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# Chautare

THE RESEARCH & INFORMATION JOURNAL  
**TRAVEL NEWS, DOCUMENTARIES & PUBLICATIONS**





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### CHAUTARE

Stories from Our Himalayan Neighbourhood



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*"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."*

— Leo Buscaglia



*Chautare* is taking baby steps towards becoming a sustainable monthly newsletter. In this issue, we bring to you diverse stories and news reports from the region and beyond.

February 27 is celebrated as World NGO Day (WND). Officially proposed and recognized in 2010, WND was proclaimed in 2012 and first observed in 2014 by the UN, EU, Nordic Council leaders and international organizations. It was officially proposed and recognized on April 17, 2010 by 12 countries of the Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania. On February 27, 2014, the Ministry for Foreign affairs of Finland hosted the WND inauguration in Helsinki. Leaders from UNOPS, UNESCO, UNDP, European Union, Nordic Council and other international organizations participated as guests.

The day is a perfect reminder of the will and intent of likeminded people coming together to make a difference no matter how small. WND recognizes the inspirational work done by people of not-for-profit organizations every day. It celebrates the benefits — large or small — such activities bring to the world. Not-for-profit and service organisations like Lions International, Rotary International and many others work around the world in different sectors to address issues in the community. It celebrates and honours the incredible work of more than 10 million NGOs and nonprofit organizations worldwide.

As an NGO, ACT has completed more than 30 years of its journey and collaboration. In the past three decades, we have been able to reach out to communities not only in the region but also in the neighbouring countries. We have been successful in empowering local communities to conserve nature and natural diversity. We could also connect a region's local folk cultures to its natural resources by building livelihood through rural tourism. From Sunderbans to Arunachal Pradesh, we have been able to create models for conservation and sustainability. Some of our flagship programs and events like the Himalayan Orange Tourism Festival, Kanchenjunga Tourism Festival, Waste to Wealth, Homestay Congress and International Writers Meet have been recognized and applauded in different forums.

With the support of its members — who form its backbone — ACT will emerge stronger as a member of the not-for-profit community. As an NGO, we have demonstrated the power of volunteering and working as a team. Let us celebrate the spirit of ACT in our thoughts, words and actions as we come together to bring people together. ●



Bengia Manna Sonam is Deputy Director, Tourism, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. She brings to her work her deep passion for community linkage and rural development. Her focus is on spreading the benefits of tourism across all sectors of society, especially the rural areas where the potential for growth is often untapped. Bengia Sonam dedicates her time to empower local communities by motivating individuals to embrace self-employment and become self-reliant. By fostering sustainable tourism practices, she strives to bridge the gap between tourism and local communities, creating a thriving ecosystem in which everyone can benefit.

Bengia Sonam has been actively involved with ACT for more than a decade. She began the community tourism or homestay movement with women involved across the length and breadth of Arunachal Pradesh — a cross-community action which brought several tribal communities closer. In a state blessed with abundant natural resources, she efficiently linked rural tourism and homestay movement with conservation of local natural resources and revived local traditions linked to the conservation of the natural resources. In 2019, the Balipara Foundation recognized her for her efforts towards conservation of resources and local traditions. ●

### Glimpses of Arunachal Pradesh





## Meet Revives India-Bhutan Cross-border Initiative

**February 10, Siliguri:** The Siliguri Chapter of the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Association (IBFA) met to discuss “Fifty Years and Beyond: A Roadmap for Better People-to-People Relations Through Spirituality, Trade, Tourism, Art, Culture, and Scope of Collaborations for Happiness.” The meeting sought to reinvigorate Indo-Bhutan relations and set a tangible course for enhanced collaboration. Seventeen delegates from Bhutan and 12 from India attended. IBFA president Vivek Baid and Secretary General Raj Basu led the discussions.

The IBFA initiative, which began 12 years ago, remained dormant due to various constraints, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the urgency to revive this initiative, the meeting underscored the necessity of re-engineering Indo-Bhutan relations into a measurable, peer-to-peer partnership.

The deliberations at the meeting underscored the importance of this relationship beyond diplomatic formalities. The dialogue emphasized the need for building a brotherhood without borders, allowing both nations to explore each other’s culture, land and markets freely; the significance of local

networking to address regional issues without external intervention; a shift in educational trends: Bhutanese students once sought higher studies in North Bengal, fostering deep-rooted camaraderie. However, this trend had witnessed a decline, leading to a generational gap in mutual appreciation; the spiritual interdependence between the two countries: Bhutanese often look to the Indian plains for solace, while Indians gaze upon the Himalayas for *moksha* — a testament to the sacred and reciprocal nature of their cultural perspectives.

**India and Bhutan are more than just neighbours — they are spiritual allies and economic partners**

**Above and Centre:** Delegates at the IBFA meeting; **Right:** Relaunch of *Chautare*



The meeting drafted a 7-Point Siliguri Declaration which outlined key actionable steps to enhance Indo-Bhutan relations and a shared commitment to transform these resolutions into tangible outcomes. The meeting reaffirmed that the two nations are more than just neighbours — they are spiritual allies and economic partners

The IBFA meeting also witnessed the relaunch of *Chautare*, the monthly newsletter of Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT). The newsletter will strive to disseminate the latest information and cutting-edge analysis and insights on the Himalayan neighbourhood every month.

