

ADVENTURES OF A NEPALI FROG

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An excitable young frog from Kathmandu Valley, “just out of his tadpole teens”, decides to travel through his country. Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto goes where no frog has gone before. He rides a tin can downriver, treks past majestic peaks, rides porter-back, mule-back and yak-back to remote villages, arid hops across a good part of Nepal before returning to Kathmandu in an airline pilot’s shirt pocket.

This description of Bhaktaprasad's adventures through Nepal's mountains, hills and plains presents authentic landscapes and unique characters. It brings Nepal to life for the young readers, and helps build empathy for the creatures, including humans, that inhabit the Nepali countryside.

Bhaktaprasad: a name common in Nepal

Bhyaguto: 'frog' in the Nepali language

Rato Bangala Kitab is the publishing wing of Rato Bangala School in Kathmandu Valley. This book is part of our effort to provide the children of Nepal with readings specific to their country and society. We also hope it will help inform a larger audience of young readers about life and times in this corner of South Asia.

KATHMANDU CALLING

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto was a young Kathmandu frog, barely out of his tadpole teens. He lived with his grandfather Buddhiprasad, mother Sanomaiya, sisters and brothers in a rice terrace by the village of Ichangu, on a hillside behind the great *stupa* of Swayambhu. Like all froggies his age, Bhaktaprasad was a curious amphibian, but only more so. He was the quickest to learn to hop among his brood, and had lately taken to venturing out of the muddy paddies and unto the path used by humans that went down the hill.

He saw men, women and children walk back and forth on that trail, and wondered where they were coming from or going to. Normally, frogs do not worry too much about going anywhere. Their lives consist mostly of lying in wait for insects that buzz about, keeping watch for garden snakes which love to lunch on amphibians, wallowing in muddy water, and croaking till the throat goes dry. But the humans walked up and down the narrow trail as if they were headed somewhere. They seemed to have an *intention*, something that average frogs never felt the need for.

"Well, I too will have an *intention*," young Bhaktaprasad decided one morning in early summer. And so, while he waited for his tail to drop off, he hung around the *chautara*, the rest platform by the trail where the people stopped to exchange gossip. From their conversation, he formed an image of the world that lay beyond the secure paddies where his frog clan had lived since before anybody could remember.



It was evening, and Bhaktaprasad was gazing down upon Kathmandu Valley as the sun's slanting rays lit its fields of greening paddy. Beyond, he saw a mass of shingle-roofed houses interspersed with pagoda temple tops and tall palace buildings. All the frogs of Ichangu knew this was "The City", although none of them understood what the word meant. At the *chautara*, Bhaktaprasad had heard of motor cars, street lights, and gigantic buildings with hundreds of rooms.

The evening that the last remnant of his tail disappeared Bhaktaprasad announced his intention to leave home. "But why?!" the entire clan croaked in unison, incredulous that anyone would want to leave the Ichangu rice paddy. Tail-less Bhaktaprasad replied, with some confidence, "Because I want to experience life beyond this field. I want to see the city, where the people live. I want to go to the Tarai, which is so flat that you can hop forever without feeling tired, and where they say the sun sets on the horizon rather than on hillsides. I want to see wide rivers, strange creatures, vast plains, and great mountains!"

Buddhiprasad, the elderly head of the clan, was the only one who understood Bhaktaprasad's urge. Years ago, he too had felt similarly, but to his everlasting regret had done nothing about it. He did not want his grandfrog Bhaktaprasad to make the same mistake. "Besides," thought Buddhiprasad, looking admiringly at his defiant descendant, "this young one is made of sterner stuff than I was. Bhaktay has made up his mind and nothing will stop him."

Turning to the circle of concerned froggies, Buddhiprasad said, "Let him go. He will see the world and he will return to us, to tell us all about what he experiences." Bhaktaprasad took this as permission from everyone, and before his mother Sanomaiya

had the time to argue with her father, the young frog had croaked a quick farewell and was bounding down the trail used by the humans to go to The City.

“Thank you, *hajurba!*” he shouted over his shoulder, addressing his grandfather. The young frog did not look back till he arrived at the bottom of the slope and a strip of tarmac he knew was called the Ring Road, which circled Kathmandu town. Taking one last look up at the terraces of Ichangu, he turned and continued his hopping.

After some time, Bhaktaprasad passed Swayambhu’s *stupa* up on a hill. He noticed that the benevolent eyes of the Buddha were following his progress. “Go on, young adventurer, I will keep watch over you,” the eyes seemed to say, and Bhaktaprasad took heart.

As he kept on the hard-topped tarmac road, the frog found himself tiring. He remembered that the men and women at the *chautara* had always talked of taking a bus into town. So he waited at the point where the Balaju Road intersects with the Ring Road, and before long a blue Sajha Bus arrived. But the bus conductor refused to let him hop on, saying that the Sajha company’s General Manager had forbidden all frogs, toads, worms, snakes and rats from riding public transport, “And besides,” said the conductor, making a face, “we only go to Ratna Park in the centre of town, and what would a frog want to go to Rama Park for?”

“Ratna Park will be fine, *hajur?*” said Bhaktaprasad with exaggerated humility. Now, the scruffy-looking conductor had never been addressed with that respectful honorific before. His life’s work was dealing with rude passengers who constantly pushed him out of the way, refused to pay the proper fare, and called him names when he tried to insist. In fact, it was the conductor’s lot to say ‘*hajur*’ to everybody else, never to be addressed thus. The man’s attitude towards the young frog immediately softened. “Hop on,” he said. As Bhaktaprasad jumped past into the passenger compartment, he gave a double bang to the side of the bus with his palm, which was the signal to the driver up front to move.

Passing by large fields, over the Bishnumati River, and up a steep slope, the bus entered Kathmandu town. It passed the Royal Palace of the King, the big pond of Ranipokhari, and finally arrived at the Ratna Park bus stop.

The city’s centre was a bewildering whirl of dazzling lights and cacophony of noises of the kind that would have shocked not just Bhaktaprasad but any rural creature from Kathmandu’s *kaanth*, or outskirts. Hundreds of people milled about, going in every which direction. They were joined by cars, buses, pushcarts, *riksas*, bicycles and motorcycles. It would have been immediate and messy death for a frog to descend to ground level amidst such bedlam. “Not such a good idea,” Bhaktaprasad advised himself. Kathmandu could not be experienced on foot.



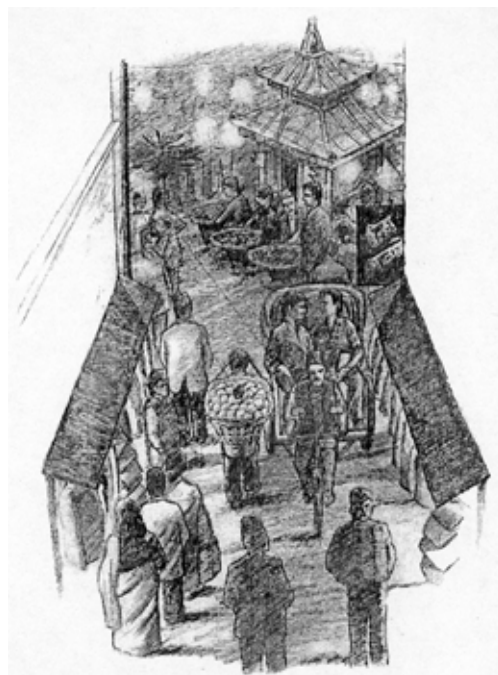
THE MANGO PORTER

For a while, Bhaktaprasad wondered what action to take. If he did not get off the bus soon enough, it would return him to the Ring Road, and it would be back to Ichangu for him. “That would be the shortest adventure ever,” thought the frog.

Then, using the quick-wittedness which would serve him so well in the days ahead, Bhaktaprasad got an idea as he looked out of the bus window and saw a porter coming by with a basket on his back. “Thank you, *hajoor*,” he shouted in the direction of the conductor and leapt off the window sill. With a thump, he landed on top of the basket, which turned out to be full of mangoes meant for the Asan market.

What better way to see the city than to ride atop a mango-laden *doko*, headed straight into the busiest bazaar in all Nepal? The porter was aware of the stowaway who had hopped on top of his cargo, but he did not seem to mind. In fact, he said hospitably, “You can try a mango while you take in the sights, little one.”

His name was Jagat Bahadur, and he made his living carrying loads for the *sahus* of Kathmandu town. Sometimes he carried metal sheets on his back, at other times rice bags, furniture, or tins of kerosene. “Today, I am taking mangoes to a shop on the far side of Asan,” said Jagat Bahadur. “Go ahead, have a fruit,” he added.



Bhaktaprasad selected an over-ripe mango. He sucked on it as they passed the brightly lit shop fronts of Asan. There were stores selling pots and pans, paints and brushes, carpets and brooms. There were stalls selling fruits, vegetables, spices and grains.

Bhaktaprasad reflected, partly to himself, "Frog! I did not think there could be *so* many things to buy and sell!"

"Oh, there are!" replied Jagat Bahadur. "There are many more if you go into the new stores they call supermarkets!"

Frog and porter passed the triple-roofed temple of Anna-puma, goddess of plenty. Further on, they paid their respects to the fearful visage of Kali, who seemed ready to pick up passers-by in order to add to her garland of skulls. They passed the enchanting courtyards and temples of the Kathmandu *Darbar*, from where, said Jagat Bahadur, the most powerful kings of Nepal had ruled in centuries past.

All too soon, the tour was over.

"You will have to go now?" Jagat Bahadur said as he heaved his basket down next to a one-storeyed temple dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god with a pot-belly. Said the porter, "A Ganesh temple is a good place to begin any journey. Take care as you go about your adventures. Nepal is a big country, and you can easily get lost."

With a quick bow towards the image of Ganesh, which stared impassively back at him, the frog followed a lane that went downhill. He had not gone far in the darkness before a tall, spindly dog came out of nowhere and blocked the frog's path. He crouched and he growled. Bhaktaprasad, acting instinctively, managed a mighty hop. He bounded over the dog and was off down the slope, taking huge hops and not able to plan where he landed. He flew into a gutter and crashed with a splash on some muck, which cushioned his fall. He had found a refuge, however filthy, and the fangs of his pursuer bit the air, centimetres away.

The mongrel waited there, whining and barking the rest of the night, but Bhaktaprasad was too tired to care. The combination of bus ride, porter ride and chase by an unfriendly city creature was enough to make anyone tired, and especially an Ichangu frog on his first day out. Knowing he was secure in this little drain, Bhaktaprasad decided to catch some sleep, "This city is not without danger, that's for sure," said the frog. He reminded himself drowsily, "Tomorrow, I must head down to the Tarai, where the land is flat and the dogs must be more civilised."



A TRIP TO THE TARAI

Bhaktaprasad slept lightly. He dreamt of his grandfather Buddhiprasad Bhyaguto, renowned far beyond Ichangu as the wisest amphibian in the whole Valley. Buddhiprasad came down into the gutter and whispered into his grandfrog's ear, "You want to go to the Tarai, *kanchha*? Take the river, because the government does not allow frogs as airplane passengers, the bus drivers will refuse to take you, and the only *railgadi* in Kathmandu is the toy train that goes round and round in circles at the fair ground. You have no choice but to take the river if you want to go to the Tarai."

Towards dawn, there was a sudden downpour, and the little gutter filled up with rushing water. The frog willingly joined the flow and soon arrived at the point where the drain met the river Bishnumati. This holy river, which in the dry months tended to be full of city sewage and garbage, had been cleaned by the monsoon's flow.

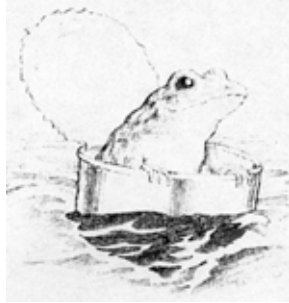
Bhaktaprasad found a rusty tin can by the river's edge and, after checking that there were no leaks, edged it down into the water. Once it was floating, he hopped in. Slowly, the tin can and its frog passenger joined the current of the Bishnumati and they made swift progress, swaying and spinning as they were swept along.

A few minutes downstream, the Bishnumati joined the larger river Bagmati, which came in from the left. Beyond the confluence, was the Chobar Gorge, through which the Bagmati exited the valley of Kathmandu. The tin can went crazy as it entered the gorge, dipping and swaying and spinning its way downstream. Bhaktaprasad felt nauseous as he slipped past huge boulders and bounced over rapids, but was glad that he had chosen a sturdy tin can for a boat.

After the Chobar rapids, the cruise became somewhat smoother, but not too much. It was still a long way to the plains. Throughout the day, other rivers met the Bagmati—the Kulekhani from the west, the Kokajhar from the east, the Mann, also from the east—until it grew into a massive, roaring, frothing force. Spinning around in his tin can, Bhaktaprasad became dizzy once again and decided it was best to try-to get some sleep. It was, after all, already evening.

It was quite a while before the bright light of dawn woke him up. Gone was the turbulent Bagmati of the hilly. Instead, the river was wide and its flow smooth. Water lapped softly on the side of the can. In fact, the river was so slow it seemed motionless. Looking over to the east, Bhaktaprasad saw the sunrise right off the horizon. Yes, he had made it to the Tarai.

“Yay! I’m a hero!” cried Bhaktaprasad, across the expanse of the great river. It was an expression he used when he could not contain his excitement.



ALONG THE EAST-WEST HIGHWAY

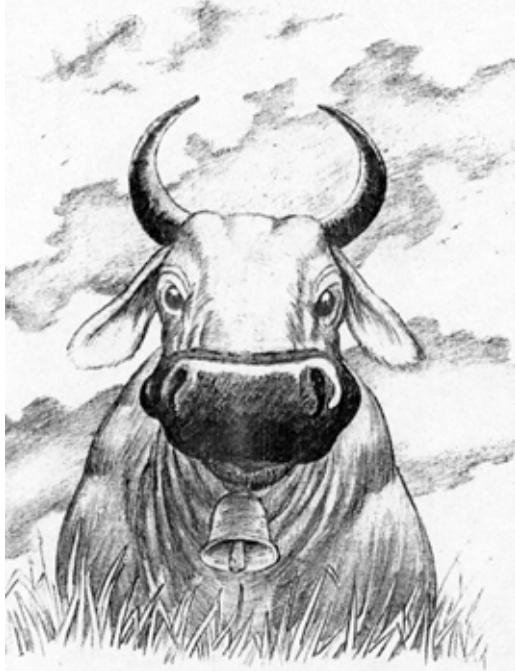
Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto, of Kathmandu Valley, had arrived in the Tarai, a place rarely frequented by highland amphibians or reptiles. He relaxed for a while in his tin-can boat, spinning slowly and letting the early morning sun warm his skin from all sides. The frog then stretched out one long leg over the side and paddled over to the muddy bank. He landed close to where a plover was busy dipping his beak under little pebbles, searching for an insect breakfast. The bird looked up from the search and introduced himself to Bhaktaprasad, “Hello, I’m Prachanda Plover. What are you doing, shipping yourself in that ridiculous little tin can?”

Taken aback that a Tarai bird could speak the same tongue as a mountain frog, Bhaktaprasad said, “Uh-uh, hello, they call me Bhaktay, short for Bhaktaprasad. And I am here from Kathmandu because I wanted to visit the flatlands. I am also quite hungry.”

