining the tourism industry. In high school, I took science stream so then I wanted to be a nurse. As we grow older, our dreams change and one day you don’t have any at all. But now I am happy with my current profession. Since I couldn’t get into college and asking parents to fund me for college seemed too much to ask, so I just found myself a job and considered it a good decision.

As soon as the tourism business resumes, I plan to go back to my work. One of the happiest memories for me was when I got my grade 10 result. I was at the grazing ground when my sister called me announcing the news. Even when I got a job after twelve, that too is a memory I'll cherish. My sister passed away last year, and because of the covid restrictions I couldn't attend her funeral—this still lingers in my head as a bitter memory. I haven't attended community meetings since I have little knowledge on how local governance works. I leave that to the elders who are better at making decisions that are beneficial to the community.

Before, there was no electricity which made it difficult for us to study, so we used the lantern instead. The pandemic period was very hard for us, especially for His Majesty The King. He traveled extensively and even lost weight carrying the worry of the country on his shoulders. I, among many others, are grateful for the services of our king.

Pre-pandemic, everything was going smoothly and then the pandemic put a halt in the tourism industry. The only relief we got was the King's charity money and I solely relied on it. Apart from that, the Dessung training allowed me to be engaged, while at the same time getting various skill advancement. Boys used to be the only ones who got education while girls were kept back home. But now, it's different. Anybody can do anything and the only one stopping them is their own will. We need to remind our girls that, whatever boys can do, they too can achieve it. They need to be encouraged to come forward.”



Tashi Nidup

 Merak, Trashigang

“My mother passed away when I was in grade 9, after which I dropped out of school. I look after my wife’s kids from her previous marriage who are now in elementary school. I moved here to Merak after marrying my wife. I did dream of becoming a teacher once, but all in vain since I couldn’t even finish high school.

To be able to inspire young minds and shape them into capable individuals seemed a bold yet a meaningful aspiration to have in life. I fractured one of my legs from falling off a tree once and since then, life has become a little difficult. I was cutting the branches and leaves off the tree for the cows’ fodder when I lost my grip and fell, badly hurting my foot. Since I’m only 27, I do wish to do something more with my life, that is if my body permits. The lands in Merak are not fertile enough to be able to yield a significant amount of produce. So we depend on the dairy products from our cattles for our livelihood, from its consumption to sale for income.

Seeing the scarce amount of green produce we get here, the government provided us with green houses but the final harvest was only enough for our own consumption. The rest of my siblings too couldn't finish their schooling and eventually dropped out. My elder brother is now doing business in the capital. Before I got married, I decided to participate in the community election as a Tshogpa but since my Azha too was participating in it, I backed out. Maybe in the future, I plan on coming back during the next election.

In our village, there haven't been any women participants and I believe it is the lack of interest rather than the lack of capability. So if more women step forward and take part in the process of community development, I believe there will be significant progress, both in the community by taking away any gender disparity, and in their personal lives as well. Overall, it will leave room for women empowerment and be a source of inspiration for many children, especially young girls who have always been conditioned to be a homemaker."



Sangay Choden

 Merak, Trashigang

“After high school, I joined Paro College of Education. After 4 years of training I came back home as a teacher. There were no slots in Merak but I still requested to be posted here. I wanted to make changes that would benefit the community. Another reason I came back was my father’s passing which left my sick mother on her own. I, being the eldest, had the obligation to look after her. Being the eldest is a challenge in itself, both at school and at home. I spent most of college looking after my sick father. Later on, I heard he died while on his way to the grazing ground with my little nephew on his back. The same year, my mother had several operations done on her leg.

As a student who studied and now teaches in Merak, I could see a lot of changes. My initial plan was to stay for a year but now it’s been 7 years. As children, we did not have access to social media so it was our teachers that had the most influence on us, which was why I wanted to be one as well. As I started growing and expanding my environment, I had other aspirations in life.

My father's sickness prompted me to dream of becoming a doctor or a nurse. Girls in villages are prone to being married young, which I've never considered important nor have my family ever imposed the idea on me. Everything has its time, and mine at the moment was to focus on my career. Young people shouldn't marry early as they need to experience life before settling down.

During holidays, when I'd come home my parents would be out at the grazing ground most of the time, so as far as I'd like to admit, coming home didn't make any difference. The idea of a warm loving home never really charmed me. Merak is a remote area, but we now have basic facilities. Since ours is the only school here, we have been generously provided help whenever maintenance and renovations are needed by the Gewog Office. For the moment, I've no interest in participating in community elections as I already have a job, but future circumstances might alter my decisions. However, I do wish to pursue Master's studies for now.