### ACT assesses tourism potential of Jalpaiguri temple

**February 9, Jalpaiguri:** Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT) members visited the Debi Choudhurani temple in Jalpaiguri to assess the possibility of its restoration and conservation. It is one of the oldest temples of North Bengal; some believe its age to be more than 300 years. The members met Debashish Sarkar, who is



**Left:** The ACT delegation in Jalpaiguri; **Inset:** The idol inside the Debi Choudhurani temple

the Secretary of the Temple Committee. Sarkar told the ACT delegation that an ad hoc committee looks after the day-to-day affairs of the temple. The temple also features prominently in Jalpaiguri's local belief. Some say it was Debi Choudhurani, ruler of the Manthani Raj Estate in Rangpur district had founded this temple

of present-day Bangladesh, who in 1785. She is also one of the main characters in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's famous novel *Anandamath*. According to Sarkar, the temple has tremendous potential for religious and cultural tourism and can become a much sought-after destination in Jalpaiguri.

### Toribari to Become Model Village for Homestay

**February 13, Toribari:** A training session on homestay and hospitality was held at Toribari, near Siliguri. The two-day session, conducted by trainers from TATA Strive, was attended by 24 homestay facility owners who were introduced to concepts of and the



**Homestay clusters can offer a seamless experience to guests**



latest trends in housekeeping, food presentation, fusion cooking and itinerary preparation. Dushyant Nariala, Additional Chief Secretary of North Bengal Development



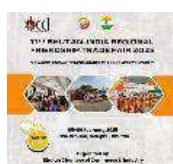
and Principal Secretary of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), was the Chief Guest. Guests included Naresh Agarwal (social worker and former chairman of the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), Kabita Saibo Chettri (Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti member of Toribari) and Arati Roy (Panchayat Pradhan of Dabgram-1 Panchayat. Hotelier and Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT) member Rajesh K Saraf attended as an observer. The even began with the traditional lighting of the lamp by the chief guest and panchayat members.

Addressing the gathering, Nariala highlighted the growing opportunities for homestays and the need to blend modernity with local culture. He suggested homestays to work in clusters to offer a more seamless experience to guests and a more sustainable model to owners. He also highlighted the village's potential to play host not only to tourists but also to other homestay stakeholders.

The training programme kicked off with a session focused on hygiene maintenance, dining etiquette, kitchen cleanliness, personal hygiene and on to keep both the front and back of the house in top condition. The session also covered waste disposal practices, eco-tourism and the importance of maintaining a presentable, clean and organized environment. The participants enjoyed the practical sessions, which covered housekeeping, general hygiene, food plating and the finer details of presentation.

ACT, partnering the state and local governments, aims to make Toribari a model village. Former Tourism Minister Gautam Deb also supported the initiative. The next phase of training will include various skill modules such as waste management, digital marketing, with training from organizations like Airbnb and Google to enhance the participants' skills.

## India and Bhutan Strengthen Bonds Across the Border



**February 5, Gelephu:** The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce & Industry organized

the 11th Bhutan-India Regional Friendship Trade Fair (BIRFTF) at GSA Ground, Gelephu, Bhutan, February 5–9. The theme of the fair was **Strengthening bonds for economic prosperity**. The main objective of the 11th BIRFTF was to enhance B2B and people-to-people relations by facilitating direct interaction between enterprises and people from both countries. This annual regional event serves as an exclusive platform for businesses from Bhutan and India to showcase their latest offerings and explore new trade and investment opportunities. Bibhuti Dutta, ACT Coordinator, Assam and North East Region, represented ACT. The fair saw active deliberations and brainstorming among attendees from India and Bhutan. Dutta also met the members of Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries at Gelephu. ●



**Neighbours  
cementing  
India-Bhutan  
friendship at  
Gelephu**

# Life and Times of Gyalo Thondup

*A ring-side view of Tibet's struggle for freedom*

*Sandip C. Jain*

**A**NY BOOK on Kalimpong documenting its past and present loses its credibility if it does not tell the story of Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama; he is also arguably the most colourful personality in Tibetan politics in the second half of the 20th century.

Born in the remote village of Taktser, in Amdo province of Eastern Tibet, Gyalo Thondup spent his early life in Lhasa, after his brother was recognized as the 14th Dalai



**Brothers-in-arms:** Gyalo Thondup (left) and his younger brother Lhamo Thondup who is the 14th Dalai Lama

Lama, and was later educated in China. Gyalo finally made Kalimpong his home, from where he globe trotted and hobnobbed with some of the tallest world leaders. It was from here that he plotted, planned and played all his political moves in his effort to salvage what he could of Tibetan freedom, religion and international rights.

His life and role in Tibet's struggle for independence and survival has no parallels. The trail of intrigue, suspense, controversies and conspiracies he left behind made him a detested and unreliable personality in the eyes of his adversaries

but loved and respected by an entire generation of Tibetans.