“Here, try some of these,” said Prachanda, and swinging his beak the bird flung some water bugs the frog’s way.

“Mmm, good,” said Bhaktaprasad, not wanting to offend, but the live insect tasted bitter and clawed around inside his mouth. Quickly swallowing the bug, the frog changed the subject. “Can you advise me on how to see the Tarai?”

Prachanda replied, “Go to the East-West Highway, over there by the bridge. From there, you can travel east or west all the way to either corner of the country. So they say, although I haven’t been to the far ends.” Then the plover added, “The bugs are finished on this bank, so I’ll be off to the other side of the river now.”



With that, the bird dipped his beak in a traditional birdie goodbye and flew off low and fast over the water, his grey and white plumage flashing in the sunlight. The frog hopped in the direction given, and saw the bridge that spanned the Bagmati. Climbing an incline, he suddenly came upon a smooth stretch of metalled road. Bhaktaprasad was about to hop across it when he was confronted by a huge head containing twitching nostrils, bulging eyes, large horns, and a tongue that drooled saliva. The head belonged to a curious bullock.

“Tulsi is my name and this is my friend Ram. Pulling carts is our game,” said the bullock, his voice very gruff. “Do you know what happens if you cross this road without a *stop, look* and *go*? You will be squished and flattened into a pretty pancake. Trucks and buses will not stop for you. Don’t they teach you things like this where you come from? Hmph!”

“Oh thank you, kind bullock, for saving my life!” exclaimed Bhaktaprasad, even as two buses roared past and over the bridge, racing each other to a destination out east.

“No,” the frog agreed, as the buses receded in the horizon, “they certainly would not have stopped for me.”

When Bhaktaprasad confided to him his ambitious mission of exploring Nepal, starting with the Tarai, Tulsi Bayel turned out to be a helpful comrade, said the bullock, switching on the voice of an experienced tour guide, “Yes sir, the Nepal Tarai! It is a place of unique interests, and I am glad that a hill person like you is keen to see these parts. Our land is flat, and we do not have geography to distract us. This is why plains creatures turn out to be great thinkers. I can introduce you to greatly accomplished Tarai cats, cows, dogs, pigeons and people. The meow of a tabby, the dance of the turtle dove, the songs the humans sing and the music they play, are all sweeter here in the Tarai- And then, yes sir, we have the Tarai jungle, unmatched in its wildness by anything you have to show in the hills.”

Bhaktaprasad interjected enthusiastically, “Mr Bayel, I have seen many cats, cows and humans, but never a real jungle. What is it like?”

As a creature from the paddy fields of Ichangu, Bhaktaprasad knew only of the Nagarjun forest, known as *Raniban*. But there was a tall wall around the woods that not even frogs with the strongest muscles could hurdle. As a result, Bhaktaprasad had never been in a jungle before.

Ram Bayel, who had been listening to the conversation so far, explained that a jungle was a place with trees, bushes, tall grasses and, most of all, wild birds and animals. “What you want, frog, is to visit the Royal Chitwan National Park. It has wild animals of the kind you will never find anywhere else, in Nepal, in the world!”

Tulsi invited Bhaktaprasad to jump on top of the straw stacked on his bullock cart. Two bulls and a frog trundled westward along the East-West Highway, which ran straight, as far as the eye could see.

“You know,” said Tulsi after a while, “if someone were to see us now, they’d call us a bullfrog!”” It took a few moments for Bhaktaprasad to realise that the bull had made a joke. Appearances could be deceiving; the dour-seeming bullock had a sense of humour!



After a day and a night’s slow journey, they rolled into the crossroad settlement of Pathlaiya. Tulsi Bayel said, “Here we must turn south, whereas you continue north, then west. Keep going to where the plane lands at Bharatpur, where you must turn left and hop till you reach the Chitwan jungle,” As an afterthought, the bullock added, “But remember those are wild animals, untamed creatures of the jungle. Quite different from us domestics. Be aware.”

CHITWAN’S WILD SANCTUARY

Two days and three nights of hopping along the highway shoulder brought Bhaktaprasad early one morning to Bharatpur. He knew this because he saw an airplane swoop low overhead and land on a grass airstrip on one side of the road. As advised, he turned left, that is, south. In some hours, the frog came upon a sign that said “Royal Chitwan National Park”. There was a bamboo barricade manned by a man in olive, one of the soldiers who guarded the jungle and protected its beasts from poachers.

The soldier looked down suspiciously at the frog. Bhaktaprasad summoned all his courage and hopped nonchalantly over the barricade, in full view of the forest guard. He

hoped to give the impression of being an unconcerned forest frog who was headed home after wandering about outside the park, it was touch-and-go.

“Hey, Sher Bahadur! Come over here!” cried the soldier to a colleague. “Look at this one, he does not look like any amphibian mentioned in our park manual.”

Sher Bahadur came out of a nearby tent and carefully scanned the frog’s markings, “Well, you can never tell with frogs, soldier. There are so many species.”

“But this guy was out, coming in.”

“Well, rhinos and boars are always going out of the park in search of food. The same must be true of frogs. Let the chap go.”

By the time Sher Bahadur had made this suggestion, Bhaktaprasad was already several metres into the forest. He sloped behind the trunk of a stately tree that reached half-way to the heavens, and heaved a sigh of relief. “Phew!”

Bhaktaprasad looked up and realised he was under the broad canopy of a *simal* tree. A “croak-croak” greeting came from under a nearby bush. It was an amphibian, who called out, “Hello, mountain cousin, I’m Tarai Toad. I watched you there with those soldiers. You’re quite an actor!”

Tarai Toad held out his hand and said, “Zoologists know me as *Buro melanostictus*, or the Black Spined Toad.”

Bhaktaprasad returned the greeting, “*Rana tigrina*, a frog from Kathmandu,” Tarai Toad was much larger, more muscular and darker-skinned than Bhaktaprasad, and, of course, as his name suggested, he had a dark line down his back.

Tarai Toad said that while the Chitwan denizens had seen many human tourists from overseas come visit, this was the first time that a non-human tourist had come. “This is an occasion! We should celebrate!” he said.

Tarai Toad spread the word and that afternoon, in a clearing by the Rapti River, the Chitwan inhabitants gathered to meet the guest from Kathmandu. A herd of deer greeted him with gentle curiosity, nudging him with their wet snouts. This was less terrifying, certainly, than the big toothy yawn with which Mugger the crocodile said, “Hi!”

A couple of *langur* monkeys refused to come down from their perch high on a *simal* branch but they chattered their greeting and playfully threw down seeds of the tree, which came wrapped in a cottony substance. A fussy male peacock landed in a flurry of colourful feathers. He was obviously a well-known show-off, as everybody pretended not to notice. He started his insistent “*ngnnaaaaaa ngnaaaaaa*” call, which nagged everybody no end.



A strange creature, as large as a thatched-roof hut, with folds of grey skin cascading down her sides, sidled over and shook a single horn that grew straight out of her snout. One small eye of Madam One Horn, the rhinoceros, winked at Bhaktaprasad. She introduced him to her calf, who was hiding behind her substantial backside.

“Meet my son Ekraj. He is a shy, shy one. Ekraj, can you tell Mister Frog whether you are a one-horned rhino or a two-horned one?”

“A one-horned rhino,” came a small voice from over the side.

“And where do you find the *two-horned* rhino?”

“In Africa!” said Ekraj, getting bolder.

Before long, the frog and baby rhino were fast friends, playing hide-and-seek amidst the tall grass known, quite naturally, as Elephant Grass,

The hustle and bustle in the jungle clearing suddenly became subdued as a yellow-and-black striped form was seen moving in the undergrowth. Reluctantly, it seemed, the beast emerged into the clearing.

“Oh, how nice of you to have come, Royal Bengal!” exclaimed Tarai Toad, delighted that the tigress had decided to drop in. The unquestioned queen of the Chitwan jungle, Royal Bengal did not often mingle with lesser wildlife. However, even she seemed keen to meet the frog who had travelled all the way to Chitwan from Kathmandu.

After the introductions were over, Royal Bengal even made conversation. “You are one lucky frog, free to go where you want,” she said. There was a certain melancholy in her voice.

Bhaktaprasad indicated that he did not understand, while everyone, even the peacock, fell silent in order to hear the words of the wise and elderly cat. Royal Bengal explained, "Once, the jungle was spread like a huge, thick carpet across this entire land of Chitwan. The humans used to call it the *Char Kosay Jhadi*, for them a fearful stretch of dense forest full of demons and spirits, besides wild animals. Back then, we creatures of the forest were free. Today, the humans have come down from the hills and taken over our once expansive home. They have cut the forest tracts and established farms and fields, and we are locked into this reserve."

"But, Royal Bengal, this Chitwan jungle is still so large," interjected Bhaktaprasad.

"It does seem like a huge reserve, and it is adequate for frogs and loads. But we larger creatures need to move about for food and forage. Each of us tigers and rhinos needs a large territory if we are to survive, and what the humans have left us is just not enough."

The wise and wistful words of the Jungle Queen had everybody captivated. She ended by saying, "The long stretches of *jhadi* are all gone now, Bhaktay. And the other national parks ' and reserves are so far apart that we cannot visit them without going through human territory. You can come at will from Kathmandu, frog, but I could never go there if I wanted to. We are imprisoned."

A WILD AND WET PARTY

All the creatures, including the guest from Kathmandu, had become increasingly morose as they learnt from Royal Bengal how good and wild all of Chitwan used to be. For a while, everyone forgot that there was a party to be enjoyed. And then, suddenly, the clouds opened up.

A flash of jagged lightning cut across the sky. It took a couple of seconds for the thunderclap to hit the forest clearing, setting the heart racing. Winds came from nowhere and swooped down on the forest canopy, bending the *simal* branches. Grey clouds with dark underbellies churned overhead. Soon it began to rain, at first in large drops which pattered on the leaves. Then in sheets that came slashing down with a roaring sound which drowned out even the thunder that was constantly crashing overhead.

There is nothing a frog likes more than a monsoon shower, and this one had a ferocity Bhaktaprasad had never experienced before. This jungle deluge was something to tell the folks back home about. Around him, every creature great and small was making the most of the downpour. Mugger looked up and opened his jaws wide to let the rain drops tickle his palate. The monkeys slithered down the tree trunks and swung by the vines. Parrots, turtle doves and ravens set up a screeching racket and flew awkwardly around the forest clearing, their plumage dishevelled by the wind and rain. Royal Bengal graciously invited Bhaktaprasad to hop on her back, and together they cavorted around the waterlogged clearing.

Bhaktaprasad had not had so much fun since playing tag with his tadpole buddies. Look at him now, riding a Chitwan tiger! And all these new friends! He could not hold himself back.

"Yay!" cried Bhaktaprasad, "I'm a hero!"

The squall departed as quickly as it had arrived, and for a moment the forest was quiet. Then from high above the parrots set off an alarm, “The elephants are coming! The elephants are coming!” Bhaktaprasad looked around in amazement as the animals hurriedly slipped into the undergrowth and underwater. Mugger dragged himself to the river, took a deep breath, and sank to the bottom to wait out the intruders. Royal Bengal looked back apologetically, said “Sorry” and flicked the frog off his back into a patch of rhino dung where he made a soft landing. She disappeared into the tall grass. The party was clearly over.

Then the elephants lumbered into view, a whole line of them, maybe five. But what was this? These were not wild elephants, which was what Bhaktaprasad had expected. Tarai Toad was by his side, and he explained the strange procession as it went past. “Those are domesticated elephants, trained by the humans to do their bidding. Those are tourists riding *howdahs* on the elephants’ backs. They come to Chitwan to look at us wildlife.”

As frog and toad peered from behind the pile of rhino dung, they could see clearly that the tourists were displeased. After having spent so much time, and money to come here, they were not seeing Chitwan’s fauna. It was most curious. There were rhinos, tigers, sloth bears and wild boars all around them in the undergrowth, but the humans had no idea! Their cameras and binoculars hung idly by their neck straps.

“So they spend large amounts of money to come to Chitwan just to look at leaves, branches and tree trunks!” Bhaktaprasad exclaimed, most amused. Tarai Toad nodded, trying to control the mirth that made his fat belly bulge and contract.

The tame elephants, looking as unhappy as their human passengers, heaved and swayed their way through. All around the clearing, you could hear the wild animals tittering as they tried to suppress their laughter.

“Oh, what a dull place the Chitwan jungle must seem to people,” said Bhaktaprasad. When he did not get a reply from his friend, Bhaktaprasad turned around. Tarai Toad was nowhere to be seen. Concerned, Bhaktaprasad searched the surroundings. He only saw Mugger the crocodile, his great jaws chewing slowly at some tiny morsel.



Mugger then slithered back down to the river's edge. Before he slipped into the slowly moving water, the crocodile gave a backward glance at a startled Bhaktaprasad. He said, "Mister Frog from Kathmandu, never forget that this is the jungle, where the law of the jungle prevails. This is no place for you, Bhaktay. A village creature like you might like Pokhara better. Try Pokhara."

With a snort and a ripple, the crocodile was gone. Terrified, Bhaktaprasad hopped his way out of the national park of Chit-wan as fast as his hind legs could hop him.

TRUCKING IT NORTH

"Try Pokhara," Mugger had said, and that had set the programme for the frog. Some place a little less wild, where one's newly made friends were not dancing and playing one second, and converted into a crocodile's appetiser the next Pokhara, the frog knew was a valley just like Kathmandu, only shaped differently and somewhat lower in altitude. It lay northwest of Chitwan, right below the towering snows of Annapurna Himal.

Bhaktaprasad, by now a seasoned traveller, decided he would stow away in a truck to Pokhara, for which he first had to get to the town of Narayanghat. All the major highways of Nepal joined up in this bustling township by the river Narayani, and there would surely be a regular line of trucks headed for Pokhara. To get to Narayanghat, Bhaktaprasad rode under the seat of a jeep carrying tourists back from Chitwan.

It was already dark when the jeep arrived at Narayanghat's busy crossroad. Mighty "night buses", with mightier pneumatic horns, continuously screamed in and screamed away. By morning, these buses would be depositing their passengers in far west towns like Nepalganj, or at the eastern border at Kakarbhitta. The bazaar lights and neon hoardings made it as if it were daylight. Fast-paced Narayanghat was quite different from the pedestrian-only bazaar of Asan in Kathmandu. You could buy anything in Narayanghat, the frog noted, from motorcycles to calico, and electric generators to seasonal fruits.

"Asan is boring in comparison to this. I can't wait to tell Grandfather Buddhiprasad," the frog said to himself. He then set about to see if he could hitch a ride to Pokhara. Bhaktaprasad chose a drain to slip along so that he would not be trampled or crushed by the traffic overhead. He made his way to what seemed like a truck-stop, an eatery patronised by long distance drivers.

Bhaktaprasad entered the shack and slid under a bench so that he could listen in on the diners' conversation. From the banter of relaxing drivers, he learnt that a truck was about to leave for Pokhara. The driver of the truck in question was a lady, Phulmaya by name,

Phulmaya, the frog gathered, was the first-ever driver of trucks who happened to be a woman. "Even in India, which is a much, much larger country, there are no women truck drivers, not one," a young waiter was saying to one of his customers.

"Oh, shush, do be quiet!" Phulmaya said. Clearly, she was tired of this introduction, which she must be hearing all the time.