Many people don't prefer working in a place located high in the mountains with harsh weather, but for me it's home. The teachers who have decided to work here have not gone back since. If only people gave it a chance, because Merak is a beautiful place, it has so much more to offer than what people assume. The cold weather can be driven away with a hot cup of tea by the fire and heartfelt smiles from the people."



Sangay Wangchuk | 33

 Merak, Trashigang

“After completing high school, I qualified to pursue my education in Samtse College of Education. After four years of college, in 2014 I was placed in Merak as a teacher. Now, it’s my 9th year in the service. I was raised in a remote place where we didn’t have electricity and roads. Growing up, we faced a lot of hardships - I didn’t even own a pair of slippers. Despite that, I managed to complete my education, and the credit goes to my parents. Our school breaks were laden with manual labours such as herding cattles, collecting firewood and manure, and so on.

My wife is a Non Formal Education’s instructor in Merak and we have two children. To become a teacher was a childhood dream; back in the village, teachers were the only professionals we saw and interacted with, and we looked up to them for inspiration. As a result, I was at my happiest when I got into the teaching school. It’s no surprise why I take my job seriously.

Compared to our times, students now are way smarter. Even coming from a countryside like Merak, they can perform well in their studies. On top of that, teachers are given various opportunities to attend seminars and workshops, which helps to develop capacities of both teachers and the children. Even the community's attitude towards education has changed now and we see a lot of support towards the schools by the parents. In the beginning, the residents who were mostly yak herders, migrated to their pasture lands, leaving their children behind. This also led to a lot of school dropouts. It was also hard to reach them to have parent-teacher meetings, but now, that attitude has shifted.

Soon, we will have a boarding facility in our school and though the school doesn't qualify for this facility, it is a special grant after taking in the needs of the community. The change has come after many requests from the teachers here. Later, the officials from WFP came and investigated the situation, and gave permission to change into a boarding school."



Pema Yangzom | 56

 Merak, Trashigang

“As a child, I herded Yaks in Sakteng. At 18, I got married and migrated into a household in Merak. After 2 years, I gave birth to a boy, and now I have six children. The oldest son became a monk and lives away in a Monastery. Back at Sakteng, we could at least grow some grains, but here people hardly farm. We have motor roads now, and it has changed the lives of both people and animals, freeing them from the tiresome travels on foot. The road has shortened our trips to the town. Without it, the mud slacks and leeches were the everyday affairs of a traveler here.

After a few years, electricity also reached the village and now, it’s hard to imagine life without electricity. Most of the residents of Merak and Sakteng are nomads, and for generations they never officially owned any lands. Seeing this as an issue, His Majesty granted lands to every family with legal ownerships. Now, our lives are secure and it’s so reassuring to have ownership of the lands, all thanks to His Majesty.

Our family has around 90 yaks, and it's perfectly common here. However, not every family has pasture lands. So, the yaks are raised in the jungles and mountains far away from the village, and it keeps some family members away too. My grandparents had to divide the pasture land, and by our generation, we didn't even have a patch of land. Other times, we have to pay for the pasture, and even barter them with butters, cheese, and local wines. My family with our 90 yaks have so many hardships finding pastures for them.

Like a beast with horns, it never occurred to me that I could become something in life. Even for my kids, only when I had my third one, I knew about enrolling them to school. It was the order of the government to put them in school, but my kids didn't want to go. I even went to beg to the officials to spare us, not realising the wealth that education is - I feel so stupid now. While the school was under construction, we had to give around 100 days of Labour. It felt taxing, carrying roofing sheets and Timbers, and leaving all my children under the care of grandparents. I worked in construction while still carrying my baby on my back. Only my oldest child couldn't go to formal school, and education was the best investment for my other children."



Kezang Choden | 34

📍 Merak, Trashigang

“I never went to school, though my parents encouraged me. I regret my decision now, as education has proved to be useful to many. Knowing English would also be of a lot of advantages. I got married and have three kids. My whole life, I was sick for one reason or another. I had to also undergo a surgery related to childbirth – I had 2 miscarriages. So, I opened a shop a year ago because I can’t work like others. I even worked on weaving but they are hardly for sale unless it’s for tourists. My husband drives a bolero and takes it for hire.