Gyalo Thondup's autobiography *The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong*, published in 2015 did become a best seller which left readers amazed at the life of this Tibetan freedom fighter. He was the third child of Choekyong Tsering and Diki Tsering. Taktser was a village of just about a dozen houses, 40 km from the famous Kumbum monastery. This monastery was built on the spot where Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, was born. His ancestors were descendants of soldiers of Songtsen Gampo, who is regarded as the greatest king of Tibet. It is said that Songtsen Gampo, and his Chinese and Nepali wives were instrumental in spreading Buddhism in Tibet. His parents had seven children who survived till adulthood. Gyalo Thondup was the second of the five sons while the 14th Dalai Lama, named Lhamo Thondup, was the fourth son of the family. Gyalo Thondup's elder brother was Jigme Norbu who was recognized as the Taktser Rimpoche in 1923. Born in 1929, Gyalo Thondup was the only



son of the family who did not become a monk; his father wanted him to become a farmer who would take over the management of the family estate in the future.

The 13th Dalai Lama died on 17th of December 1935. Divinity indicated that the new Dalai Lama would be found in the region around the Kumbum monastery and accordingly a search party headed by the Kewtsang Rimpoche reached the village of Taktser and after having put the three year old Lhamo Thondup through a series of tests recognized him as the 14th Dalai Lama. Amidst wide spread joy and a celebration, the family was shifted to Lhasa where the little brother of Gyalo Thondup was officially enthroned as the 14th Dalai Lama.

Life changed drastically for the family once in Lhasa. From being an ordinary farming family from a remote village the family suddenly became the first family of Tibet. The family name was changed from Taktser to Taklha and his father came to be known as Yabshi Kung while his

mother got the title of Gyayum Chemo, meaning the great mother. Their status and wealth increased drastically with the Tibetan Government providing the family all the comforts due to the first family of Tibet. They were granted



**The Potala Palace in Lhasa is the seat of the Dalai Lama as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site**

five huge estates across Tibet which earned the family much riches and prestige. The Regent of Tibet at that time, the Reting Rimpoche also constructed from them an enormous three story house with over 50 rooms, near the Potala, the official residence of the Dalai Lama. With this the life of Gyalo Thondup also changed dramatically

— Gyalo Thondup was thereafter groomed to be the closest advisor to the Dalai Lama. The Reting Rimpoche assumed personal charge of Gyalo Thondup and sent him for education to a private school named Tarkhang, which provided traditional Tibetan education. The Regent felt that if Gyalo Thondup could understand the history, culture and tradition of China, it would help Tibet in the long run and with this in mind he appointed a Chinese Muslim named Ma Bao as Gyalo Thondup's personal Chinese teacher. Within a few years Gyalo Thondup had a basic knowledge of the Chinese language and its way of life.

With his elementary training complete it was decided that Gyalo Thondup be sent to China for further education. This was a surprising move as generally Tibetan royalty and elite families sent their children to India to receive education and being sent to China for an education was unheard of in those times. The Reting Rimpoche probably took this decision as an act of balancing between China and British India. Gyalo Thondup left for China in the year 1945 via India. The first place in India that he stopped over was Kalimpong. He travelled to Kolkata from here and life in Kolkata was a completely new



**Coming from Lhasa, the glamour and glitz of 1950s' Kolkata was a cultural shock for a young Gyalo Thondup**

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experience for this young boy of sixteen. The glamour and glitz of Kolkata gave Gyalo Thondup a cultural shock. It was here that he had his first haircut and had his first experience of shopping in departmental stores and staying in five star hotels. In April 1946, Gyalo Thondup finally left for China and settled down in Nanjing where he was enrolled in the reputed Central University of Politics. Chiang Kai-Shek the leader of the Nationalist government of China at that time being his sponsor. Nanjing was the capital of China at that time and he was hosted personally by

the Governor of Jiangsu province and the mayor of Nanjing.

Chiang Kai-shek being his sponsor, Gyalo Thondup settled into a comfortable life in Nanjing with a personal three room house, domestic and personal staff and a generous allowance to cover all his expenses.

At the university Gyalo Thondup was favoured student with Chiang Kai-Shek deputing the President of the Central University Dr. Gu Yuxice to personally look into his studies. Six senior professors were assigned to privately give Gyalo Thondup lessons in World History, Geography, Chinese History, Literature, Music and Maths. The education and life in Nanjing was an eye opener for Gyalo Thondup. Here he realized how backward and under-developed Tibet was and how defective and outdated the administrative system in his country was. His experience here made him aware of all the modern ways of life and governance in a civilized society. This filled him with ideas and desires to implement these reforms back in Tibet for the betterment of his countrymen and for the modernization of his country.



**Chiang Kai-shek**

While he was soaking in all the knowledge of the modern world, civil war was at its peak in China. The Communists under Mao Zedong and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek were locked in a bitter battle for control of the country, with Chiang Kai-Shek on the verge of defeat. While this

struggle was on, Gyalo Thondup found the love of his life in the beautiful Zhu Dan. She was the daughter of Zhu Shigui, a leading general on the side of the ruling Nationalist party. She had a degree in social work from the Jilin University in Nanjing.



After two years of courtship, the two married in 1948. The wedding reception was a grand affair held at the Grand International Hotel in Shanghai. However, their happiness was short lived because within the next few months, the Communists had all but routed the Nationalists and were knocking on the doors of Nanjing. In March 1949, Gyalo Thondup and his new bride had to escape to Hong Kong via Shanghai.