Bhaktaprasad leaned forward from under the table to get a glimpse of Phulmaya, and for the effort came within an inch of being crushed under the waiter's rubber slippers.

The driver had golden-brown skin, a large forehead, and a stubby nose with a *phuli* ring. She was gathering her long black hair into a bun, getting ready to leave.

Her tresses firmly out of the way, Phulmaya said a friendly “*La ta, bhai,*” to the waiter, left a generous tip on the table, and headed out to the heavily-laden Tata truck that was waiting outside. Walking around the vehicle, she kicked the tyres and made sure that the tank was full of diesel. The battery and engine oil, too, were checked to satisfaction; Phulmaya reached up and opened the door of the driver’s cockpit.

Bhaktaprasad knew exactly what he had to do. He sprang up and in one leap landed right on the driver’s seat. At eye-level with a startled Phulmaya, he croaked. “Listen, Phulmaya! You are the first woman trucker in Nepal and I am the first frog traveller of the kingdom. So you have to help me. Will you please let me hitch a ride with you to Pokhara?”



While clearly taken aback by a talking frog, Phulmaya was nothing if not adaptable to strange and sudden circumstances, which, incidentally, is the mark of all good truck drivers.

“How interesting! An eloquent frog, an articulate amphibian! But of course I will take you to Pokhara, dear!” replied Phulmaya, with genuine warmth. She added, “But trucks are cold to ride at night, you better get something to wear.”

When Bhaktaprasad indicated that he had never worn a stitch of clothing in his life, she replied, “There’s always a first time. Come, let’s get you something.” Frog and truck driver went around some of the Narayanghat shops, but it was late and most of the shutters were already down. They found a place which specialised in selling *topis*. “Well, a cap on your head is better than nothing,” Phulmaya said. Choosing one that was striped green and red, Phulmaya paid for it and put the cap on Bhaktaprasad’s stubby head. It fell over his eyes, and Phulmaya laughed at the discomfort of a frog who was wearing *anything* for the first time.

They went back to the truck, and the driver slipped in behind the steering wheel. With one strong arm, she lifted Bhaktaprasad and deposited him on the passenger side of the cockpit. She reached down, pulled up a stool, and put it on the seat so that the frog could look out of the windscreen and side window.

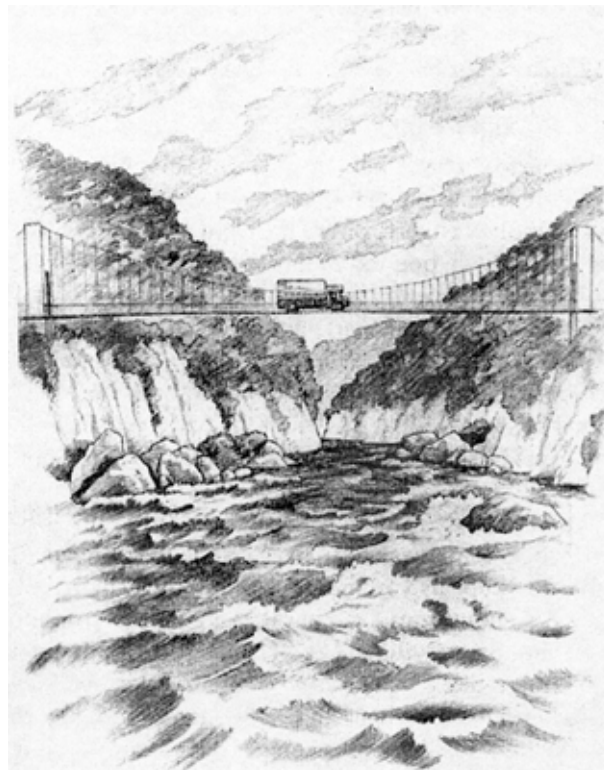
RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS

The trucker, who was from the Tarai town of Malangwa, turned out to be quite knowledgeable about the country's geography. As they left Narayanghat, she provided a continuous commentary on the route. The highway would take them upriver along the Narayani to the point where the Kali Gandavi River came in from the left. Beyond this point, the main branch was called the Trisuli, said Phulmaya, and then came the confluence where the Seti joined in. At the point where the Marsyangdi also joined the Trisuli, the road jumped to the other side over a huge suspension bridge, "This is the truck-stop of Mugling," said Phulmaya.

Realising that Bhaktaprasad was encountering difficulty keeping track of the steady progression of rivers, Phulmaya switched to singing gentle songs, which she had to sing rather loudly so as to be heard over the engine's roar. The songs were all about the rivers that they passed, and Bhaktaprasad dozed off as she was singing one which spoke of the crossing of the Marsyangdi River by dugout and climbing "the long climb to Bandhipur". This was an old trading post on a hilltop which had now been left isolated by the highway which followed the river valleys.

The frog awoke as the first shafts of the morning sun rose over some *himals* to the east. They had entered Pokhara Valley and were driving towards Pokhara town. The view was breathtaking.

Bhaktaprasad knew of the peaks of Ganesh Himal and Langtang Himal, which were visible from a ridge above his village of Ichangu, but this was a different kind of view. The snow mountains seemed to lean over Pokhara Valley, and you almost had to bend backwards to look at them!



Phulmaya seemed to be as good a mountaineer as she was a geographer and truck driver. She knew as much about *himals* as she did about rivers and carburettors. "That

mountain, above which the sun has just arisen, is Lamjung Himal,” she said with authority. “Next on the left, the black granite face which sweeps up to the summit ridge is Annapurna Two. Over there on the left, that broad ridge with no prominent summit, that’s Annapurna One, the highest.”

“Is she one for listing names!” Bhaktaprasad thought, lost now among the mountains just as he had been confused earlier by the rivers. But he perked up when he heard Phulmaya say, pointing ahead, “That, Bhaktay, is Machhapuchharay.” It was a name every school-going child in Nepal knew.

As he looked eagerly out of the right window, Bhaktaprasad saw a steep, pointed pyramid which had more rock than snow on it. Up, up, up it rose; and as he craned his neck to follow the mountain’s sweep, Bhaktaprasad’s *topi* fell off. But wait! If this was Machhapuchharay, where was the tail of the fish? Since his tadpole infancy, when he himself had a tail, Bhaktaprasad knew what the tail of the fish looked like. “But *didid*, how can this be Machhapuchharay when it does not look anything like a *machha*’s *puchhar*?”

“Silly Bhaktay,” Phulmaya said, taking one hand off the steering wheel to place the cap back on the frog’s head. “Mountains change shape as you move around them. The tail of the fish does not show from here, but if you go north from Pokhara towards Ghandrung village, it will come into view. I promise!”

It sounded like a fishy tale, and the frog decided he would have to extend his travels up to Ghandrung in order to check out Phulmaya’s suggestion. When he said as much, the trucker replied, “You should go to Ghandrung, Bhaktay, but first you must see Pokhara. It is a town with a huge lake full of friendly frogs. It will be good for you to be back among your own kind for a bit.”

As the truck approached Pokhara town, a sudden sense of anticipation took hold of Bhaktaprasad. The funny thing was, he did not know what about. It was a tingling sensation, and with it an urge to jump out of the truck and head he knew not where. Something was in the air. He looked quizzically over at Phulmaya, who, of course, knew what was up.

Phulmaya explained, “As an amphibian, Bhaktay, your instinct has just told you that there is a large body of still water nearby. You have been away from stagnant pools for too long, and it is time to get wet!”

Not to prolong the frog’s state, Phulmaya quickly drove the truck over to the shores of the great Lake Phewa. She had a look of melancholy as she reached over and opened the door on the frog’s side.

“Do not say anything, Bhaktay. I hate goodbyes. Go quickly, and take care as you climb mountains and ford rivers.”

Bhaktaprasad bolted out of the truck and hopped towards the water’s edge, not even looking back as the truck made a slow turn and disappeared in a cloud of dust and diesel smoke. He was intent on reaching the water’s edge.

“Wow, what an expanse of water! What a huge pond! No, it is a lake! No, a sea! Nonsense, an ocean! Oh, if only *hajurba* Buddhiprasad could see me now!”

As he bounded towards the shore, a frog who appeared to be a twin of Bhaktaprasad joined him. “Hey, you, blabbermouth! Where do you think you’re going, huh? Entering my part of the shore without asking me!”

But Bhaktaprasad was not listening. He reached the water, jumped far and dove deep, surfaced, and swam around in circles. He then floated with his face up, head resting on his tiny hands, a wide grin lighting up his face. Like any frog which has been removed from water for a long period, Bhaktaprasad let the wetness seep in through the pores of his skin.

After a while, Bhaktaprasad paddled back to land and slipped into a muddy patch by the shore. “Ahh, wallow, wallow, wallow! I love to wallow!” he exclaimed in ecstasy. It was somewhat later that he became aware of the presence of his amphibian companion, who was hunched on a rock above, glaring angrily down at Bhaktaprasad. “What do you think you’re up to, eh, you interloper?! Infiltrator! Intruder!”

“I’m sorry, friend frog. You see, I was so excited to see this huge lake, I forgot to seek permission of the custodian.”

“You, sir, are on my portion of the lakefront. If we did not look so alike, which indicates that we may be related, I’d have had you hauled up before the Lakeside Security Tribunal. Who’re you, anyway, and why do you look so much like me?”

Still in the mud, Bhaktaprasad explained his mission, and the tour which had now brought him to the side of Lake Phewa. He added, reaching back to Grandfather Buddhiprasad’s tutorials, “As for looking alike, we are both *Rana tigrina*, a common enough amphibian species that is found from Garhwal in the west all the way to Sikkim in the east.”



Now, that had sounded just like the learned Phulmaya, and Bhaktaprasad was pleased with himself. He could not keep from sharing one extra bit of information, if only to show off in front of this grumpy Pokhara cousin. “Ahem, did you know that there are other large lakes in the country? One of them is Lake Rara. And on its banks lives a frog species *rara* which is found only in Nepal and nowhere else in the world. Its scientific name is *Rana rara*.”

Bhaktaprasad's examiner couldn't help but be impressed. "Oh, all right then. I'm Prajapati Pokhrel, a clan that is specific to the valley of Pokhara. Call me PP."

"You know you should call yourself BB," said Prajapati in all seriousness as he joined Bhaktaprasad in the mud. It was clear he loved to wallow just as much as his Kathmandu look-alike. Only a scar on PP's forehead distinguished him from Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto,

The two frogs then became engrossed in exchanging notes about the valleys of Pokhara and Kathmandu—the creatures, people, mountains—so much so that they did not notice darkness set in. It was only when the fireflies came out that PP looked towards the shore and shouted, "Hey, the party! We'll be late, come let's go!" Dripping a trail of water and mud, the two frogs hopped towards town.

The extended Pokhrel family, which had for centuries lived along the Phewa lakeside, was having a gala affair that evening to celebrate the monsoon planting season. Unlike humans, who celebrate the harvesting season with festivals like *Dasain*, frogs of Pokhara marked the end of planting, because this is when insects are available aplenty in the slushy rice fields. Outdoor picnics were a regular feature, when frogs gorged on mosquitoes, dragonflies, ladybugs and a variety of flies.

"The planting season of early monsoon could well be called *Frog Dasain*," said PP as they hopped towards the party venue. They headed up a brightly lit avenue full of restaurants and lodges. PP explained that the fields and paddies along this part of the Phewa lakefront had been taken over by eateries and hotels which catered to tourists that nowadays arrived in Pokhara by the thousands. "However, this is off-season, so we have the place to ourselves," said the Pokhara frog.

"Off-season?"

"You know, the tourists do not like rain, so they do not come during the monsoon," PP and Bhaktaprasad both laughed at the thought of creatures who did not like rain. How strange!

Still laughing, the two friends entered the restaurant where the Pokhrel party was already in full swing. A local band, "The Croakers", was doing its utmost to imitate a Western froggy-rap band, and on the dance floor, scores of amphibians hopped to the music, from frisky young ones with their tails still on to wrinkled old geezers. Human waiters moved about with trays of the most delectable flies imported from the Indian state of Bihar. The variety was unimaginable; fried flies, sautéed flies, flies in oil garnish, flies floating deliriously about in mushy greenfly soup, and flied rice.



Coming from a village in Kathmandu's *kaanth*, Bhaktaprasad was taken aback by the sophistication and sumptuous-ness of the party hosted by his fellow-species of Pokhara. Sitting at a corner table, a tall glass of fresh fly juice in hand, he sensed the tempo build up as the froggy-rap boomed faster and louder. "It's unreal," he said to no one in particular. Identical frogs, distinguished only by age, were hopping higher as the party got wilder. By about midnight, the frogs were jumping so high that they were hitting the ceiling of the restaurant, and one could hear the double-thumps as they hit the ceiling and crashed back to the ground.

This swinging Pokhara frog life was eons removed from the quiet existence of his own Ichangu clan. "Same species, but what a world of difference," murmured a bemused Bhaktaprasad. He understood that, with their exposure to the modern world of tourists, these cosmopolitan Pokhara frogs now had standards which were quite different from his own.

Evolution had brought the frog species all over the world thus far. But now, new and unplanned directions were being charted. Here, in Pokhara, the Pokhrelis were, knowingly or unknowingly, reaching out beyond the grasp of evolution. As to whether this was good or bad for the Pokhrelis and frogs in general, Bhaktaprasad was not old enough, nor wise enough, to know the answer.

In the dancing crowd of identical faces, Bhaktaprasad spotted his friend PP from his forehead scar, and waved to indicate he was off. He made a quick exit before PP could come over and persuade him to stay, and headed back to the wallowing hole by the wonderful Lake Phewa. He had to wake up early to make it to Ghandrung, and there was some serious trekking to be done in the days ahead.

That night, sensing his adventurous grandfrog's state of confusion following the great party, Grandfather Buddhiprasad visited him in his dream. "To be modern is nice, Bhaktay, But when frogs lose all of their traditions in one go, they become disoriented. They lose the ability to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. Too much of anything, including change, is bad. It is all very confusing, Bhaktay. I guess it is best you go back to sleep."

CHECKING OUR MACHHAPUCHHARAY

Bhaktaprasad had not forgotten Phulmaya's instructions: Go to Ghandrung if you want to see the tail of the fish on Machhapuchharay. The frog headed up the mild slope that led away from Lake Phewa, past wide open fields set off by the low rock walls that were so distinctive of Pokhara. Every so often, he stopped to rest under the stately *pipal* trees that dotted the valley. He passed Pokhara's *bazaar*, itself was built along a long and winding road, which the frog followed all the way to the edge of the town. Continuing he passed many villages and finally arrived at a place which a sign said was Phedi, from where the real trek began. At the top of the climb would be Dhampus, a ridge top settlement which was famous for its view of Annapurna Himal.

As he gained height, Bhaktaprasad's breathing became more laboured and his hops became increasingly sluggish. His legs ached, he felt dizzy, and his outer skin dried up. "Hey, slowpoke!" came a shout from behind. "Out of the way, unless you want to be trampled!" It was a perspiring porter, bent low with a basket-load of luggage.

"Please help me up this climb," said Bhaktaprasad, remembering how comfortable it had been riding Jagat Bahadur's basket back in Asan bazaar. "All right, here," said the porter, picking up the frog with two fingers and placing him on top of his *doko*. The frog caught his breath and slowly began to regain his composure. Before long, he was enjoying himself, especially when a passing cloud decided to release a cool shower on them and later the wind came up the valley to rustle the leaves of the massive *pipals* on the slope.