All my kids are in school; I tell them to study well and I will bear all the expenses. Even if they don’t get a job in the future, anything requires education. The shop doesn’t really bring much money, but there is a little income for sure. We bring the supplies from Rangjung as Trashigang is far away, and needs a bigger car. During the pandemic, it got harder for the people to travel for shopping, and as a result, the business was good for us. We also have a homestay. Prior to the pandemic, a few Bhutanese people did come to experience it. So we do get a little busy at times.

I used to go to the gewog meetings but now, it's my husband who goes because I need to stay at the shop. We don't say much, mostly it is the men who stand up and bring issues to notice. People listen to men more. Women hardly speak.

The shop is only to sponsor my students for school. That's my only future aspiration – I just want my kids to study and grow up well. If they are able to make it on their own, it's good. I don't even say they need to have a certain ambition, just do what they want to do. They just need to sustain themselves. I try to provide for them as much as possible.”



Tshangpa | 46

 Sakteng, Trashigang


“I am currently serving as the Tshogpa for the Sakteng chiwog. My parents didn’t send me to school because they needed help at home. However, I did learn to read and write in Dzongkha through Zhiten Shayoem (non-formal education). I have two kids – my daughter is 25 years old and in college, my son didn’t get a scholarship to college, so he is here at home with me. My wife is from the same village.

When there was no road here, we had to bring all the load on horseback. Now with the motor roads, it is so convenient and it is the biggest development for us. It is also convenient to take the sick to the hospitals, and we don’t lose lives to avoidable deaths.

Before the pandemic, we made sufficient incomes with tourism and other works. Now, our people do not have work. We used to produce certain dairy products that had niche products in places across the border; Before the motor roads arrived, we used to bring rice from there as well.”



Tshering Choeda | 35

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“Starting from the primary school to the higher secondary, I studied in remote parts of the country. My ambition was to become an engineer. However, my marks and the lack of slots pushed me to ultimately choose teaching as a career. For many years after, I tried hard to upgrade my qualification and go to graduate school. But that never happened and eventually, I stopped trying. As a teacher, the schools I was placed at were remote too—however, I loved my job. It was another joyful experience to always surround yourself with children and make a difference in their lives.

After I got married and had my first child, it was the happiest moment in my life; I felt like my purpose in life was fulfilled. Jokes apart—after the birth of my 4th child, the feeling was normalized. I should not plan for another child, and rather worry about educating the existing ones.

My parents raised and educated all their children and this is a blessing I can never stop counting. Being transferred in Sakteng, I'd visit them regularly and every school break, my family and I'd go to our hometown in Samdrup Jongkhar. I'd help my father by working in his orange orchard and giving a hand in his business. During the lockdowns, it was hard to visit them; as both the districts were declared red zones, the quarantine was doubled, and the school breaks were not long enough to spend time with them.

Hence, I decided to join Dessung and help contribute to the nation's fight against the pandemic. The internet connection was weak in Sakteng, and it was hard to apply online. After much effort, I succeeded. On the result day, all my teaching colleagues got selected but not me. Dejected, I saw my friends prepare for the training.

My brother gave me a call and said that my name was already in the list, and it was the wrong ID number that prevented me from seeing it. Elated, I immediately shaved my hair and gathered my essentials for the training.

After 21 days of rigorous military training, I took the oath of Dessung. I was committed to serve the nation when it needs its people the most.

Back at my school, I was made the leader of a team consisting of all uniform personnel to patrol the eastern borders of Bhutan with India. We had to trek for several days, crossing the mountains and passes, to ensure that people do not enter or leave the country. I was prone to altitude sickness and that scared me, but at the end of the day, duty mattered more to me. Further, I was still bewildered by the fact that I, a teacher, was made the team head of all the uniformed personnel on this mission. Together, we reported on the signs of human and animal movement such as the foot tracks.

After the border duties, the role of the teacher still needed fulfilling. With the schools closed due to COVID, our children's education was being affected. As nomadic herders, some of our students lived in secluded Yak farms, and reaching them with Education In Emergency (EIE) kits became urgent. Nonetheless, I joined my fellow colleagues in reaching our students, no matter how far flung their locations were; we'd even have to teach them and ensure they were updated with the lessons.

In my 13 years of teaching, all my placements have been in remote schools. Although the desire to opt for a posting in the urban area exists, I plan to request for a posting in my hometown. Research has shown that elderly people also face the risk of mental health crisis. So waking up to that, I want to move closer to my parents and take care of them in old age. In Bhutan, education is the most rewarding investment and I always encourage my students to study hard."