**D**URING the years Gyalo Thondup spent in China, there was a huge political turmoil in Tibet. Both his father and the chief supporter of his family and the former Regent of Tibet, the Reting Rimpoche, died—both seemingly under suspicious circumstances. In his absence a power struggle had been underway in Tibet between the Reting Rimpoche and the Taktra Rimpoche, the former and ruling Regent of Tibet.

The young Reting Rimpoche was appointed as the Regent of Tibet after the demise of the 13th Dalai Lama and it was him who oversaw the coronation of Lhamo Thondup as the 14th Dalai Lama. He was the chief benefactor of Gyalo Thondup's family in Lhasa. After a few years in office the Reting Rimpoche took temporary leave of office to go into a religious retreat and appointed Taktra Rimpoche as the stand-in Regent of the country on the understanding that the former would resume office once his retreat was complete. Unfortunately Taktra Rimpoche refused to vacate office once Reting Rimpoche returned. In the ensuing power struggle, the Reting Rimpoche was imprisoned and died under suspicious circumstances in prison. Gyalo Thondup's father too passed away, many believed under dubious conditions.

After the death of the two, the Tibetan government wanted Gyalo Thondup to return to Tibet but he refused to do so till he completed his studies in Nanjing. His decision was also prompted by apprehensions on his security now that his two main supporters were no longer alive and that people opposed to them were in the helm of affairs in Tibet. But return he had to on being forced to do so after the Communist takeover of China. From Hong Kong he made his way to Kalimpong wherefrom he got in touch with his mother who was still in Lhasa. His mother instructed him not to travel back to Lhasa. Since Gyalo Thondup's wife was expecting their first child and medical facilities in Kalimpong being poor, they decided to shift base to Kolkata.



Gyalo Thondup and his bride Zhu Dan

## SPECIAL REPORT: TRIBUTE

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While in Kolkata the then Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru contacted him and invited him and his wife to spend some time with him in Delhi. They travelled to Delhi and had a dinner meeting in which Nehru, his daughter Indira and a host of other important officials were present. Nehru wanted to understand the situation in Tibet and also the effects of the Communist takeover of China. Nehru wanted to offer help to the Tibetans and in the absence of any accredited Tibetan Official in India, Nehru requested Gyalo Thondup to be the go-between. The Americans as well as the new Chinese government too contacted Gyalo Thondup and wanted him to be the intermediary between them and the Tibetan Government. Gyalo Thondup made several



trips to Kalimpong and managed to relay messages to the Lhasa Government via the newly-opened telegraph station at Kalimpong. The Tibetan Government chose to ignore all messages from these various governments, relayed via Gyalo Thondup, for

reasons best known to them. Finally, they sent a delegation under their progressive minded Finance Minister Shakabpa and this delegation based itself in Kalimpong. Although they made several efforts to visit China and start a dialogue with the Chinese government, all their efforts were in vain as visa issues prevented them from travelling to China. In any case, their efforts were too little and too late as by this time the Chinese had already invaded Tibet. The first attack of the Chinese on the eastern frontier of Tibet began in October, 1950.

The small Tibetan army, ill-trained and poorly armed, was routed in Eastern Tibet. The panicked government in Tibet hurriedly decided that the Dalai Lama, despite being under-aged, should assume full temporal powers for the larger good of Tibet. His advisors, fearing the worst, decided that the Dalai Lama and his Government would relocate temporarily to Droma, a small village on the border with Sikkim. The Chinese having marched into Lhasa later forced the Tibetan government to sign what is now known as the 17-Point Agreement, which effectively gave the Chinese overlordship over entire Tibet.

**Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to offer help to the Tibetans and in the absence of any accredited Tibetan Official in India, he requested Gyalo Thondup to be the go-between**

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While this tragedy was underway in Tibet, Gyalo Thondup was making efforts to go to China and have some kind of dialogue with the Communist leaders of China. With the Indian government having refused to allow him direct passage to China, Gyalo Thondup travelled to Manila, with the intention of entering China via Macau. He failed in this effort too as the ruling Portuguese administration in Macau refused to let him in. He finally ended up in Taiwan where his former mentor Chiang Kai-Shek had established a government. Although he was extremely well received by Chiang Kai-Shek and the Government of Taiwan and was hosted with much respect and pomp, Gyalo Thondup was forced to stay in Taiwan for about a year-and-a-half due to the Taiwanese government obstructing his visit to main land China. Chiang Kai-Shek probably believed that young Gyalo Thondup would be influenced by the Communists if he travelled to China. While in Taiwan, he managed to send letters to US President Truman and his Secretary of State Dean Acheson, pleading for their intervention. His efforts paid dividends when they finally invited him to America.