"Trekking is fun when you don't have to walk, eh?" said the porter between grunts. It took quite an effort for him to climb with a load that weighed more than 50 kilograms. The porter's name was Hira Bahadur, and he said he was lugging the bags of trekking tourists who were headed for Ghandrung.

"Oh, goodie! Then can I go with you all the way!"

"Sure, no problem."

Like Phulmaya, Hira Bahadur, too, was quite knowledgeable about his country's geography. As he paused for a drink from a water tap by a *chautara* platform, he nodded when the frog asked him about the fish-tailed mountain. "Yes, you do see it change shape as you walk towards Ghandrung. I'll point it out to you."

As they came up the ridge at Dhampus, the peaks of Annapurna Himal came into view. And, lo and behold, the top of Machhapuchharay was no longer a pointed spire. A second summit was peering out from behind, but only just. "You keep your eye on that other top, Bhaktay. It shows itself as we move along," said Hira Bahadur.

The trail now headed west over a couple of days towards a village named Landrung. From here, it was a steep descent to the raging torrent of the Modi Khola, which was crossed on a suspension bridge, and then the hard climb up to Ghandrung. Every so often, Bhaktaprasad looked up to the right to check how much the mountain's shape had changed. By the time the trekking party turned the last corner into Ghandrung village, Machhapuchharay was openly flaunting its tail. To Bhaktaprasad, it was a thrilling moment of confirmation. "This is the real thing. This is what the postcards show," Hira Bahadur assured him.

Ghandrung was a famous stop for tourists, with a vista of the Annapurna Mountains that was famous all over Nepal and the world. Another reason the village had a good

name was the cooperative spirit of its human inhabitants. The villagers of Ghandrung understood that each individual had a responsibility towards the community as a whole. They constantly helped each other in a lot of things, such as keeping the village clean, protecting the forests from destruction, and maintaining old traditions and customs which had died in so many other villages of Nepal.

Bidding goodbye to Hira Bahadur and thanking him for carrying him, Bhaktaprasad put up in one of Ghandrung's many beautiful lodges, the one with a sign outside proclaiming, "The Ghandrung Mountain View and Chocolate Pudding Lodge With Hot Water Shower", Bhaktaprasad shuddered at the thought of a hot water shower, which would not do a frog any good, and decided to do without a bath.

The frog settled into a lounge chair in the front lawn of The Ghandrung Mountain View and Chocolate Pudding Lodge and took in his fill of Machhapuchharay's twin-spired summit. Towering like a sentinel, thousands of feet above the village, this hulk of rock and ice seemed almost alive, as if at any moment the tail might wiggle and swish away the fluffy clouds which had strayed near the summit.



Bhaktaprasad spent the rest of the day there, watching as the sun slid down to the west and cast the valley below in deep shadow. The scene became even more captivating as the snows on the mountains changed colour, from brilliant white to orange to red to gold, and finally to a dull ivory as the sun finally called it a day. As darkness fell, a full moon arose from behind the rounded summit of Annapurna South. In the moonlight, the mountains loomed silently and protectively over the adventurous little frog who was so taken by them.



It was all too beautiful for Bhaktaprasad, who could not hold back his feelings. "Yay! I'm a hero!" he cried, his personal expression of delight and discovery,

An insistent "Ding dong, ding dong" from the trail that ran by the lodge caught the frog's attention. In the darkness, he could make out a mule, laden with sacks, his upper

body decked out in colourful tassels and other ornaments. A large bell hung from his neck, and it was this that was doing the dinging and donging.

The mule stopped by the fence and looked over. “What is all this hero talk, eh? And how come a frog can talk?” Always ready for conversation and quite self-confident by now, Bhaktaprasad hopped over and replied, “I am Bhaktaprasad, from Kathmandu. What about *mules* that can talk?”

At that, the mule let the matter of talking ability rest. His name was Saligram Shumsher, one of the hundreds of mules who plied up and down the Kali Gandaki valley carrying goods for traders.

Said the mule, “I came by Ghandrung to drop off a bag of foodstuff, but am really headed up to Jomsom. It is behind the Annapurna Mountains, to the north of here. You want to come along?”

The question was a waste of breath, for of course Bhaktaprasad was game. He had been to the Tarai and had travelled through Nepal’s mid-hills, and here was an opportunity to actually penetrate the Himalayan range and get to its northern side.

“Oh, please, Sir Mule, Sir Saligram, take me with you!”

With a swish of his tail, a nod of his head, and a “ding dong” from his bell, Saligram indicated that the frog should hop on top of the sacks of rice he was carrying. He said, “Your additional weight will not amount to much. Hold on to the stay ropes. The trail is precipitous, and I do not want you falling into the river.”

And so, Bhaktaprasad looked up one last time at the fishtail mountain in moonlight and murmured a farewell. He could have sworn that the tail flapped ever so faintly—a goodbye wave. Or it could have been the dim light playing tricks on his eyes.

Bhaktaprasad clutched the rope that held the sack to Saligram’s back. He fell asleep to the steady gait of the mule, who plodded northward towards the Trans-Himalaya.

OF APPLES AND AMMONITES

The days that followed were blissful. Bhaktaprasad was travelling through what the mule said was the most majestic scenery in the world, and he had the best view from his travelling perch. The frog did not have to watch where he was going on the difficult trail, for Saligram took care of that.

The Kali Gandaki river valley cut a deep gorge between the range of Annapurna Himal range to the east and the hulk of Dhaulagiri Himal in the west. “You know do you not, that this is the deepest gorge on earth?” the mule asked, Bhaktaprasad answered, “I do know, now.” One more bit of information added to his already voluminous store of knowledge about his country.

“This river,” said Saligram “was here before the mountains began rising millions of years ago. As the mountains kept rising, the river kept cutting. Thus, the higher the mountains reached, the deeper this valley became.”

The trail was wide at times, and they passed tourists, porters and pilgrims along the way. At other times, the path narrowed so you could only go single-file. It hugged cliffs that dropped directly into the Kali Gandaki. One mis-step by Saligram, and they would be

trout meal. In the days that followed, the travellers negotiated lush jungles, walked in the mist of tall waterfalls, and watched the massifs as they changed shape in keeping with their progress. Always, by their side, was the roaring, frothing Kali Gandaki, one of the mightiest rivers of the Himalaya.



A week into their trip from Ghandrung, Bhaktaprasad noticed that the landscape had begun to change. The green forests of the south now gave way to terrain that was more and more desert-like. The rhododendrons and oaks gave way to scattered pines, and later to the smaller plants of the Trans-Himalaya, such as dwarf juniper and thorn bushes. Nothing grew beneath the trees, unlike the heavy undergrowth which was so abundant in the forests around Pokhara and Ghandrung. Here, there was only sand and rock. In the fields, Bhaktaprasad observed, rather than rice and maize there was barley.

This region of the upper Kali Gandaki was also full of apple orchards. Bhaktaprasad enjoyed munching on the fruit he plucked off branches which hung low and heavy over the trail. As they approached the village of Marpha, Saligram grunted greetings to other colourfully decked mules headed the other way. On their way back down to Pokhara, these mules travelled without loads. Moving faster, they made a greater racket with their bells.

Marpha was a pretty hamlet, with a central thoroughfare lined with inns and cafes. The whitewashed village houses all had flat roofs of beaten mud. Seeing Bhaktaprasad eye these strange houses which had no rooftops, Saligram intoned, "There is no need for sloping roofs here, because it does not rain that much."

"Why does it not rain here? It is the same country, isn't it?"

"Foolish frog!" said Saligram. "There can be different climates within the same country. Here we are still in Nepal, but north of the Himalayan range. The clouds cannot cross the high mountains to bring much rain to this side."

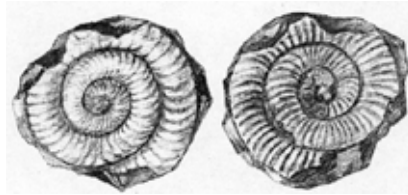
The rock path that ran down the middle of Marpha village was well swept. Everyone kept their courtyard clean and dumped all dirt into a covered gutter that ran under the path. Why were villages like Marpha and Ghandrung so much cleaner than Kathmandu or Pokhara towns, Bhaktaprasad wondered? He could not ask Saligram, because, while the mule was quite knowledgeable about the Kali Gandaki region, he knew little about the rest of Nepal.

Saligram walked over to a hawker who was selling some rounded black rocks spread out on a piece of cloth laid on the ground. “Take a close look at these rocks,” the mule said. Bhaktaprasad saw that the exhibited rocks had strange markings on them.

Said Saligram: “These black rocks are known as ammonites, and the markings are fossils of creatures which lived in the oceans of millions of years ago. Before they rose to become mountains, the Himalaya was part of the ocean floor. Today, Kali Gandaki’s cutting action exposes these fossils to our eyes.”

Indeed, Bhaktaprasad knew that the Kali Gandaki area was famous in all Nepal for its ammonite stones, which were regarded as extremely holy- “Guess what these are called in Nepali?” the mule challenged the frog.

Bhaktaprasad thought for a moment, and guessed correctly, “*Saligram!*” he cried. “They are called *saligram!*”



HOWLING WINDS OF KALI GANDAKI

After the mule had finished his lunch of cornmeal and had his fill at Marpha’s drinking trough, the two companions travelled the few remaining kilometres north to Jomsom. This was a trading post and the turnaround point for Saligram. It was getting to be early afternoon, and the frog noticed that the wind had picked up. Before long, it was a howling storm, except that there were no clouds or rain. The wind came up from behind, picking up little pebbles from the ground and hitting the frog in stinging bursts.

A gust picked up Bhaktaprasad’s cap and before he could grasp it, it was gone. Saligram saw it happen and gave chase, but the *topi* flew higher than the treetops before falling to the ground and rolling along. Just as the galloping mule’s forefoot was about to step on it, off the cap went again, carried by a fresh gust. “Go! Go!” Bhaktaprasad was like a jockey and Saligram the racehorse. The chase went on for a while, but the heavily laden mule was no match for the great wind of Kali Gandaki. The mule gave up the chase, snorting in disgust.

Bhaktaprasad’s cap ended its flight by landing in the middle of the river. The frog saw a flash of green and red as the cap surfaced once, then it was gone. “Perhaps in a few days it will end up back in Narayanghat, where we bought it,” said Bhaktaprasad. He knew that after miles and miles of descending through the hills, the Kali Gandaki would join with the Trisuli, becoming the river Narayani that flowed past Narayanghat.

Wheezing, and his nostrils flaring, Saligram was still catching his breath. He said, “Sorry about that! I should have warned you!”

“What is with this wind?” asked the frog.

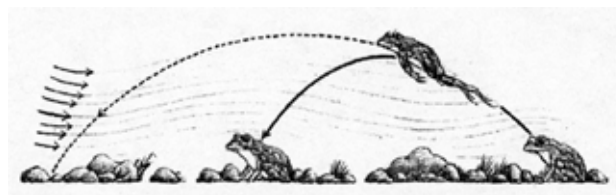
The mule explained that this was a regular phenomenon in the upper Kali Gandaki. “As the morning sun heats up the lowlands of Nepal and India, it creates high air pressure south of the Himalaya. The Tibetan plateau up in the north has low pressure, sort of vacuum. The mass of air from the south therefore wants to move into the Tibetan plateau, but the mountains are too high. The air has to find some way to make it north. The valley of the Kali Gandaki forms a natural funnel because it is so deep, and so the wind takes this path to reach Tibet.”

As Bhaktaprasad was trying to understand the science in what Saligram was saying, the mule continued, “The wind can either help or hinder travellers on this trail. If you are going down-river, you have to lean against it, which makes the journey harder and longer. However, if you are headed upriver, as we are, the wind pushes you along as if you were a kite.”

By the time the mule finished explaining the technical aspects of walking with or against the wind, they had arrived in Jomsom. Besides being a trading post and tourist stop, Jomsom had its own airfield, above which towered a huge mountain, Nilgiri. Its fluted ice columns seemed close enough to touch, but Bhaktaprasad knew that views could be misleading in the highlands. What looked very close could take days of hard hopping to reach.



Frog hopping with the wind.



Frog hopping against the wind.

Arriving in Jomsom, Saligram’s load was taken over by a *sahu*. The mule was let loose on a field full of green shoots, his reward for a job well done. It was now time for frog and mule to part. Bhaktaprasad took Saligram’s advice and lost no time in heading north, for he had to take advantage of the high wind to push him along.

The gusts were fierce, and Bhaktaprasad made quick progress. Every time Bhaktaprasad hopped, the wind carried him further than he would have gone if there had

been no wind. If he used to travel two feet at every jump, now Bhaktaprasad was airborne for four feet. He made double time.

He was surprised to see frogs on the trail, headed the other way. They were having a hard time, going against the wind. With every hop which would have taken them four feet under no-wind conditions, they were achieving only one foot's advance. They would never reach Jomsom before nightfall at this rate, thought Bhaktaprasad as he bounced past. He would have liked to have stopped and said hello to these locals, but the wind would not allow it.

THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF KAGBENI

The super-hops brought Bhaktaprasad quickly to the large village of Kagbeni, which was a curious kind of place. Upon arrival, he noted that there were wires and electrical lines all over. But when night fell, there were no lights in Kagbeni. The village was as dark as any of the thousands of villages of Nepal. "I wonder why this is so," thought the frog. As if to answer his question, fate put him in the hands of Dzo Dzopa, the most talkative bovine this side of Mongolia.

Dzo was a crossbreed, the offspring of a highland yak and a lowland cow. She lived in a trail-side stall, and clearly her life's mission was to corral passers-by and have talk sessions. She had watched Bhaktaprasad enter the village, and now called out, "Come on in, come on in! So you're wondering why we have electric lines but no lights in Kagbeni?"

Bhaktaprasad entered the stall a bit unsure of what he was getting into. "Sit down, sit down, and I will tell all," said Dzo. The frog seated himself, and without losing a second Dzo was off. "Once upon a time, some engineers—humans, you know— came up from Kathmandu and promised us electricity. They said they would use the valley's great winds to turn windmills, which would in turn spin the generators to make enough electricity for all of Kagbeni. Unfortunately, the engineers underestimated the power of our local winds, and the propellers were blown away the day they were put to work.

"And so, you have power lines everywhere, but no juice in them!" interjected Bhaktaprasad. "Oh, how foolish, these humans!"

"Yes, yes, we know that," said Dzo. Then, "We have not been introduced."

"I am a frog ..."

"That I can see," Dzo cut him off.

"Of species *Rana tigrina*..., "

"Oh, one of those."

"Residence, Kathmandu. Destination, unknown."

"Right. And I'm Dzo Dzopa. Crossbreed. Mix of strains. Hybrid. Half yak, half lowland cow. Humans do these things because they want in us the hardiness of the Highlander and the productivity of the lowlander."

"Tell me about yaks," said Bhaktaprasad, beginning to enjoy this hybrid creature, so cocksure.

“They are known as the camel of the Himalaya. But if you ask me, it is the camel that should be called the yak of the desert.”

“Go on, go on,” the frog egged Dzo to continue.