Neycho Dem | 42

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“Growing up, we were used to a life of journeying back and forth to the nearest town with our horses to buy the basic amenities. It was hard and took many days. However, who would have imagined that Sakteng would be connected with motorable roads soon, and the hardship of traveling on foot would become history. Thanks to His Majesty and the Royal Government of Bhutan, our village has everything we need today.

I got married at the age of 25; it was considered late, at least for today’s standard of marriageable age in the village. People here tie knots very early and we know that early pregnancy is harmful to the mothers. My husband is a Village Gomchen (Lay monk) and consequently, religious practice has been a major part of our lives. As his wife, I have to take equal part in religious responsibilities that my husband gets assigned with.

The village Goemba (temple) is secluded here in the forest and far from home. This year, my husband and I were assigned with the role of the caretaker, and we shoulder them diligently. It is a heavy task of making constant and uninterrupted offerings, in addition to maintaining cleanliness which is non-negotiable. We even receive a lot of devotees, and hosting them is also part of the job. I have no complaints and this is a life we have known for the longest time. It's only the worries I have for my children; none of them are here with me, and as a mother, I'm constantly worrying if any of them would fall sick in my absence.

The lockdown was hard for us. Although Sakteng is a remote village, it was still a red zone. Our movements were restricted and staying home seemed the only option. However, the Dessups never failed to deliver food and other necessities on time, and made it easier to stay home without worrying about going hungry. I think we did our part of fighting the pandemic and now, the country is opening again; Before COVID, we received a lot of tourists in the village.

I have never been to Thimphu in my life. Judging from the television, I think it's huge. People like me may even get lost. Nonetheless, I hope to visit it once. The furthest I have gone is Bumthang and traveling helps to open your mind to new cultures and places. As an illiterate person, I don't know what advice I could give to anyone. I think young people in our village should study hard and with time, I hope to see our women contest for the local government elections. So far no women leader has been elected, but education can change that. I'd also advise the children and even adults to be careful around electric poles and wires in the village. That's all."



Pema Yangzom

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“Before dropping out of school, I dreamed of becoming a doctor. I admit it was a very high ambition, but as kids, everyone had high expectations of themselves and it was okay to do so, regardless of how life turned out. Maybe if the younger version of me hadn’t left school, she would have been in college studying MBBS, and not high in the mountains selling groceries. It has now been 4 years running the shop. I am the middle child among 8 of us.

During grade 7, I got sick with typhoid and couldn’t continue with my studies. Compared to Thrakti, it is much better doing business here owing to a larger population. I get my stocks from Trashigang and till now, it’s doing well except for the time during the lockdown. Compared to when I was young, Sakteng has improved a lot. There are now roads connecting villages, and the population here has also grown. I married at the age of 18 and now I’m divorced with a child. Sometimes, I wish my parents had been more firm and advised me against marrying so young.

I actually hoped to participate in the community election but I was not 25 yet, which is the minimum age required to do so. So, in future I will make sure to participate. Not only that, I will also work on expanding my business and if everything goes well, I will build myself a house. I know many women who are talented and capable, but often they don't come forward. Thus many potentials are never utilized the way they should be, especially by women in a remote village like Sakteng.

I opened the shop at the age of 18 because I thought it would be easier than working in the fields. It is still one of the best decisions I've ever made. From the pictures I've seen of the capital, I really wish I could go there someday and feel the warm city air on my face and walk on concrete pavements.

If we were provided with some sort of skilling programs in the fields of culinary, and business, we would have done something big. Youths, especially young girls should keep on striving, and my advice is to never leave studying or get married young. Women should work towards becoming independent and capable of making something of themselves.”



Sangay Choden | 25

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“Although I was born in Sakteng, I was raised in Thimphu. My parents got separated when I was young. By the time I was enrolled in school, it was quite late. In 2011, I was studying in pre-primary but I couldn’t complete my studies after class 8. In Thimphu, I worked as a dancer in a drayang (Entertainment club). Everyone, including my family members dissuaded me from joining Drayang. There were a lot of stigmas attached to these kinds of establishments. However, when I displayed sincerity and honesty, my siblings ultimately allowed me to work there.

When COVID happened, all the Drayangs were closed and I had to return to my village. With my savings, I decided to open a shop here. I even met my husband shortly who was working on the road construction project in Sakteng. We have a daughter together now.

The reason why I preferred to stay in the city was the easy accessibility and choice of food and other amenities. We could buy anything we liked, which is not the case here.