Once in America, he stayed for a while



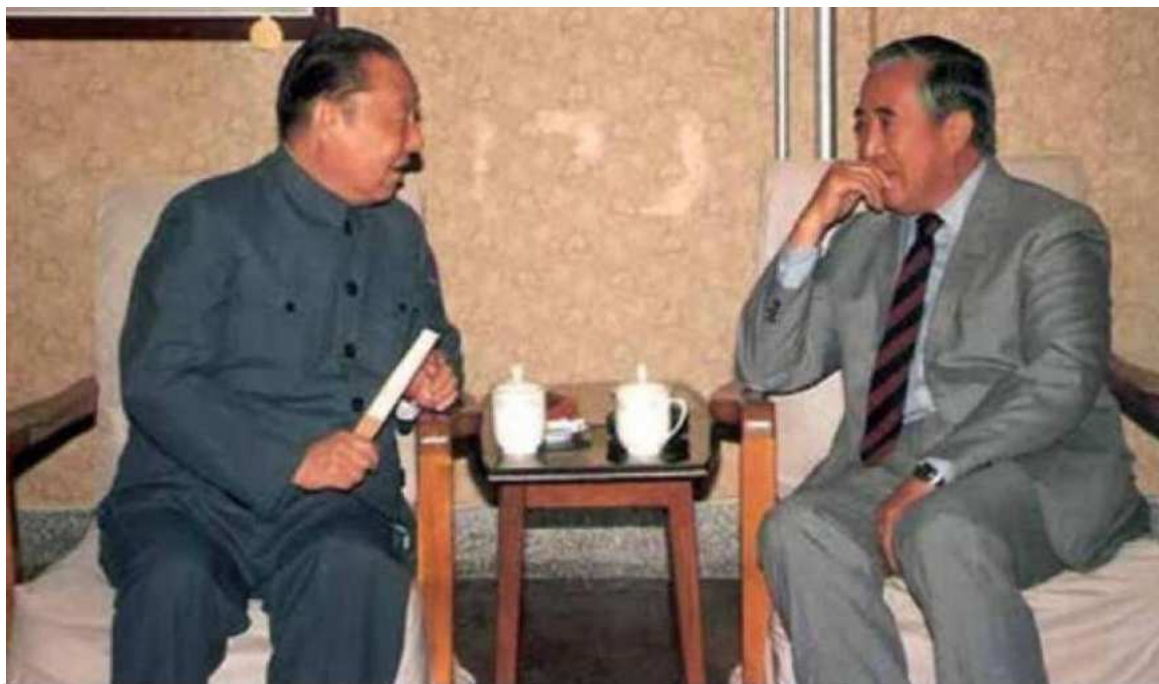
**Thondup (extreme right) and other officials on their way to attend meetings at United Nations Headquarters, New York, 1959**

with his elder brother Jigme Norbu, the former Taktser Rimpoche, in Washington. Jigme Norbu had escaped from Tibet and had immigrated to America after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. The Americans offered him a scholarship at Stanford University for which he travelled to San Francisco with his family. Later, deciding that he could best serve his country by being nearer to home, he

journeyed back to Darjeeling after a brief stopover in London. In Darjeeling, he met up with his mother who was in residence there after a pilgrimage of the holy Buddhist sites in India.

After a happy reunion with his mother and other members of his family, Gyalo Thondup received first-hand information on the situation in Tibet. It was decided that he would best serve the interest of Tibet by accompanying his mother back to his country of birth.

Since his wife was expecting their second child, she was forced to stay back in Darjeeling while Gyalo Thondup returned to Tibet with his mother. Riding on horse-back, he entered Lhasa via the usual trade route, after seven long years of absence from his country. Back in Lhasa, Gyalo Thondup bustled with excitement on the prospect of



**Gyalo Thondup (right) meeting Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun. Once he received a direct order from Mao Zedong to attend the Communist Youth Congress as the head of the Tibetan delegation**

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finally getting a chance to implement all the ideas and experiences he had gained living in places like China, Taiwan and USA. Having closely followed the land reform policies of China and Taiwan as also the farming and animal husbandry techniques used in the modern world, he could not wait to implement his idea in Tibet for the benefit of his countrymen. Having discussed his ideas with the Dalai Lama who was supportive of his vision, he tried to convince the government to support his ideas but all his efforts were in vain. The traditionalists in the ruling class shot down his enthusiasm and disregarded his ideas. A disappointed Gyalo Thondup saw his dreams die an unnatural death. He, however, implemented land

reforms in his own estates across Tibet, giving the peasants living on his estate right over the land they toiled on. While he was in Tibet, a countrywide revolt broke out against the Chinese and the Chinese rulers of Tibet wanted to use force to quell this mass uprising. They started pressurizing Gyalo Thondup to side with them and support their depraved designs. Meanwhile, Gyalo Thondup received a direct order from Mao Zedong, directing him to attend the Communist Youth Congress that was to be held in Beijing. He was to attend as the head of the Tibetan delegation. Unable to disregard an order from the Chinese supreme leader, he escaped to India on the pretext of visiting his estates in southern Tibet.

Having returned to India, he visited Darjeeling before proceeding to Kolkata where his wife delivered their second child, Khendoop. The Chinese rulers of Tibet, on hearing of his escape, flew into a rage and took away his citizenship. Gyalo Thondup made Kolkata his base. He started to write to various international agencies, heads of governments and international organizations, lobbying for intervention in Tibet. He made several trips to various countries, highlighting the plight of the Tibetans and internationalizing the issue of Tibetan independence. During one such visit to Taiwan,





he also brought the Taiwanese and Indian intelligence agencies together so that they could work cohesively for their mutual benefit. In 1956, the Dalai Lama managed to get permission from the Chinese for a visit to India. Officially, the reason for Dalai Lama's visit was to join the 2,500th birth anniversary festivities of Lord Buddha. But the hidden agenda was to seek political asylum. The Chinese, getting wind of the actual reason, dispatched Zhou Enlai to prevent any such move and he managed to get the Indian government to go back on its commitment to shelter the Dalai Lama. On his way back to Tibet, the Chinese and Indian government

With Deng Xiaoping (**right**) in 1979

even tried to prevent Dalai Lama and his entourage from visiting Kalimpong, fearing that the Tibetan expats there, along with agents from various international espionage agencies, who had made Kalimpong their base, would prevent the Dalai Lama from re-entering Tibet. The Dalai Lama brushed aside such apprehensions, visited and stayed in Kalimpong for a week before returning to Tibet.