“Well, yaks have heavy fur and live high on the sides of the Snow Mountains. They are brought down by the yak herds only when the lowlands are cool, in wintertime. Like mules, yaks are working animals. They are very useful dead or alive. Their hair is woven into cloth, their skin makes all kinds of products, the milk can be converted to rock-hard *chhurpi* cheese, which holds the record as the longest chewable edible item on earth. And the meat is eaten,” said Dzo Dzopa, making a face.

“And what do *you* do, Dzo?”

“Me? I do as little as I can,” Dzo chuckled. “My mistress at the tourist lodge keeps me for milk, but I give as little as I can.”

Dzo continued, “I am one for lazing about. Dzo Dzopa makes friends with mules from down-country and yaks from up-country, but she stays home.” She thought for a while, then added, “I do provide good conversation and guidance to travellers, so I believe I have a role to play.”

On days when she felt especially immobile, Dzo refused even to saunter over to the pastures above Kagbeni. She would merely lean out of the stall window and help herself to grass and straw loads being carried by villagers on their way in from the fields. And all the time, Dzo chewed and chewed, so much so that Bhaktaprasad decided this could not be regular bovine mastication.

“Say, Dzo, what’s in your mouth?”

With a mischievous glint in her eyes, Dzo replied, “*Chhurpi!*”

In Dzo’s good-humoured irreverence, Bhaktaprasad found a personality quite distinct from the others he had met in his travels. Phulmaya was knowledgeable and earnest; Prajapati was smart, but a bit of a bully; Saligram was a workaholic who did not know the pleasures of life. Dzo Dzopa knew *everything*, it seemed, but took *nothing* seriously.

From her trail-side listening post, Dzo kept her antennae tuned to gossip and trail information; when bad weather caused cancellation of a flight into Jomsom; where a new landslide had washed away a footbridge; and—far out—what the king in Kathmandu had said in his annual address to the joint session of Parliament.

Bhaktaprasad took Dzo’s advice and rested in Kagbeni an extra day. She had warned, “There is a sudden climb to a height in front of you. Lowland frogs are susceptible to altitude sickness, also known to medical science as Acute Mountain Sickness, or AMS, which includes the symptoms of pulmonary and/or cerebral oedema. Ahem.” Dzo cleared her throat and added, a bit sheepishly, “At least that’s what the Director of the Himalayan Rescue Association said when she held a workshop Here in Kagbeni last year.”

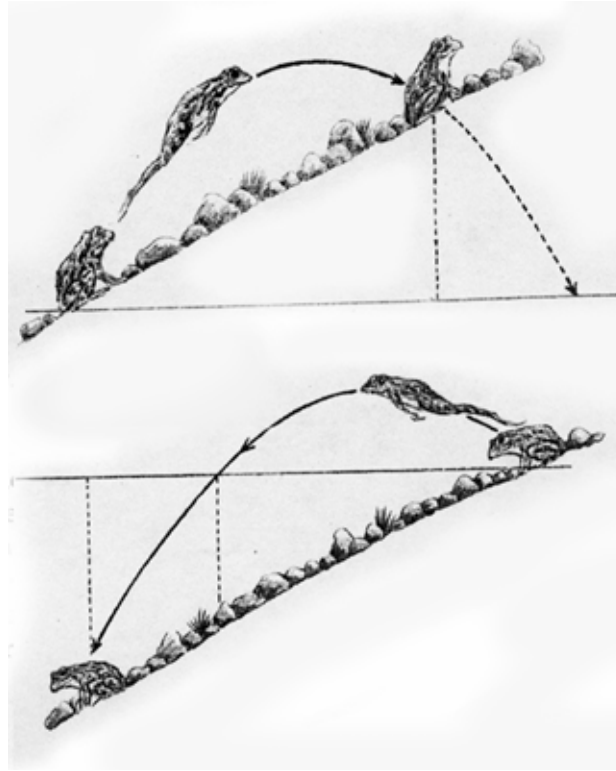
Bhaktaprasad suspected that the mountain sickness argument was Dzo’s way of keeping him in Kagbeni a little longer, just so she could chat some more. That evening, Dzo advised the frog on his travel plans. “We are in Lower Mustang. That thumb of territory you see on the map sticking out of the middle of Nepal on top is Upper Mustang. It is also known as the Land of Lo, which few have seen. I suggest that you first visit the temple of Muktinath, collect your blessings, and then travel north.”



PILGRIM FROG AT MUKTINATH

It took a full day of hopping up a relentlessly steep incline for Bhaktaprasad to reach the holy precincts of Muktinath. As he moved in ever-weaker hops, Bhaktaprasad had occasion to again study the science of movement as it related to frogs. Down by the Kali Gandaki, he had observed how wind could help or hinder progress. On an upwards slope, such as this one, an average hop did not take you as far as it would if you travelled on the flat. Conversely, on a downward slope you would go further.

Bhaktaprasad realised that he was becoming increasingly scientific-minded as he went along. He had experienced so many phenomena, which had made him curious, which in turn had made him seek answers. The frog made a mental note to write a scholarly research paper after his travels on the topic of “Amphibian Locomotion.” He realised now that he finally had an answer to all those aunts and uncles who kept asking him, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” His answer would henceforth be, “A scientist!”



On upward slope, it is a shorter hop.

As his mind was distracted by matters scientific, the frog did not notice the distance he had covered, and before long he was in Muktinath. It was already dark, however, and he scurried over to an abandoned trailside rest house to spend the night. Tomorrow, there would be enough time for exploration. When morning came, Bhaktaprasad saw that Muktinath was at the base of a massive mountain to the east. This meant that the sun did not shine on the settlement till late in the morning. However, the area was lit up by sunlight bouncing off the hillside on the far side of the valley. Looking around, the frog realised that amidst the dry landscape, Muktinath was located where water emerged from a spring in the mountainside. The immediate area was therefore green and inviting, with shady poplars and the sound of gurgling water. The temple itself was in the shape of a three-tiered pagoda, which made Bhaktaprasad feel at home since it looked so much like the tiered temples of Kathmandu.



Muktinath was a pilgrimage centre. It had such sanctity that creatures great and small from all over made their way here to pray and meditate, and seek emancipation (*'mukti'*) from worldly concerns. On one side of the temple were 108 water spouts which came out of taps shaped like cattle heads, an odd feature which reminded Bhaktaprasad of Dzo a hundred and eight times over.

In the pool where the water emptied, Bhaktaprasad met pilgrim creatures from east, west, north and south. There was an elderly couple, a male and female Impeyan Pheasant, from Jumla district to the west. A large family of jackals had come up from Parasi, the Tarai district close to Chitwan. One turtle, who spoke a tongue no one could understand, gestured to indicate that he had trudged for three years to get here, from the south .of India.

The pheasant couple from Jumla took a liking to young Bhaktaprasad and guided him around the temple, which was dedicated to Lord Shiva. They then entered an adjoining building which was kept very dark inside. Bhaktaprasad saw a flame emerging from an opening in a rock. It burnt a clear blue from natural gas that emerged from deep inside the earth. The sound of flowing water indicated that there was a spring somewhere underneath.

The monk who protected the flame looked down at Bhaktaprasad and said in a whisper, "Muktinath is a place of great significance, where fire meets water."

The monk explained that Muktinath welcomed all worshippers, the Tibetan Buddhists from the north, the Hindus from the south, as well as those who worshipped nature, art even those who were not religious at all. "This is a powerful place, where the energy

from the depths of the earth comes to meet us, to remind us to be respectful to the planet.”

In the dark of the temple’s inner sanctum, as the blue danced before his eyes, Bhaktaprasad felt a surge of understanding as to the need to respect the earth and all that constituted. He had come far in the single-minded mission of exploring his country, and in this room, in front of that flame, he understood that he had done right.

After the pheasant husband and wife said their prayers by the flame, Bhaktaprasad emerged with them into the bright light outside. The frog decided to move on, and he politely declined the old couple’s invitation to travel with them to Jumla. Close by the temple, Bhaktaprasad saw a sign that said “Tourist Information” and went in. A lady behind a counter looked down and asked if she could help. The frog asked for trail information.

She replied, “Well, you could either go back down to Kagbeni, or north to Lo Manthang, which is the capital of Upper Mustang. Or you could take the trail eastward and trek up the high Thorung La pass.” This pass, she said, led from Mustang District on this side over to Manang District on the other. The climb was steep, high and long, and there were no settlements along the way. No frog had been known to have made the Thorung La crossing before, because of the dangers of AMS.

“When you go up too high, too fast in the higher reaches, the body does not get enough oxygen to breathe, so like other lowland creatures frogs become sick and can even die,” said the information lady. Bhaktaprasad had no intention of dying this young. In fact, he had no intention of dying, period. He” decided to follow the suggestion of Dzo Dzopa and visit Lo Manthang.



HIGH AND DRY DESERT

While other frogs having visited Muktinath might have decided to declare an end to their wanderings and gone home to brag about their exploits, the wanderlust in Bhaktaprasad was as yet unsatiated.

There was another reason to go to Upper Mustang. He knew from Dzo Dzopa’s descriptions that it was a different kind of society from everything he had experienced thus far. Unlike much of the rest of Nepal, this region had been isolated from all the modern developments of the last few decades. Upper Mustang had therefore remained an ancient society where the old ways had not yet changed. For example, it still had a *raja* of its own, who retained the respect of his subjects. He lived in the walled township of Lo-Manthang, the capital. The people of the kingdom of Lo were known as the Loba.

Taking a final dip in the wallowing hole under the bovine-headed taps of Muktinath, the frog headed north, towards Lo Manthang. Before long, he had left all habitation behind and entered a truly desert-like region. He hopped along dry riverbeds and over

barren rocky slopes. Powdery dust rose underfoot, and all the while the bright Himalayan sun beat down on his back.

All kinds of amphibians, including frogs, by their very name, are meant to live on both land and water. But up here there was only dry expanse. Even the lakes further up on the Tibetan plateau, he had heard, were salty, like the sea, whereas frogs needed fresh water. Bhaktaprasad realised that he was high and dry, which was not a safe thing for a frog to be!



The sun became hotter and the dust more powdery. Bhaktaprasad's throat became parched, his skin turned dark from all the exposure to bright light, and cracks appeared on his back as the sun sucked the moisture out of it. So this is how a frog lost in the desert would feel, thought Bhaktaprasad. Then a sudden revelation—he was very much that frog, lost in the desert!

Bhaktaprasad was on the verge of panic when his unfocused gaze fell upon a blur of green. Indeed, up ahead, there was what could only be an oasis! Bhaktaprasad had heard of mirages playing tricks on desert travellers. So he inspected the view closely, blinked several times and looked again. He closed one eye and turned his head sideways. This was not a mirage, and very much an oasis.

This was how it was in Mustang: when you were about to collapse due to all the dust and dryness, green fields would beckon. At the base of mountains, invariably, there were rivulets with their source in the melting snows higher up. The water flowed clear and cold, and canals were used to channel it into fields, where buckwheat, mountain barley and potatoes grew in carefully tended fields. Next to the fields were little flat-roofed villages, swaying poplars and willows, lovely green grass, and, above all, mud.

This is not such an inhospitable terrain after all, Bhaktaprasad decided, and he rejected all thought of retreat. He made good progress north towards Lo Manthang, going from green valley up to high pass and down to the next green valley. Along the way, he passed

villages with enchanting names like Chailey, Ghemi and Charang. At each high point between the village-oases, Bhaktaprasad came across a *la-toh*. These were pyramidal piles of rocks and pebbles placed there as offerings to the gods by travellers seeking blessing for a safe journey, or thanksgiving for travels completed. Some of the *la-tohs* were so tall; they must have accumulated their rocks over centuries.

Stopping to catch his breath at one *la-toh*, Bhaktaprasad wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked back at the way he had come. What he saw took his breath away, for he had notched quite a distance already from Lower Mustang, The white flanks of Nilgiri Himal, which he had seen up close from Jomsom now rested low on the horizon.

Bhaktaprasad was thrilled with the realisation that this far north of the Himalaya he was still within the boundaries of Nepal. In much of the rest of the country, he knew, the snow range formed the northern frontier with Tibet. From Kathmandu, Pokhara, Narayanghat and almost everywhere else in Nepal, you had to turn north to see the Himalayan peaks. But here he was looking south!

The idea took some getting used to, and Bhaktaprasad marvelled yet again at the diversity of Nepal's geography. He also remembered Saligram explaining why Mustang is so dry. Clouds that well up from the Bay of Bengal are unable to overcome the Himalayan barrier and shed all their moisture on the windward southern slopes. Situated north of the mountain chain, as the mule had explained, Mustang was in a "rain shadow". And so, while it was monsoon season down in Pokhara, up here the skies were clear and the view limitless.



THE LAST LA-TOH

Going up from valley floor to *la-toh* and down, and up again, seemed a never-ending cycle and Bhaktaprasad was once again close to despair. He dragged himself to what he hoped would be the final *la-toh* and slumped next to a rock that had the Tibetan Buddhist prayer *Om mani padme hum* inscribed in beautiful calligraphy.

"*Om mani padme hum*" announced a huge, furry four-legged creature that suddenly appeared from behind and slumped by the rock pile. It heaved a long sigh, blew an equally long whistle, and looked down the valley. As if ignoring the presence of the frog, he said, "Yup. Lo Manthang. Here we come!"

Bhaktaprasad cheered up, for this fellow trekker seemed to have spotted the destination. He had a stubby snout, long whiskers, and an undulating body that glistened as if the fur had been oiled. There was a mischievous look to his eyes and his face permanently locked in a crooked grin. "Eh?" he said, cocking his head, suddenly pretending to notice a travel-weary Bhaktaprasad by his side. "You're a frog, right? Now how did I know? I've seen the likes of you down in Pokhara and in India. What're you

doing up this far? Lose your way? Heh, heh!” He slapped his side with his front paws and laughed.

Bhaktaprasad thought better than to take offence, and replied in earnest, “No, sir, I did not lose my way. I am Bhaktaprasad from Kathmandu. I am headed for Lo Manthang.”

“That’s it down there,” said the creature, which then proceeded to give his own introduction.



“My name is Pemba Musa, but I’m not a rat as my name suggests, I am a marmot, and there are many of my kind up on that high plateau beyond Lo Manthang. A school-master from the lowlands had come up to teach in Upper Mustang. Teacher had never seen a marmot before and thought I looked like a rat, so he named me ‘*musa*’. But I don’t really mind, for the name serves me well when I travel down south for trading. I am a trader, and when it is winter and freezing cold up here, I travel all over Nepal and India.”

Changing the subject, Pemba pointed his snout down at the compact settlement full of flat mud-roofed houses and completely enclosed by walls on four sides. “Lo Manthang’s the main village of the Loba people. The wall surrounds it completely and they close the one entrance there is at dusk.” Bhaktaprasad learned that the enclosing wall and the tradition of closing the gates at sundown was a legacy of a violent past, when bandits from the north used to raid Lo Manthang and other such isolated settlements. Even though there were no robbers today, the custom was continued.

Pemba checked the setting sun and suddenly realised that it was almost time for the gates to close. He shouted, “Hey, brother, let’s go! Otherwise we will be locked out!”

It was a steep path down to Lo Manthang, and Pemba was off like a flash. The frog followed him but he was so tired, he gave up hopping altogether; he just slid down the

sandy slope after the bounding marmot. The huge gates were just creaking shut when the twosome slipped through.