My future aspiration is to buy a small plot of land and run a shop of my own. I want to work hard and give the best of education to my daughter. I couldn't study well because I didn't have proper guidance. I regret it when I see my friends who are still continuing their studies. Before, I could help my family with my earnings but after the pandemic I was in between jobs and couldn't be of any help. If there was no pandemic, I would still be in Thimphu living aimlessly; It was an opportunity for me to return and discover a new life here again.

Till date, there had been no female participants for the local government election. Women in comparison have less exposure and communication skills. Even when they meet with an official or other guests, they are too shy to talk to them. In the future, if any women participate for local leaders, I would definitely support them - even over my own siblings. That would make me proud as a woman."



Dorji Wangdi | 32

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“After completing high school, I worked as an instructor in the Non Formal Education (NFE) for three years, and now I work in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD).

I wanted to become a teacher and my current job, though quite different from what I wished to become, has the components of teaching. My father passed away when I was quite young. Raised by a single mother, I could never go to college. Another reason why I couldn't do well in school to get into college was my poor vision. I wrote very slowly and that definitely didn't help with the exams as well.

Although I enjoy working with children, there are some obvious challenges as one can imagine; My own child studies in grade one and I'm quite familiar. Many prefer women in the caregiving and teaching professions, but I think that even men can do them. It's all about our interest and dedication. In the future, I'd like to work as a Warden or other administration jobs in schools. Otherwise, if nothing works, I would try to run a small business.

Life in Sakteng before the motor road was quite difficult. The villagers had to walk for two-and-half days to get all the necessary loads from the nearest road point. Now it's very convenient, and services are almost door-to-door.

When it comes to gender equality and women empowerment, I think we should share equal responsibilities and respect each other's view. Based on our free times, my wife and I share our domestic work loads.

So far, we didn't have many women taking part in the local government elections, and that could be due to the low literacy in women. However, times have changed and education is almost gender equal now. I did try to participate in 2017 but owing to personal reasons, I couldn't go forward. I even thought it was too early for me, so in future I may give it a shot."



Samdrup Gyalpo | 42

 Sakteng, Trashigang

"I was born in Thimphu where my father served in the military. After becoming a teacher, I served in various remote places - this is my 20th year of service. I came to Sakteng in August 2018. I am the principal of this school and we have about 16 teachers and 282 students this year; the numbers are increasing yearly. I think it is because the community and the parents are now realizing the importance of education. Development process of Bhutan has to be one of the fastest in the world. As a teacher, all my postings were in remote schools where there was no electricity and roads. Now that I hear, these schools have been connected with roads and electricity - it's a lot of changes.

I think education is an eye to view and understand the world; it was the key that changed my life and made me the person I am today. Back then, our profession was decided by the marks we had and mine could only qualify me as a teacher. In the year I was studying grade 12, the whole nation had only 335 students in grade 12.

The best thing I would cherish about being a teacher is seeing our students doing good with their lives. I think the number of women and youth participating in the local government is increasing, and I find it very encouraging. It's good to have diverse groups in the LG; for instance, youths have contemporary knowledge, and the participation of women in the LG can eliminate the stereotypes and bridge the gender gaps.

Covid-19 has greatly affected our children with their education. With the schools closed, almost 60% of our students had to live alone at home because their parents are yak herders. Although we went to different villages to teach our children, still we couldn't reach many students who belong to the yak herder family. After we resumed our school, the majority of the students found it hard to cope with their lessons. Moreover, the percentage of students failing the exams increased drastically.”



Tshewang Tshering

Gup (Elected Head of the District)

 Sakteng, Trashigang

“I was elected as the gup for the first and third local government. I studied till grade 10 and got into vocational training. My siblings and I grew up with a lot of struggles and hardships. Our family never had any yaks like others. In 2008 at 35, people from my village requested me to compete for the position of a Gup.

I left my job and came back home. However, the local government election was postponed for 3 years. In 2011, it was then conducted where I competed and got elected as a Gup. Since people supported me, I did my best to serve them well. In the second election, I didn't get elected. It was a bit disheartening - I didn't make it past the primary round. After that, I did some business and took on some household responsibilities. However, I was encouraged to compete for the third term by my people and I got re-elected. I am 45 now.


My biggest achievement as a Gup would be in helping people with their citizenships. There were many in the village who had lived in the country since 1952, but didn't have proper citizenship documents. Apart from the hardships and hurdles, they even faced discrimination from others. However, with His Majesty's tremendous support, I could help most of them.

Another thing on my manifestos was to help the village with clean drinking water. In line with His Majesty's vision towards cleanliness and hygiene, we could improve the situation around water in the village tremendously. Today, almost all households have a tap each with running water.