The situation in Tibet further deteriorated in the next few years, with the Chinese making unreasonable demands and the Tibetan public exploding in open revolt against the oppressive Chinese forces stationed in Tibet. In utter frustration over the repressive measures adopted by the Chinese against the unarmed Tibetan protesters, Gyalo Thondup used his contacts in CIA to help train a small number of young Tibetan fighters in the art of guerilla warfare. The first group of recruits was smuggled into Kalimpong and Gyalo Thondup used his own jeep to transport them to the Bangladesh border, wherefrom they were transported to Saipan, in the middle of the Pacific ocean. They were trained there by CIA and later airdropped into Tibet to lead an armed revolution. In later years more than 250 other young recruits were further trained in Saipan and, later, in Camp Hale in Colorado. These trained guerilla fighters were smuggled back to Lhasa and later became the backbone of Chusai Gangdruk, the Tibetan guerrilla army under the inspirational leader Gompo Tashi.

Finally in 1959, fearing for his life, the advisors of Dalai Lama planned for Dalai Lama, his family and his closest advisors, to escape into exile in India. Gyalo Thondup travelled to Delhi after getting news of Dalai Lama's flight from Lhasa and had a meeting with Nehru. Nehru consented to providing shelter to Dalai Lama and his group after this meeting with Gyalo Thondup.

Dalai Lama and his advisors had hoped that the Government of India would allow them to set up base in either Darjeeling or Kalimpong. But the Government of India decided take them to Mussoorie. After a year, they were shifted to Dharamshala where the Dalai Lama set up his government in exile. Gyalo Thondup was appointed the foreign minister. He led several delegations to various American, European and Asian countries,

## SPECIAL REPORT: TRIBUTE

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trying to advocate the need for them to intervene in the Tibetan crises. He held meetings with International NGOs like the International Red Cross, CARE, Catholic Charities and Oxfam in his bid to internationalize the issue. For him, no international forum or country was taboo as long as they were willing to listen to the plight of the Tibetans. He even set up meetings and came to an understanding with the KGB, the Russian secret service. It was through them that he later learnt that the Americans and Chinese had already reached an understanding and that the Americans had decided to wash their hands of Tibet and the Tibetans were left to their fate.

After the Indo-China War in 1962, Gyalo Thondup was once again contacted by the

Indian intelligence; he helped the Indian Army set up a special unit consisting of Tibetan



**Above left:** Tibetan guerrillas metamorphosed into Indian Army's Special Frontier Force (SFF);  
**Below left:** Chakrata, Uttarakhand, where SFF personnel are trained in stealth combat



fighters known as Establishment 22 which exists till date as Special Frontier Force. On Gyalo Thondup's appeal, hundreds of young Tibetans, many of them trained guerrilla fighters, joined this force which

was and is used by the Indian Army in high altitude operations.

Gyalo Thondup spent the next decade criss-crossing the globe talking to governments, advocating the case of Tibet and pleading for their intervention. With the growing might of China in the international arena, all the Tibetans received was a sympathetic hearing but no concrete results. He finally decided to give up all official designations having become mentally and physically exhausted. Despite new persons taking charge of foreign affairs in the Tibetan government in exile, Gyalo Thondup was called upon to negotiate whenever the situation turned tricky. The Chinese government found the new team inept and Gyalo Thondup was requested to once again continue the negotiations which he did for the greater good of Tibet. He even met Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese supreme leader after Mao Zedong, and despite several rounds of talk with him and other senior leaders, no agreement could be reached on the return of Dalai Lama to Tibet. Gyalo Thondup finally decided to hang his boots and settle down to a peaceful and less stressful life in Kalimpong in the three-acre land which he had purchased in the year 1952. The beautiful house just before St. Philomena's School (at 8th Mile,





Kalimpong) was named Taktser House in memory of his birth place. The noodle factory that he set up, took much of his time whenever he was in Kalimpong.

Gyalo Thondup passed away in February 2025. His dream of seeing an independent Tibet may not have materialized in his life time. But there is no doubt that his contributions towards the struggle for Tibetan Independence will be remembered and spoken of in times to come. ●



*(Sandip C. Jain is a Kalimpong-based author and journalist. He also owns Epilogue Café and bookstore in Kalimpong. He is a leading essayist in the Darjeeling- Kalimpong region. Winner of several awards in the field of journalism, his works are published in National and International media. This article is reproduced from The Darjeeling Chronicle.)*

## A Tapestry of Faith

*Celebrating Basant Panchami at Nizamuddin Dargah*

Vani

**C**elebrating a Hindu festival within the precincts of a Sufi shrine might appear paradoxical to some. Yet, this very juxtaposition embodies the syncretic nature of Indian culture, a vibrant tapestry woven with threads of diverse faiths and traditions. Basant Panchami, a festival deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, deity of knowledge, music, and arts, finds a unique expression within the hallowed grounds of the Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi. This annual celebration, a symphony of yellow hues and soulful melodies, transcends religious boundaries, showcasing the shared cultural heritage of India.