“Phew, that was close! I wouldn’t have wanted to sleep out in the open after such a long journey,” said Pemba. After catching his breath, he said, “Come with me. I know where to go.”

The marmot led the frog through narrow stone-paved lanes to a lodging house run by a hostess whose name, Pemba said, was Hema Malini. Bhaktaprasad was taken aback, for he knew this to be the name of a Hindi film star of long, long ago. Anticipating Bhaktaprasad’s question, Pemba said, “Dolma was once renowned as the beauty of Upper Mustang. Back then, everybody said ‘Dolma is as pretty as the great Hema Malini’. The name just stuck.”

They entered a crowded room full of loud talk, laughter and wood smoke. In one corner, some men were playing cards, and elsewhere children rolled about on a dusty rug. “Hello, Pemba, you rascal you! Back from the plains, eh? And who is this strange new face that I have the pleasure of welcoming?” A lady in the traditional wrap-around dress looked down at Bhaktaprasad. Her features were soft and rounded, her voice high-pitched but pleasant. When she smiled, a gold tooth glittered in the kerosene lantern’s weak light.



“Oh, hello, *ajila*. This is Bhaktaprasad. He is a frog. We met up on the pass and I’m showing him around,” said Pemba, suddenly subdued and respectful. Turning to Bhaktaprasad, he whispered. “This is Dolma. She has the prettiest human face north of the Himalaya.”

“Here, sit down,” Dolma a.k.a. (also known as) Hema Malini said, pointing to a low wooden table by the window. She put two bowls of *tsampa* and two cups of tea in ornamental ceramic mugs in front of frog and marmot and went off to attend to the other guests. Pemba taught Bhaktaprasad to eat the dry *tsampa* flour by mixing it with the tea,

which was salty and smelt of yak butter. Bhaktaprasad found he liked this kind of tea. “It is best when you put popcorn in it,” Pemba whispered, as if letting him in on a secret.

The marmot then took Bhaktaprasad out for a quick tour of Lo Manthang. The lanes were narrow and winding between flat-roofed houses where yaks and mules lived underneath and people lived in the upper floors. They visited huge, dark gombas with brooding statues of gods that were two or three storeys high. It was late evening now. Monks prayed in monotone, gongs and bells rang out, the aroma of incense pervaded the air, and the people of Lo Manthang prayed for the safety and prosperity of their little town.

They came across a tall white building, with a fiercely barking mastiff tied to a balcony which overlooked the main square next to the town gates. “That is the palace of the *raja*,” Pemba said, looking up. “Even though Mustang is within the much larger kingdom of Nepal, the king in Kathmandu long ago allowed Mustang to keep its own *raja*. He does not have much power now, but he commands a lot of respect of the people here.”

Bhaktaprasad confided to Pemba his surprise in finding in the desert wilderness of Upper Mustang such a fine town with so many beautiful gombas, so many people, and even a *raja* with his own palace. Pemba nodded his head, and replied, “What to “you is wilderness, to us is home, Bhaktay. Come; let us turn in, for tomorrow we have some walking to do. We have to visit my family up on the plateau.”

They headed back to the lodge for the night.

FRONTIER MARMOTS OF CHANGTANG

In the early morning, after Pemba Musa settled the bills at the guest house of Dolma a.k.a. Hema Malini, marmot and frog slipped out of the gates of Lo Manthang. They went down to a stream, forded it, and headed north. After a few hours, they came to the inevitable *la-toh*, but there was a surprise in store for Bhaktaprasad. Instead of another dip and another valley beyond the pile of rocks, the land suddenly levelled off and seemed to go on for ever.

“Hey, Pemba, this place is flat, just like the Tarai!” said Bhaktaprasad.

The marmot replied, “Except, frog, that the Tarai is less than 1000 feet above sea level, and here we are 13,000 feet high. This is Changtang, the plateau which extends from this part of Nepal deep into Tibet Now you know why Tibet is also known as the High Plateau,”

The frog hopped and the marmot shuffled along on the treeless flats until they came upon a little man-made cement pillar. No more than three feet tall, it was the only thing that stood out of the ground for miles around.

“What’s this thing doing here in the middle of nowhere, Pemba?”

The marmot replied, “We are now truly at the edge of Nepal, This is a border pillar which marks the line separating Nepal from Tibet, which lies beyond this point. Long ago, a team of Nepali and Chinese officials came to this desolate spot did some measurements on large maps, and then put up this pillar.”



And sure enough, on the cement pillar was written, in Nepali, “Nepal No 22.” Beneath was given the year in the Nepali calendar “2019.” On the other side, there were Chinese characters. “There are hundreds of cement pillars like this all along the frontier,” said Pemba. Then, looking mischievously at Bhaktaprasad, he said, “Well, guess what? We’re here! Welcome to my home, Bhaktay!”

The frog was taken aback, for there was not a house or a shelter to be seen on the Changtang plain. The ground was pock-marked with holes, all over, but that was all. Then Bhaktaprasad looked again at the holes. Out of each, he now noticed, peered the face of a marmot. They were Pemba’s cousins and relations, and all were eyeing Bhaktaprasad, this strange, warty creature, certainly not a native of Changtang.

“Emerge, people!” shouted Pemba. “This is my friend from Kathmandu, Bhaktaprasad, the frog!” The air was suddenly full of noise and dust as scores of marmots, yapping among themselves, jumped out of their hollows to inspect the visitor. Shouting to make himself heard over the din, Pemba introduced Bhaktaprasad as an adventurer, an explorer, one who had travelled right through Nepal to make it to Border Pillar No 22.

Marmots, by nature inquisitive creatures who are forever investigating this thing or that, wanted to know everything about their country. They made Bhaktaprasad describe Kathmandu Valley, and listened with rapt attention as he talked about the busy bus stop at Rama Park, Asan bazaar, temples, shop fronts, and the crush of people. They then had him recount the rest of his travels, and it was dusk by the time Bhaktaprasad was through with telling of Chitwan’s jungle, Pokhara’s lake, Ghandrung’s mountain view, and Muktinath’s blue flame.

Somebody lit a camp fire, using thorny desert bushes as fuel. Bhaktaprasad looked up, and saw the stars shining bright in the night sky. Someone plucked at a string instrument and someone else beat a drum. It was party time under the stars! A shrill marmot voice called for attention and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, the marmots of the plateau propose to mark Pemba’s return and the arrival of Visitor Frog. Let the celebrations begin!”

All marmots great and small abandoned their holes and joined the singing and dancing. The dance steps involved standing on two feet and shuffling backwards while twisting the hips. It was known as the Changtang Shuffle. Bhaktaprasad's stubby frog body could not execute the Changtang Shuffle, so he demonstrated how the frogs danced in the fields of Ichangu. It required letting the hands hang loose in front, palms down, and jumping with knees bent to the beat of music. There was merriment all around as the marmots tried the Ichangu Hop, but they were not created to jump the way frogs could.

The noise of the wild party under the stars reached far out on the treeless plateau. Many miles away in Tibet, nomads preparing for bed in their Yak-hair tents were kept awake by the squeaks, yelps and snorts of the frontier marmots. And if you listen carefully, above the drumbeats and assorted rodent noises, you could hear a high pitched croak, repeating over and over: "Yay! I'm a hero! Yay! I'm a hero!"

Down in Lo Manthang, Dolma a.k.a Hema Malini, the lodge-keeper went over to the window and listened. "I recognize that croak," she said, turning to a guest. "It's that frog from Kathmandu!"

TRAVELS WITH KAILI

The morning after any wild party, everyone sleeps late, and wakes up lazy and grumpy. All was absolutely quiet the next morning by Border Pillar No 22 as Bhaktaprasad woke up in Pemba Musa's home-in-the-ground. He peered out. There was nothing to show for the night's frolic, other than trampled ground and a drum that someone had forgotten to take home.

While Pemba snored, Bhaktaprasad emerged and listlessly made patterns on the dust with his feet. This seemed to be the end of the journey. Here he was, at the border of Nepal. Even if he wanted to venture into the Tibetan side, which he didn't, he couldn't. Because the frog had neither a passport nor visa, which are required to go from one country into another. What would he do next?

As the frog was lost in contemplation, one by one the marmots emerged from their holes yawning, stretching and wiping their eyes. Pemba too got out and asked, "Brother! Why are you so deep in thought?" Bhaktaprasad explained that for once he was at a loss what to do next. The ever-helpful marmots held a quick meeting. One elderly rodent suggested that the frog visit Bajhang and Bajura districts in the extreme west of Nepal; another thought that Bhaktaprasad must now travel to far eastern Nepal, as he had already been through a fairly large section of the country's west. A young marmot suggested that the amphibian choose a hole-in-the-ground, of which there -were plenty around, and settle down in Changtang itself.

But Pemba overruled them all. Bajhang and Bajura as well as east Nepal were too far away, and holing in with the marmots was out of the question because frogs were not made to survive winters in the high plateau.

Pemba then announced, "Bhaktay should go to Dolpo and visit the monasteries there. A caravan will soon be going from Lo Manthang to the great Shey Gomba in northern Dolpo. He could join the caravan," There was a murmur of agreement, Bhaktaprasad was willing, and so that was that.

The entire marmot population of the Changtang colony accompanied Bhaktaprasad as far as the *la-toh*, where the plateau ended. They waved as the frog hopped downhill and back to Lo Manthang. When he arrived in the walled settlement, the caravan to Dolpo was about to depart from the town gates. The frog was quickly assigned to Kaili, a blonde-haired yak who was carrying bags of *tsampa* for Shey Gomba as a gift from the king of Mustang. He lodged himself down on top of a sack, and the line of yaks and their handlers began the long journey to Dolpo, many days' travel to the west.

Kaili was the most uncommunicative creature in all of Bhaktaprasad's adventures. She did not speak unless she had to, and never said a word more than was necessary. Mostly, she made do with grunts. This yak did not moo, she did not yak. When she stopped at a spring, Kaili would jiggle her back to get the frog's attention, and simply utter tonelessly, "Water." Similarly, over the course of the journey, Bhaktaprasad learnt to interpret terse commands like "camp," "food," and "shoo fly"—this last when the yak wanted him to flick away a troublesome bug from where her tail could not reach.

So, the many days to Dolpo, along an increasingly rugged landscape, were spent in overall silence as far as Bhaktaprasad was concerned. Deprived of conversation, the frog found he had time to concentrate on the world around him: the changing light of day, clouds as they altered shape, and blue sheep peering down quizzically from high rock cliffs as the caravan passed by in a jingle of bells.

Once, Bhaktaprasad felt Kaili stiffen and stop in mid-stride. She stared up at a rock outcrop above a juniper bush, and said, "Snow leopard." Indeed, reclined majestically on a rock ledge was a snow leopard, one of the rarest and most elusive animals of the Himalaya. The big cat flicked his long and furry tail from side to side as he regarded the queer combination of yak, sack and frog.

The snow leopard serenely met Bhaktaprasad's gaze, and after what seemed like a long time, languidly got up. The cat then suddenly tensed his muscles, and in a flash had leapt on to a rock ledge higher up, and then to another. Then, in the twinkling of an eye/ he was gone. Kaili turned her head and shot a glance at the frog on her back, as if to say, "Well, how about that?"



MYYAAAH GOES COUNTER-CLOCKWISE

Riding Kaili's back, Bhaktaprasad watched nature up close. It was pleasant to observe dawn turn to day and day turn to dusk up amidst the craggy terrain. But how long could you do this without getting tired, especially if your only company was a taciturn yak? Bhaktaprasad tried singing to himself but music and melody are beyond the reach of a frog's vocal chords. He tried to initiate conversation with the other yaks in the caravan, but it was difficult because of the distance between the animals.

Bhaktaprasad began to panic, thinking he would forget how to speak altogether if he did not soon find someone to talk to. A frog who could not croak was only a half-frog. What to do? Bhaktaprasad looked up to the skies and croaked loud and long.

His prayers were answered. As luck would have it, Bhaktaprasad's croak of despair caught the attention of Myyaaah, who was at that very moment overtaking Kaili on the trail. Myyaaah was a shaggy-haired domesticated mountain goat who enjoyed conversation.

Myyaaah's was a life which was as tragic as his spirit was blithe. He was a porter-goat, part of a caravan that carried Tibetan salt from Dolpo down to the lower valleys of Nepal, and brought up food grain that was not available in Dolpo. In two well-used woollen bags slung over his back, one balancing the other, Myyaaah carried a load of salt. This was a method of hauling cargo which had all but disappeared everywhere else but here in remote Dolpo.

As the two got talking, Bhaktaprasad said how sorry he was for the goat, having to carry all that heavy load. "The sheep and goats I know have lived pampered lives, always being fed the best grass, and left to graze on the choicest pastures."

"Oh, foolish frog!" exclaimed Myyaaah, becoming immediately familiar with the frog, for that was his way. "Don't you see, it is those well-fed sheep and goats that are to be pitied? The humans are just fattening them for the kill! Come *Dasain*, and it is off with their heads and into the saucepan! Me? I much prefer carrying these bags of Tibetan salt to being cooked as a meal for someone I do not even know!"

Bhaktaprasad was glad to see that Myyaaah had a sense of humour, which was one way to be reconciled with a difficult life. After some more conversation, it was revealed that the goat's trail also led past Shey Gomba, so Myyaaah, Kaili and Bhaktaprasad became a threesome. Now that he had someone to talk to, the journey passed much quicker for Bhaktaprasad. And time passed even faster after the frog devised a game of jumping from yak-back to goat-back and back again, a game Myyaaah gave the name "Back-to-Back".

The landscape was stark and life seemed hard in Dolpo, the largest but perhaps the remotest district of Nepal, Said Myyaaah, "Outsiders hardly ever visit this place. Life is hard for the *Dolpopa*, They have no comforts like electricity or running water and their children do not have schools. On the other hand, their very isolation has kept old traditions and religion alive in Dolpo."



On the final day, as they approached Shey Gomba, the caravan passed a *chhorten*. Kaili the yak began going around on its right. Bhaktaprasad knew this to be wrong. For everywhere, whether in Hindu temples or Buddhist monasteries, you showed respect to religious objects by circling them from the left, or clockwise. Why was Kaili going counter-clockwise around a *chhorten*?

Bhaktaprasad looked back and saw that the other yaks, and even Myyaaah, were doing the same—going counter-clockwise. “Either they’re all crazy in Dolpo, or there is something I need to know,” thought Bhaktaprasad. He shouted to the porter-goat, “Why do they circle the *chhortens* counter-clockwise here in Dolpo whereas everywhere else in Nepal they do it clockwise?”

Myyaaah came up and explained, “In Dolpo, we circumabulate shrines from the right because we follow Bon Po, the religion they say is older than every other in the Himalaya.”

Dolpo was so physically removed from the centres of the larger religions that it had remained unaffected by changes that had transformed traditions in many other parts of Tibet and Nepal. Said Myyaaah, “This is why even when everyone else goes clockwise, we in Dolpo continue with our old ways. Besides, Lord Buddha does his own circumambulations clockwise, so when we go anti-clockwise, we get to meet the Lord once in every circuit!”