I still ponder a lot on the development needs of my community. Since our community borders India, the concerns of cultural dilution and national security have always existed. Not having a motor road made the situation even more grave. Hence, in 2015 when His Majesty visited our village, seeing the struggles of our people, commands were given to connect Sakteng with a motor road."



Phuntsho Dhendrup | 62

 Buli, Zhemgang

“At 16, I chose to become a monk and left for a Monastery. As the time passed, my parents were aging and my elder sister couldn’t do all the work by herself. My elder brother was a civil servant, and after the demise of my sister’s husband, it got difficult for her to help our parents along with raising her 6 children. During winter break, I helped at home and at other times, I’d stay in the monastery and continue my studies. Monks before had to take care of themselves in terms of food and other amenities, but soon we started receiving some assistance.

After 9 years, I went back to the village leaving behind my monastic study. I helped my family to build a house. Being a former monk, I also served under many Rinpoches and I even got an opportunity to visit Malaysia to perform a mask dance. However, the regret of leaving the monastery will always remain with me. Although I had taken the vows, I got married and dedicated my life to making my children’s lives better; now, all of them have graduated college.

For a year, I served as a Chipoen (A village leader). I was also appointed as the in-charge of the village's temple for 3 years. I also served as a representative of Druk Seed in three gewogs, and later as a chairman of the agriculture development committee of the village. For 15 to 16 years, I served the people. I even got an opportunity to visit Bangkok for an agriculture tour.

Compared to a decade ago, I see drastic developments taking place. There are different policies and plans coming up for the betterment of our country, and the people's living standards are improving. During my time, we had to manually deliver letters. Now everything is done through technology; moreover, technology has brought a lot of conveniences in our life. In our village, people started to run a home stay for the tourists, aiding in the development of our community.

The youths of our communities are our future; I would wish that they remain in the villages and take more responsibilities, and care for their parents and community.”



Rinzin Wangchuk

 Buli, Zhemgang


“I was born in Mongar. Before my birth, my parents got divorced and this proved a difficult life for my mother and her 4 children. Slowly, my older brothers started working and taking care of the family. However, being the youngest, I was given away for adoption.

After 15 years, I met my father and went with him to Bumthang. I was enrolled in a school. After studying for 6 years, in 5th grade, I dropped out. As the oldest in the classroom, I felt like I didn't fit in. I went to work in a cardamom field in Zhemgang and later became a cattle herder. Soon, I got married and stayed in Kheng since then.

Later, I got a land as a Kidu and settled in Tsirang. After that I got married again and I have 3 children now. I feel sad to see the grown up children move away from the village, and settle in urban areas; All I can see are empty houses and villages turning into forest slowly. Children don't understand the value of their familial land. For my daughter, I would let her study up to whatever she could, and let her take care of the farm lands. It's important that we preserve our culture as well as utilize our farm land.”



Dorji Wangchuk | 62

 Buli, Zhemgang

“I was born and raised in Bumthang, Chumey. I had 10 siblings, but the youngest one did not survive his childhood. My father who was serving the Kings returned to the village after the demise of His Majesty the Third Druk Gyalpo. Life before his arrival was full of hardship. I was raising yaks and led a nomadic life.

My father enrolled me in a school, and after grade four I went to study in a vocational training Institute. It was run by a catholic priest. After graduation, there were job opportunities in the power companies. However, I chose to become a football player instead. I was part of a football club which was coached by Indian nationals, and some of the players were from india. We represented Bhutan and played in Nepal, Delhi, Kolkata, and even Sri Lanka.

Later in life, I settled in Buli and bought a plot of land. I opened a small shop and became part of the community here. Slowly the people of Buli knew me well. Appreciating my character, they asked me to participate in the local government election.

In 2011, I contested as a Gup and served for the next 10 years. The reason I participated was solely due to my interest, and it kept me going to bring developments in the Gewog. I must be the first Gup in the country who generated an income through community development. In 2012, I started to research on protecting and reviving lakes, and even went to Tsho Pema and Bangkok. After that, I started a project to revive the Buli Lake with the help of Zhemgang Dzongrab.

We came up with a Nu.30 visitor fee for all - even for the local people. For years, the local people didn't understand my concept. Finally, they understood my motives and showed support. From the income generated, we made donations to the temples, and it helped fund community activities.

I think local government is the most important form of government. It's the local leader who can reach the ground, and engage with the people the most."