Basant Panchami heralds the arrival of spring, a season of renewal and rejuvenation. The blossoming of mustard flowers paints the landscape in a sea of yellow, a colour associated with joy, prosperity and new beginnings. Devotees traditionally don

**The Nizamuddin Dargah, the final resting place of the revered Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and his beloved disciple Amir Khusrau, becomes a kaleidoscope of yellow on Basant Panchami**

yellow attire, offering prayers to Goddess Saraswati and seeking her blessings. However, at the Nizamuddin Dargah, this celebration takes on a distinctive Sufi flavour, transforming the shrine into a vibrant hub of cultural exchange and spiritual harmony.

The Dargah, the final resting place of the revered Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and his beloved disciple Amir Khusrau, becomes a

kaleidoscope of yellow on Basant Panchami. The air resonates with the joyous strains of Basant *qawwalis*, devotional songs that celebrate the spirit of spring and divine love.



Men and women, dressed in yellow turbans, kurtas, scarves, and sarees, throng the Dargah, their hands filled with offerings of mustard and marigold flowers. The atmosphere is electric, charged with devotion, music and the shared celebration of a season that symbolizes hope and renewal.

The story behind this unique tradition is as poignant as it is inspiring. While yellow is universally associated with joy, the Basant Panchami celebrations at Nizamuddin Dargah are believed to have originated from a period of profound grief. Legend has it that Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was deeply saddened by the untimely death of his young nephew. The sorrow was so overwhelming that the saint withdrew into a period of mourning, isolating himself from his followers.

Amir Khusrau, Nizamuddin Auliya's closest disciple and an accomplished poet and musician, was deeply concerned about his master's well-being. He understood the power of music to heal and uplift the human spirit. To alleviate the saint's grief,

Khusrau, along with other musicians, decided to celebrate Basant Panchami with great fervour. They dressed in yellow, carrying mustard flowers, and sang joyous songs in the



**The air resonates with the joyous strains of Basant *qawwalis*. Men and women, dressed in yellow turbans, kurtas, scarves, and sarees, throng the Dargah, their hands filled with offerings of mustard and marigold flowers**

Purabi dialect, invoking the spirit of spring and its promise of new life.

The vibrant celebration and the soulful melodies eventually reached Nizamuddin Auliya, stirring him from his seclusion. The sight of his beloved disciple and followers celebrating with such enthusiasm touched his heart, bringing him solace and renewed hope. From that day onwards, the celebration of Basant Panchami became an annual tradition at the Nizamuddin Dargah — a testament to the power of love, music, and shared cultural heritage to overcome even the deepest sorrow.

The *qawwalis* sung during Basant Panchami at the Dargah are a unique blend of Sufi devotional poetry and folk melodies, often composed in the Purabi dialect, a language spoken in the region during the time of Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau. These



songs, passed down through generations of musicians, narrate the stories of the saint's life, his teachings, and his love for his disciples. They also celebrate the beauty of spring, its vibrant colours, and its symbolic association with spiritual awakening.

The celebration at Nizamuddin Dargah is not merely a ritualistic observance; it is a living example of the inclusive spirit of Sufism. The Dargah welcomes people from all faiths and backgrounds, creating a space where cultural and religious boundaries dissolve in the shared experience of music, devotion and celebration. The sight of Hindus and Muslims celebrating a Hindu festival together within the precincts of a Sufi shrine is a powerful reminder of the shared values and cultural heritage that bind the people of India together.

The Basant Panchami celebrations at Nizamuddin Dargah are a testament to the enduring legacy of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau, two figures who played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of India. Their teachings, which emphasized love, compassion and the oneness of humanity, continue to inspire people across religious and cultural divides. The annual celebration serves as a powerful

**The Dargah during Basant Panchami is a spectacle of vibrant colours, soulful music, and unwavering devotion. The yellow hues symbolize not only the arrival of spring but also the joy and hope that the festival bring**

symbol of interfaith harmony and the shared cultural heritage of India, a nation where diverse traditions and beliefs coexist in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

The Dargah during Basant Panchami is a spectacle of vibrant colours, soulful music, and unwavering devotion. The yellow hues that dominate the landscape symbolize not only the arrival of spring but also the joy and hope that the festival brings. The air is filled with the rhythmic beat of drums, the melodious strains of harmoniums and the passionate voices of *qawwals*, creating an atmosphere of spiritual ecstasy. Devotees from all walks of life participate in the festivities, offering prayers, sharing food and celebrating the spirit of Basant Panchami.

The celebration is not confined to the Dargah itself. The entire neighbourhood surrounding the shrine comes alive with festive spirit. Streets are decorated with yellow streamers and flowers, and vendors sell traditional sweets and snacks. The atmosphere is festive and joyous, reflecting the spirit of renewal and hope that characterizes the festival.