LAMOLAMA THE TALL

During the few more days they had together on the trail, Myyaaah also taught Bhaktaprasad some home truths. It all came out of discussing the humans’ taste for goat and sheep (and for that matter, yak) meat. Bhaktaprasad expressed his disgust: “Isn’t it awful, how they are just allowed to *eat you?!* ” Then he went on, “In this, we frogs are lucky. No human wants to make dinner of us. We frogs only have to be careful of snakes.”

“Uh-uh, not quite true, Bhaktay,” said Myyaaah, shaking his head. He informed an unbelieving Bhaktaprasad that people did indeed eat frog meat, and with great relish. “In fact, frogs are considered a delicacy in a land called France, over across the seven seas. They do not eat the whole of you, but I hear they like the legs.”

Seeing how this information distressed Bhaktaprasad, Myyaaah tried to console him. “Do not worry, Bhaktay, French cuisine is not popular in your Kathmandu Valley. At least not yet, and this is a taste that is acquired only slowly. Your family is safe for at least a few generations.”

Later that day, while he was dozing on Kaili’s back, Bhaktaprasad dreamt that his entire amphibian clan from Ichangu had been captured by people speaking a strange tongue. He tried to run away, but a man wearing a goat’s mask cried out, “*Ce jeune avec les grandes cuisses!* He’s getting away! Stop him!” A hand came down and grabbed him by the neck, Bhaktaprasad screamed in terror.



“What’s this frog doing on Kaili’s back, and why is he screaming at me?!”

“Let me go! Let me go!” Bhaktaprasad cried and wriggled to get out of the grasp of a tall, skinny boy in monk’s robes. It seemed that the caravan had arrived at Shey Gomba, and had come to a halt before the monastery. The novice monk had been given the task of unloading Kaili, which was when he had seen Bhaktaprasad still deep in his fearful dream.

“How now? You can talk? My name is Lamolama. And you? Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto? Well, Bhaktaprasad, stop this wriggling. Here, ride my shoulder. You can hold on to my collar to keep from falling off. Do you want to go into the monastery and look around?”

The frog nodded ‘yes’ to each of the young monk’s suggestions. After the boy had disposed of the sack in the monastery’s storeroom, he walked towards the main building, with Bhaktaprasad clutching at his collar. The *gomba* was an imposing, if coarsely built,

structure of rock and mud, with walls that were at a slight slant, and rough-cut timber for rafters, doors and windows. From inside came the deep *thrrrrngng* of gongs, and the tinkling of tiny bells.

They entered a long, darkened assembly hall which held the strong aroma of strange incense. The abbot of the monastery sat on a raised platform at the far end. He held a brass bell in one hand and made intricate gestures with the fingers of his other hand, rituals that were far from Bhaktaprasad's understanding. In front of the head lama, two rows of monks were seated cross-legged. They were poring over written texts and reciting them in a guttural singsong. The only light came from scores of butter lamps whose tiny flames danced in front of the altar, below the statue of a serene deity.

Lamolama, the novice, joined the line at the bottom, near the doorway. He opened his own bundle of scriptures, wrapped in red cloth, turned the unbound pages, and joined in recitation. An assistant came down the line pouring butter tea, the kind which Bhaktaprasad liked so much since taking his first sip in Lo Manthang. Lamolama, without breaking his singsong chanting, gestured to Bhaktaprasad to go ahead and drink. The frog hopped down to the floor, lifted the cup to his mouth, and drank in deep. Ahhhh, this was bliss. This was his reward for making the long journey from Mustang to Dolpo.

FROG (FINDS HIMSELF) IN DOLPO

Having quenched his thirst with the yak-butter tea, Bhaktaprasad hopped back to his perch on Lamolama's back. The novices, including Lamolama, finished their recitation and folded up their scriptures, while the senior monks continued their readings. This gave Lamolama the opportunity to turn to the frog on his shoulder and explain what the prayers were about.

Bhaktaprasad listened closely. It was all about the need to understand the nature of the world and the role of all creatures in it. Living was a cycle from birth to death, to re-birth, to re-death, and so on. "While unthinking creatures live by instinct, thinking creatures such as us people and you frogs have additional responsibilities as we go through the cycle. Above all, we have to show compassion and understanding to fellow creatures.

"You see, Bhaktaprasad, the best quality in any thinking creature is the ability to see things from the other being's point of view. You are a good and wise person if you are able to do that, because all the conflict and quarrel—particularly among humans—happens because someone has been selfish and inconsiderate."

"But of course that is true!" A window opened in Bhaktaprasad mind. It also dawned on him that frogs were not the most important creatures on earth, something he had unquestioningly assumed till that time. In his own trip through the various parts of Nepal, Bhaktaprasad had seen and met so many creatures, and there were thousands of other kinds he had not even met. This earth was home not only to frogs, but to earthworms, squirrels, Siberian cranes, Lammergeyer vultures, wasps, mosquitoes, butterflies, snow leopards, blue sheep, humans, and *khumray kiras*, which survived underground by gnawing the roots of plants.

Then there was vegetation—forests and jungles with ferns, pines, vines, *sal* trees, wild flowers and broad-leafed *karkalo* plants. The rest of the world was made up of inanimate objects such as rocks, boulders, pebbles, sand and mud. And blue skies, billowing clouds,

rain, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, mountains with snow, mountains without snow, valleys, flatlands.... and Bhaktaprasad in the middle of it all, just one frog, of the species *Rana tigrina*.

All these beings and things had a separate existence, and yet they were all connected with each other and part of a larger scheme. "Ultimately, everything depends upon everything else for survival, even if it is not immediately obvious," Lamolama continued, seeing that what he said was making an impression. "No one person or thing is all-important in itself, and all are linked. Sheep need grass, and grass has to have soil. And the soil is kept fertile by sheep droppings. That's how everything is linked in a cycle."

The *thrrrrngng* of the gongs, the lights dancing about on the altar, and the rhythmic chanting of the monks had a curious effect on Bhaktaprasad. Till now, he had used his mind only to observe the outside world through the medium of his eyes and ears. Now, he directed his mind inward, and tried to understand the meaning of why he roamed, why creatures lived, why they died.

The voice of Lamolama accompanied his deep thinking. "When you begin to understand life, you realise the importance of humility, and of not thinking of yourself as a Very Important Person. You also understand the need to be compassionate, which is to be sympathetic and helpful to others without expecting a reward."

Bhaktaprasad shook his head violently and blinked several times. He had never *thought* so much in his life and was overwhelmed. Lamolama patted him on the head, seeing that the young frog was straining to understand new ideas that were suddenly jostling in his little brain. The novice said in a kindly voice, "There is always something else to learn in life, Bhaktaprasad. One is never done with learning. You have just begun."

Up here, amidst the jagged mountains of Dolpo, in a monastery of the Bonpo tradition, Bhaktaprasad the adventurer had discovered the world of the mind. Earlier, at a moment of some lesser revelation, you would have expected the frog to have dropped everything, jumped high with excitement, and shouted for all to hear, "Yay! I'm a hero!"

But Bhaktaprasad was silent. He felt good, but he felt no need to shout. "You are happy inside because other people have been nice to you and have guided you," the frog said to himself. "Now, how does this make *you* a hero?" Feeling better for this unselfish thought, Bhaktaprasad sat in a state of bliss through the rest of the ceremony in the assembly hall of the great *gomba* of Shey.

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

As night fell, Lamolama and Bhaktaprasad retired to the young monk's cell, which was a bare room with a small window. As they prepared for bed, Lamolama said, "You have travelled far, Bhaktaprasad, and today you may have understood that you can travel far and not arrive, or not travel at all but still arrive. You are lucky, because you have found yourself while travelling, which must be so much fun!"

Before turning in, the two discussed Bhaktaprasad's plans. Lamolama thought it was time for the frog to head back home to his family in Ichangu, and the frog readily agreed. Tomorrow, he must travel south.

Bhaktaprasad woke up as a shaft of morning sunlight lit up Lamolama's tiny room. Biting cold air entered from the window. Lamolama was outside, having already completed the morning's chores and rituals. Some monks came down to bid Bhaktaprasad farewell, and Lamolama brought out a *khada* which had been cut to frog-size. He reached down and put the woven scarf around Bhaktaprasad's neck. Deeply moved, the frog bowed with folded hands in farewell to all the gathered monks. He then turned around, and started his journey down and out of Dolpo.

Off he hopped, the scarf flapping behind him, making good time as he headed for the airfield at Jufaal. The journey took him past sparse settlements, a turquoise lake set amidst mountains that dipped straight down to the Water's edge, and a waterfall that descended for hundreds of feet. At the base of the waterfall was a sumptuous pond, where the frog stopped for a while to wallow and frolic. He washed away many days of dust, sweat and grime, for it had been too cold in Mustang and Dolpo to really think of a bath.

Refreshed by the halt beneath the waterfall, Bhaktaprasad was jogging along once more, intent upon return. He was a hardy, handsome frog by now, almost an adult. His skin was darkened by the sun at high altitude, and his thigh muscles rippled as he proceeded along the trail. His legs had seen so much exercise in the mountains that, without even trying, Bhaktaprasad now hopped farther than all the champion frogs he had known.



He was headed for Jufaal airfield because an overland trip back to Kathmandu was out of the question. It would take months, and there would be so many distractions along the way that Bhaktaprasad might end up taking years and in the process forget home altogether. Already, he had difficulty remembering the face of his grandfather Buddhiprasad and all his brothers and sisters. His mother's face, however, was as sharp in his mind as ever, and it was a sudden yearning to be by her side that kept him maintaining long strides in the days it took him to reach the airfield.



When he arrived at Jufaal, however, the man at the airline counter was most unhelpful. He said that regulations forbade issuing tickets to worms, frogs, toads, snakes and rats, and that the “amphibian” might as well start the long trek back to Kathmandu. Bhaktaprasad was distraught. He looked dejectedly down at the Bheri River, which flowed down below, and along whose banks the south-bound trail could be seen.

Then Bhaktaprasad made up his mind. “No, I cannot accept this. The regulation is unfair. I will fly. I will have a chat with the pilot when he lands tomorrow,” he decided, recalling how he had hitched a ride with Phulmaya in Narayanghat. She had been a driver of trucks, and the pilot was the driver of airplanes.

That night, Bhaktaprasad slept underneath the weighing scale by the airline counter at Jufaal. His wanderlust was a thing of the past and he looked forward to returning to the rice paddies behind Swayambhu *stupa*, and the warmth of family and friends at Ichangu.

FLYING FRIENDLY SKIES

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto was jolted awake by the sudden roar of the reversing engines of a landing Twin Otter. Jufaal had a sloping dirt runway and the plane kicked up a lot of dust as it taxied over to the terminal shack. The passengers got off the plane amidst curious locals who had come down from the surrounding villages to gawk.

A small door opened at the front of the aircraft behind the nose, and a smartly dressed man wearing a starched white shirt dropped to the ground. He circled the plane, inspecting the flaps, propellers and rudder. This was the pilot of the Twin Otter, and Bhaktaprasad quickly hopped over to him. The man was intently studying the struts of one wing and failed to notice the frog who was staring up expectantly.

Bhaktaprasad summoned all the energy he could to his muscular legs and bounced high to come up to the pilot's eye level before gravity pulled him back. This time, the pilot took note. Removing his goggles, he came down on his knees to inspect this curious sight of a frog wearing a *khada*.

Bhaktaprasad: "Mr Pilot, sir, my name is Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto,"

Pilot: "Yes, hello. My name is Akash Bhairav Narayan. You can call me Captain Aaybee. What can I do for you?"

It all came out in a rush, "Well, they won't let me board the plane, and I've been travelling all over Nepal for so many months, and I'm homesick and I miss my mother and grandfather and brothers and sisters, and I *really* want to go home!"

Captain Aaybee stroked his clean-shaven chin and said, "Aaah, a frog with the gift of speech. How interesting!"



For a moment, the frog's fate hung in balance. "Yes, yes. There *is* a regulation against taking frogs in the passenger cabin, you know that. But the airline manual says nothing about keeping frogs from riding in the cockpit in the captain's shirt pocket, does it?"

Captain Aaybee winked, and Bhaktaprasad jumped with joy. He was as good as home!

"Do you have any luggage? No? Well then, shall we?" With one finger, the pilot pulled his shirt pocket wide, and gestured for the frog to jump in. A well-aimed hop landed the frog right inside.

The human passengers were in and the cargo loaded; it was time to go. Captain Aaybee walked over to the cockpit and heaved himself in. He gave thumbs up to his colleague, the co-pilot, who was busy checking the instruments. "We have company," he said, patting the lump in his shirt pocket.

Bhaktaprasad reached up and, putting his arms over the pocket's rim, peered out of the cockpit windscreen. His view was the same as that of the pilot, how exciting! Captain Aaybee held the steering column with his left hand and reached up with his right to grasp the throttle. He pushed it forward and revved the airplane's two engines to full power. The propellers swished, whirled and then roared, and the aircraft's body began to

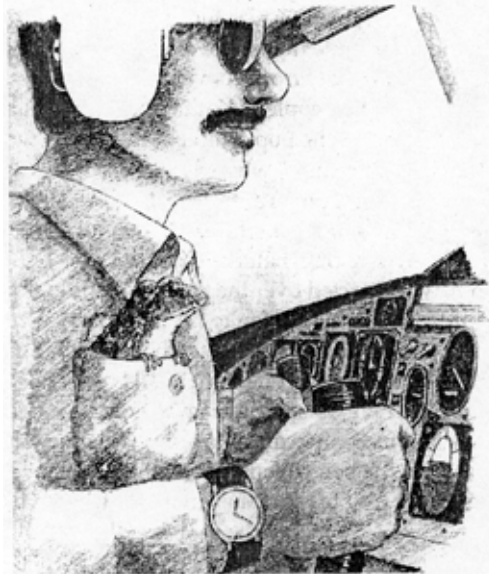
shudder, straining to go. Upon a gesture from Captain Aaybee, the co-pilot released the brakes, and the Twin Otter shot off down the rough and sloping runway. The wheels left the ground, and Bhaktaprasad was sailing in the wind.

The little plane banked over the Bheri River's gorge and winged its way south and then east. They passed over forested hillsides and green meadows, flew by snow-capped mountains. Dhaulagiri Himal passed by to the right, then the many peaks of the Annapurna on the left, including Machhapuchharay, which had not lost its fish tail. Then came the snows of Manaslu, and up ahead he could already make out the shape of Ganesh Himal, which kept guard over the valley of Kathmandu.

Meanwhile, the hills of central Nepal unfolded under the plane's wings. Practically all of Bhaktaprasad's many months of travel were visible in one turn of the head! All the friends he had made during this trip were down there, from the Tarai jungles which lay beyond the last Blue Ridge to the south across to the Trans-Himalayan regions visible over the high passes on the left, or north.

In the haze of the Tarai, Tulsiram would be pulling his bullock-cart to market, and over in the Chitwan jungle, Royal Bengal must be stalking her lunch. Phulmaya the truck-driver must be somewhere between Narayanghat and Pokhara, where that ruffian Prajapati would be guarding his lakefront strip as zealously as ever. And Saligram, the mule, would be perspiring under his load somewhere below Jomsom. Peering up the valley made by the Kali Gandaki, Bhaktaprasad wondered who Dzo Dzopa was regaling at this very moment with her wonderful conversation.