Rinzin Lhamo | 27

 Buli, Zhemgang

“As an agriculture extension officer I worked both in Dzongkhag and gewog. At the gewog level, you deal with people and the local government a lot more than at Dzongkhag level. To work in the government has always been my ambition so now I’m able to realize one of my dreams. I don’t see any obstacle in being a woman as long as we step forward and prove worthy, people will support you.

Equal participation is always a good thing and should be fostered. In today’s world, everyone is provided equal opportunity so it’s just a matter of being capable. Here at the local government of Buli, women hardly participate yet they are the active participants in the community, especially women farmers. I encourage women to participate in small group activities so that with time, they’re able to handle larger projects requiring significant leadership. One always has to start at the bottom and build from there.

In Zhemgang I managed the agriculture data in 8 gewogs. Getting into such details allowed me to work with the farmers without actually being physically present. The amount of produce depends on the number of consumers and the access to the market. My life has been easy with no extreme highs or lows. However, I do regret not participating much in school activities and now I make up for it by playing outdoor games during free time.

People do realize that participation allows them to make an impact in the community through the decisions they make, which pulls them toward leadership roles. Even after their term is over, they'll likely leave behind a legacy which fills them with a sense of satisfaction. Recently, we did a nation wide million fruit tree plantation which I continued through to the second phase and it is one of my proud achievements.

Challenges should be dealt with adaptation to ensure a solution and to achieve happiness is to have no expectations. We cannot always be the good person, circumstances will arise where we've to be the bad guy but for the greater purpose, it has to be done despite disappointing a few people, that's just reality and we have to accept it."



Kinzang Wangmo | 37

 Buli, Zhemgang

“When my friends went to school, I wished to attend too. But my mother couldn’t send me, we didn’t have money. Some of my younger siblings could go. I am from Buli and live here in Pang. I have stayed here since childhood and now, I have three children. I have been married for 20 years now. Before my house used to be a hut, but now it’s a one-story house. I met my husband who was from Trongsa - he used to send me love letters but I couldn’t read.


The local government leaders help the community in all the ways possible; Due to their help, we could borrow and use the communal power tillers and other farm machinery. I think women can become leaders too, especially ones who attended schools. With my lack of educational qualification, I couldn’t have become one.

Before, we had a hard life; we raised pigs and butchered animals for meat. Now, with all the developments, we no longer do it. We are a buddhist country, and killing is a ghastly sin.

I used to attend village meetings but never spoke anything. It was barely hard to understand the context due to not having any education. My last meeting was to meet a member of parliament from our constituency. In the olden days, meetings were not taken this seriously. Recently, women have started speaking up in the village meetings, and some of them can share their concerns. However, no women I know have taken part in the local government election. If women have education, they should take part and we would support them ”



Choni Zangmo | 71

 Buli, Zhemgang

“I’m from Kheng Buli. Our village is isolated and doesn’t have many settlements. As a child, I didn’t get the chance to study since we had a shortage of hands on our farm. Even today, I regret not being able to get an education.

At 20, I met my husband who was in the Army. I had 7 children—4 boys and 3 girls. Sadly 5 of them died, leaving me with just a son and a daughter. My Husband also passed away due to old age and a few underlying illnesses. Since then, I have faced a lot of difficulties in my life.

I was appointed the head of the village, since no one wanted to take the responsibility. Amongst all the other heads in the district, I was the only woman. We had a meeting, and I raised the voice of concern.

Luckily our concern was heard, and we were given Kidu by Her Highness Ashi Sonam Choden. We tried to help our villagers out and we had Ashi Sonam Choden talk to us; I was reminded that as a woman, we are not less than anybody. We were told that as women, we have to stand up for ourselves, and not depend on anyone.

I think it's very important for our girls and youths to take part in the local government. I was pushed to take the responsibility, and luckily I did. I was able to help my villagers, and I was always called up for meetings to raise our concerns.

At Least now we have roads, electricity and water. Before we had to walk great distances just to get drinking water. I feel really blessed now. All thanks to Our Majesty for helping us bring in all the developments.”



Tshewang Lhamo | 37

 Buli, Zhemgang

“At 18, I got married and had two children. It’s been 7 years since I separated from my husband due to domestic issues. There was no one to give me legal counseling, and the divorce happened via mutual agreements. However, I received nothing in child support. As a result of the divorce, I faced a difficult time making ends meet. I worked as a daily wage laborer in other people’s farms; there were days when my family went to sleep without food. Later, I got an opportunity to go on a tour to Phobjikha and experience staying in a homestay - the tour was organized by the Royal society of protection of Nature (RSPN).

When the planning officer of our village inquired if there’s anyone interested in opening a homestay, 15 of us volunteered to register ourselves. After that, we were taken on a similar tour to Haa. During the course of the tour, we kept note of everything that we learned and later, implemented them by starting our own homestays.

The establishment basically requires a Traditional House. Though we haven't received the certificate yet, we are given permission by the Dzongkhag Administration. I am doing quite well, receiving guests all year round. Recently, I received 21 guests.

For four years, my homestay has been my savior. Although I charge 900 per person as a normal rate, upon request there are discounts available for larger groups. Initially, furnishing the house was quite difficult; I had to build a toilet and procure bedding materials with my own savings and some loans. After the business started running, I could clear the loans easily.

Looking back, money was a big issue in my life. My father survived a bear attack, and had to undergo surgeries. The total cost was Nu. 700,000. I was in a desperate situation and could manage only Nu. 300,000. However, someone helped me post my story on social media and raised the remaining amount.”



Tsheltrim Tenzin | 64



Yudrungcholing, Trongsa

“I was repeatedly requested by my Gewog people to contest for the Gup’s election but I refrained due to my low qualifications. During my childhood, the government came searching for children to enroll in school. My parents, due to lack of awareness, were afraid to send me away, so I stayed back. Till 13, I stayed in the village, looking after the cattle - it was a difficult time. I fell ill and was bed ridden for a year. My parents did their best to nurse me back to health. After 6 months, my pain had subsided but I was still learning to walk again. Back then there were no hospitals. All we could do was rely on religious rituals for healing. Later my parents sent me to become a monk. Until the age of 19, I was serving as a novice monk who cooked and cleaned for the monastery, and only got to learn during my free times.

For 12 years, I served as a monk. When all of my friends resigned from the monkhood, I too followed their footsteps. I left for my village to help my parents, since all my siblings have married and moved out. Apart from working, I continued my practice of buddhism and accomplished a prayer recitation of 4800,000 times. Soon, I constructed a house by selling medicinal herbs, and when it did well, I even exported the plant to india. Then I planted oranges and raised a family of 5 children - 4 of them graduated college.”



Phuntsho Wangdi



Yudrungcholing, Trongsa

“Since birth, I have been living in Beling, Trongsa. Until the age of 15, I did farmworks and found it hard to make ends meet. Then I decided to enroll as a Gomchen (A Nyingmapa monk) and studied under a very learned teacher. After that, the hardships were reduced but I still had to hustle a lot to raise my 5 children. My first wife succumbed to excessive alcohol; she didn’t have an imposing reason for her alcoholism, it just started as a pastime. Although I stay in the village, I’m still a monk and I’m serving the community here.

After my wife’s death, it was tough raising 5 children and after a year, I got married again. My new wife had also lost both her father and husband, and had 4 children. We are one big family now. While studying, I faced some of my hardest days. We didn’t have proper shelter to call home, and my family and I lived in the temple. Sometimes, I had to sacrifice my share of food for my family and went hungry to bed. Most days, I went begging for alms to support my family.

For me, the happiest times come during the festivals when all my family members gather and share a good meal together. As a monk, I am forbidden to play archery and other recreational activities by my teachers. But I enjoy chanting religious texts with my other colleagues and playing Doe-Gor (A form of sport). I don’t have any regrets because my sons are monks and I am always happy that they are following the steps of Buddha, and they even help meet our expenses.”



Tsagay | 73



Yudrungcholing, Trongsa

“I am from bumthang and I live with my wife. I got married at 12 years old. Basically, I moved here to serve Azhi Kezang when I was about 11 years old and served for around 34 years. I have 9 children. Not having much resources, I could only send 3 of my children to school. They only studied till 3rd grade. Back then, we had to do a lot of work on the farm, so they had to drop out to help us. However, I don't have any land or property to give to my children.

When I got married, it was tough to bring up my children. We earned our living through farming and doing labour work but it was a huge challenge as well due to the wild boars hampering our harvest. Soon after the roads were built, we were able to sell vegetables and get an income.

I would take fruits and pani (betel nut leaves) to Bumthang to sell. We had to walk for 3 days to reach Bumthang. I didn't have good clothes and I couldn't give them to my children as well. We would wear the same clothes, and when it tore, we would fix it with patches and wear it again.

Now with all of our children are grown up and earning their living, they send us money and take good care of their aging parents. We are a family of 21 children and grandchildren.”

This is the end of the collection of stories from the mountains