Up in Lo Manthang, the Hema Malini of Lo Manthang must have started churning the morning's round of butter tea. Beyond, on the Changtang, late-riser Pemba Musa, must still be cuddled up in his hole-in-the-ground. By now, Kaili, the taciturn yak, would have arrived back in Lo Manthang, and Lamo-lama was probably lighting the butter lamps in the assembly hall of Shey. Turning his head south once more, the frog thought for a moment of Tarai Toad, the friend he lost to the jaws of the crocodile, Mugger.



BACK TO MANGALMAN

Bhaktaprasad was in deep reverie, recollecting the moments with his friends, when a nudge from Captain Aaybee brought him back to the present. With a forefinger, the pilot pointed downward through the side window. Speaking was out of the question because of the din made by the aircraft's two engines.

Eagerly, the frog leaned out of the pocket and peered out. What he saw was a gigantic bowl amidst green mountains, half full of what looked like frothy milk. It was some time before Bhaktaprasad realised that this was the great valley of Kathmandu, its wide floor under a blanket of early winter fog. How strange and lovely it looked from above!

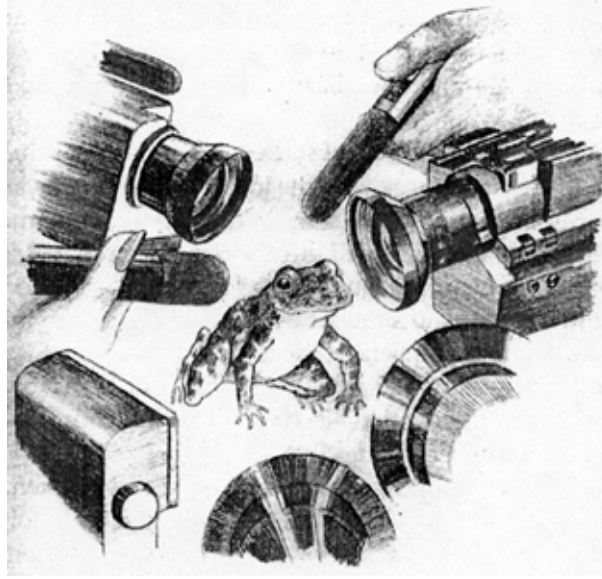
Beneath the fog, the people of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur towns and all the population of the *kaanth* were freezing in a sun-less morning, whereas up here the skies were bright and the view went on forever. He could see all the way from the Kanchenjunga range in the east to Dhaulagiri Himal in the west. This was more than half the country.

Captain Aaybee circled over the valley for some time, flying high and waiting for the fog to lift with the warming sun. Looking down once more, Bhaktaprasad beheld what was without doubt the most gorgeous sight in all his travels.

Swayambhu! There, emerging from the fog like an island in a lake, resplendent in the morning sunshine, was the white-domed stupa! And the benevolent eyes of the Buddha! They had seen the young frog off as he began his journey in the early monsoon, and now they watched serenely as he returned by air.

The plane stopped its circling and began to descend. Captain Aaybee reached up to the throttle and reduced power; he turned the Twin Otter low over Patan town before lining up with the runway at the Tribhuvan International Airport. Looking ahead, the runway came up like a wide and straight highway. The pilot pulled at the steering column, and the Twin Otter settled into the tarmac with a thud and a squeak.

Captain Aaybee taxied the craft over to where a large crowd was waiting. "There must be a Very Important Person on board they have all come to see," Bhaktaprasad said. Captain Aaybee smiled and replied, "Not a VIP, mister, a VIA—a Very Important Amphibian. I took the liberty of radioing ahead to ask the control tower to inform your family and the press of your arrival."



The pilot picked Bhaktaprasad out of his pocket and placed him on the doorway. There was much clapping and shouting as the gathering recognised Bhaktaprasad. As he jumped to the ground, someone came up and put *a* tiny garland of marigolds around his neck. His mother Sanomaiya hopped over and hugged him close. Behind her was *hajurba* Buddhiprasad Bhyaguto, smiling and proud beyond words of his grandfrog. Behind Buddhiprasad were more than two hundred and fifty little froggies, most of them new brothers and sisters born while Bhaktaprasad was away.

Kathmandu's mayor, who had also come, gave a speech welcoming the Valley's most adventurous amphibian back home, but Bhaktaprasad was too preoccupied with his family to really listen. It took quite a while just to be introduced to all his siblings, each one more shy than the other. Clearly, he was a hero to them.

Suddenly there was a cry of "Speech! Speech!" from the newsmen and women who had come to cover the return of the Ichangu frog. As flash bulbs popped and the crowd hemmed in, Bhaktaprasad looked up at the bank of microphones pointed down at him. He could not disappoint them, and he did have something to say.

He said, "Friends, when I started out of Kathmandu Valley many months ago, it was with the idea of having some excitement for himself. But I have come back having gained much more than that. I have gained the understanding that Nepal is a rich country of beautiful landscapes, lovely fields and forests, mountain terraces and snow peaks. It is also blessed with kind and considerate living beings, the animals, the birds, the insects and the people. I always knew that Kathmandu was a beautiful valley, but I now know that Nepal is a beautiful country. I hope this will never, never change."

That was the longest Bhaktaprasad had ever spoken at one go. He blushed, said, "Thank you," and hopped off to join his frog family, which was eagerly waiting to whisk him home to Ichangu. The General Manager of the Sajha Bus Company, who had hoard of how Bhaktaprasad had nearly been refused o ride during an earlier episode, had provided the free service of a long blue bus to transport the entire amphibian entourage from the airport to the Ring Road crossing.

On the ride home, snuggled up between his mother Sanomaiya and grandad Buddhiprasad, the young adventurer suddenly felt drowsiness creeping over him. It must be all the excitement of homecoming, he thought. But then he noticed that his mother was also dozing off, and the entire busload of young froggies had suddenly become uncharacteristically quiet.

Oh-oh! It couldn't be that time already! Bhaktaprasad looked up questioningly at Buddhiprasad. The old one was following his grandfrog's train of thought. He nodded, and said, "It is true, Bhaktay. It's early winter, and hibernation time is upon the frog population of Kathmandu Valley. You have come back just in time."

As soon as the bus stopped below the Ichangu rice paddies, the frogs groggily tumbled off and headed up the slope for their little hibernation cubbies. Sanomaiya turned to Bhaktaprasad and said: "You go along with your grandfather now. Have a good, relaxing hibernation. You will tell us all about your travels in spring, when we will all be awake and alert. Then, I will prepare a grand homecoming party for you!"

Buddhiprasad took Bhaktaprasad to his snug dwelling, a small cavity on a grassy knoll next to some Ichangu terraces. They made the place comfortable so that it would do for a few months' sleep. Grandfather and grandfrog hibernated together.



Glossary

ajila - *aji*, elder sister in Tibetan; *la* is a term of respect or endearment.

"Back to Mangalman" - an expression used by Nepalis to indicate "end up where you started from"; origin of saying is unclear.

bayel - oxen which are used to pull carts in the Tarai.

bazaar - marketplace, also used for 'town'.

bhai - younger brother.

bhyaguto - frog.

"Ce jeune avec tes grandes quisses!" - "That young one with the big thighs." (in French).

Char Kosay Jhadi - used till recently to denote the strip of dense Tarai jungle (*jhadi*) which was said to be the width of *char kos*, about eight miles. The term is rarely used now because the *jhadi* has mostly been destroyed by lumbermen and settlers.

chautara - a rock platform rest-stop built by village philanthropists for use by travellers and porters. Mostly found with a *pipal* tree to provide shade.

chhurpi - a hard variety of cheese made in the high mountains, mostly from yak milk.

chhorten - a domed structure, or *stupa*, which often contains relics of a revered lama or guru. The term is of Tibetan-Buddhist origin. *Chhortens* in the lower hills are known as *stupas*.

Darbar - palace,

Dasain - the autumn festival of Nepal's mid-hills to mark the victory of good over evil. The harvest is in and the people are in a mood to celebrate.

didī - elder sister.

doko - bamboo rattan basket carried with a tumpline.

Dolpopa - people of Dolpo.

gomba - a Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

hajur - a respectful address to someone during conversation, much like using 'sir' in English.

hajurba - grandfather.

himal - a snow mountain, also referring to a range of snow mountains. Machhapuchharay, for example, is a *himal*, which is also part of the Annapurna Himal.

howdah - uncomfortable wooden platform placed on elephant-back for people to perch on.

jhadi - forest with thick undergrowth, or jungle,

kaanth - expression for the village outskirts of a town, such as Kathmandu's *kaanth* (the V is nasalised, and the 'th' is strong). *Kaatithe* is a person from the *kaanth*, often used derogatively.

kanchha - youngest brother, often use to address any young man;

kanchhi for girl,

karkalo - *colocasia*, a broad-leafed plant that grows on moist ground.

khada - a scarf, often of silk, draped over the shoulder to wish someone well or to show respect. The *khada* is used by high Himalayan communities like Hindus of the lower hills use the flower garland.

khumray kira - larvae of bugs that survive in soil by gorging on plant roots.

"la ta" - an expression which serves as a 'goodbye' or 'okay'. When truck-driver Phulmaya says "*La ta, bhai*", she means "Okay, then, little brother."

langur - white faced, long-tailed monkey species found over much of Nepal's Tarai and hill forests.

machha - fish (see also *puchhar*).

mukti - release, or freedom.

musa - rat or mouse.

Mustang - this name of this Trans-Himalayan region of Nepal is pronounced *Moostaang*.

Om mani padme hum - the prayer of Tibetan Buddhism, which translates as "Hail the Jewel in the Lotus," referring to Buddha. One acquires merit by repeated rendition of this

prayer, or by writing it on prayer flags, inscribing it on rocks, or turning prayer wheels which are stuffed with printed prayers.

Phuli - ornament placed by women on their noses.

pipal - hardy tree (*Ficus religiosa*) that grows wide and tall, is considered holy by Hindus, and is sought for its shade.

puchhar - tail ('Machhapuchharay' is the name given to the *himal* whose twin summits look like a fish tail-) See *machha*.

railgadi - a train.

raja - king, or titled ruler of a principality, as in the case of the Raja of Mustang.

Raniban - The 'Queen's Forest'. Among the many so named, one is a wooded reserve on the hill of Nagarjun, above the village of Ichangu in Kathmandu Valley.

riksha - three-wheeled public conveyance pulled by a pedalling *riksawalla*. Also, *rickshaw*.

sahu - merchant.

simal - *kapok*, a tree that grows to great heights in the Tarai jungles and also in the lower valleys.

stupa - See *chhorten*.

Tarai - the low-lying flatlands which runs as a strip along Nepal's south. Much of the Tarai was jungle until recent decades. The eradication of malaria has brought settlers from the northern and southern plains.

topi - 'cap' in Nepali. The kind that Bhaktaprasad wears is known as Dhaka Topi, for the weave which has its origin in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh.

Trans-Himalaya - "the other side of the Himalaya". Although by definition the term can be used for either side, because much Himalayan scholarship has been based outside the region, Trans-Himalaya' is generally used to refer to the northern (Tibetan) parts.

tsampa - roasted barley flour, a staple in the Tibetan-speaking regions of the Himalaya.

yak - the hardy Himalayan bovine (*Bos grunniens*) found all over the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayan rimland. *Yak* is actually the male of the species and *nak* the female. However, general international usage has come to accept *yak* as the name for the species. This is why Kaili, though a *nak*, is deliberately referred to as a *yak*.

Characters

Aakash Bhairav Narayan - *Bhairav* refers to the wrathful incarnation of the god Shiva, and *Aakash Bhairav* is he who controls the skies. *Narayan*, referring to the god Krishna, is often found attached to Hindu names.

Bahadur- *Bahadur* means brave, and is often used by Nepal's hill people as a middle name.

Hira Bahadur- *Hira* means 'diamond'.

Sher Bahadur - *Sher* means 'lion'.

Jagat Bahadur - *Jagat* means ‘earth’.

Bhaktaprasad - *Bhakta* is one who is worshipful or respectful. *Prasad* is a common middle name in the middle hills of Nepal and, in its original, means ‘sacred offering’.

Bhaktay - Short for *Bhaktaprasad*, used by family seniors as endearment, or derogatorily by masters when calling a servant by that name.

Buddhiprasad - *Buddhi* in Bhaktaprasad’s grandfather’s name means wisdom.

Dolma - Tibetan-Buddhist name of the protectress and wish-fulfilling goddess Tara. Dolma, who runs the lodge in Lo Manthang, is also known as Hema Malini, the name of a Bombay-based Hindi filmstar, popular in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Dzo Dzopa - Surname of the talkative hybrid oxen Bhaktaprasad meets in Kagbeni denotes the progeny of a yak male and lowland cow.

Ekraj - *Ek* is ‘one’ in Nepali, and *raj* refers to rule (such as that by a king). The young rhino’s name means “first among kings” or “first in the kingdom.”

Kaili - In colloquial Nepali, the term is used for a girl or woman with light hair. In the story, *Kaili* refers to the golden fleece of the yak which carried Bhaktaprasad from Mustang to Dolpo.

Lamolama - *Lama* is a Buddhist monk, and *lamo* is ‘long’ in Nepali, here taken to mean tall.

Madam One Horn - the Great One-Horned Asiatic Rhinoceros is one of five species of rhino, all of them now endangered. Madam One Horn’s species is today limited to the riverine habitats of the Nepal Tarai, West Bengal and Assam, mostly within national parks and reserves.

Mugger - one of two species of crocodile found on the rivers which flow by the Royal Chitwan National Park. Full name *Marsh Mugger*.

Myyaaah - is the onomatopoeic sound used in the Nepali language to signify the bleating of a goat or sheep.

Pemba Musa - *Pemba* means ‘Saturday’ in Tibetan, and the name is given to mark the day a male infant is born, or for some auspicious purpose.

Phulmaya - the name of the lady truck driver is common for women in many parts of Nepal. The name translates as ‘beautiful flower’.

Prachanda Plover - *Prachanda* means “fearfully powerful”; *plovers* are a bird species found along sandy or pebbly stream beds in the Tarai.

Prajapati Pokhrel - Prajapati means ‘lord of the public’ and refers to the divinity Brahma. *Pokhrel* means ‘person from Pokhara’ (as in a *Nepali* of Nepal).

Royal Bengal - There are five species of tigers left many of them close to extinction due to destruction of habitat and poaching. The Royal Bengal Tiger once extended all over the great jungles of South Asia, but is now confined to national parks and reserves in Bangladesh, India and Nepal,

Saligram Shumsher - *Saligram* refers to the dark ammonites found in abundance in the Kali Gandaki valley, fossilised remnants of long-extinct marine creatures. *Shumsher*

means “he with the strength of lions,” and is attached to male names, particularly by a clan of erstwhile rulers of Nepal.

Sanomaiya - Bhaktaprasad’s mother’s name was obviously given her when she was an infant *Sana* is ‘small’, and *maiya* can be translated as ‘little lady’.

Tarai Toad - *Tarai*, the strip of flatlands along Nepal’s south. The Chitwan forest, Tarai Toad’s home before his demise, is actually in the “Inner Tarai,” for a range of low hills (Churey) separates it from the rest of the flatlands.

Tulsiram Bayel - *Tulsi* is a herbal plant thought to have medicinal as well as divine qualities. *Ram* is the god of the epic *Ramayana*, *Bayel* refers to oxen used to pull carts.