The Basant Panchami celebrations at Nizamuddin Dargah offer a glimpse into the rich tapestry of Indian culture, a culture that embraces diversity and celebrates the shared values that unite its people. It is a reminder that faith and tradition can transcend religious boundaries, fostering a sense of community and shared heritage. The vibrant spectacle of yellow, the soulful melodies of the *qawwalis* and the unwavering devotion of the devotees create an experience that is both spiritually enriching and culturally significant. It is a celebration of spring, of love, of music and, most importantly, of the shared humanity that binds us all together. ●



*(Vani is based in New Delhi and has a zest for life and a thirst for knowledge, learning through various lives while also navigating the world of digital marketing.)*

# Guru Nanak and His Five Journeys

*Defining India's strategic neighbourhood*

**G**URU Nanak Dev Ji, the first Sikh Guru, took five missionary journeys, or *udasiyas*, to spread the wisdom of Gurbani. These journeys took him across today's India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tibet, Nepal and many other countries. Guru Nanak wanted to enlighten people's lives with his message of connecting with God. He felt it was his divine mission to go out and spread his spiritual message. Back then,



traveling on foot was no easy task. Loot and plunder, diseases and wildlife were serious threats to a traveller besides the lack of

availability of food. None of these, however, held Guru Nanak back from setting off to unknown lands, along with his companion Bhai Mardana, to spread his divine message.

At a very young age, Guru Nanak began questioning the social and religious beliefs and practices around him. He was upset to see the society around him so dominated by superstition, rituals, hypocrisy, untouchability and irrationality.

A Hindu by birth, he studied Islam at the local Madrasa, where he met Mardana. Guru Nanak was quick to learn different languages that included Punjabi, Hindi, Sanskrit and Persian,

## GURU NANAK'S FIVE UDASIS (1500 – 1524)

**First Udasi:** (1500 – 1506): Eastward towards Bengal and Assam

**Duration:** Around 7 years

His first udasi was within undivided India. He visited Sultanpur, Bhatinda, Tulamba (present day Makhdumpur) in Multan district of Pakistan, Sialkot in Pakistan, Saidpur (present day Eminabad) in Pakistan, Pasrur in Pakistan, Delhi, Panipat (Haryana), Nanakmata, Nainital district (Uttarakhand), Tanda Vanjara, Rampur District (U.P.), Kamrup (Assam) and Asa Desh (Assam).

**Second Udasi:** (1506 – 1513): Southward towards Sri Lanka

**Duration:** Around 7 years

Within India he visited Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. In Sri Lanka he visited Batticaloa, Sita Eliya, Matiakalam and Katargama.

**Third Udasi:** (1514 – 1518): Northward towards Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet

**Duration:** Around 5 years

He visited Himachal, Uttarakhand, Kashmir, Sikkim, Sumer Parbat (Lhasa, Tibet) and Nepal.

**Fourth Udasi:** (1519 – 1521): Westward towards Baghdad, Mecca and Medina

**Duration:** Around 3 years

He visited present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Greece and Saudi Arabia.

**Fifth Udasi:** (1523 – 1524): Within Punjab

**Duration:** Around 2 years

After finally settling down at Kartarpur in present-day Pakistan, Guru Nanak's Fifth Udasi was within Punjab region of India.

enabling him to read religious scriptures of Hindu and Islamic faith. The more he read, the more he questioned the existing practices. He was disturbed by the irrational and often conflicting spiritual messages given by priests and other religious scholars, and he disagreed with most of them.

His thoughts and beliefs centred on the existence of one omnipresent and formless God, believing all humans, irrespective of faith, caste or profession, were equal before the only supreme power. He believed there was a better way to connect with God through devotion and action, as all the answers lay within oneself.



Puratan Janamsakhi records the earliest accounts of Guru Nanak's *udasis*. As per accounts available, Guru Nanak was just 30 when he started his first *udasi*, and over the next 24 years, he travelled to distant places in the north, east, west and south of his

**More than 500 years back, Guru Nanak Ji carried his message to a geographical area which we now describe as India's strategic neighbourhood**

hometown Rai Bhoi di Talvandi, which is now called Nankana Sahib in Pakistan. He travelled to countries like present Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, present-day Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Tibet, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In each of his journeys, Guru Nanak visited local religious centres and met local priests, seers, *pirs* and other scholars in an attempt to learn their spiritual customs, beliefs and practices. He would engage with them on spiritual matters and reason with them why and how his message made rational sense in connecting with the one and only Almighty and finding inner peace in the process.

Guru Nanak was received very warmly by all communities wherever he went. His simplicity, humility and earthy logic connected with locals, and they listened keenly to his divine message. There is a debate on whether Guru Nanak returned after the first *udasi* before embarking on the second one or whether the first and the second *udasis* were combined as one extended journey.

There are documented instances of Guru Nanak being remembered by various names even today — Nanak Rimpochea (Bhutan and Sikkim), Nanak Shah, Nanak Peer (Baghdad), Nanak Rishi (Nepal), Nanak Acharya, Nanak Lama (Tibet), Nanak Vali (Egypt), Baba Nanak (Iraq), Nanak Kadamdar, Baba Foosa (China), Vali Hind (Mecca), Peer Balgdaan (Mazhar-e-Sharief), Guru Nanak Vali Hind (Russia).

While we do not know how Guru Nanak Ji chose his destinations, it is amply clear that more than 500 years back he carried his message of spirituality, compassion and brotherhood to a geographical area which, in today's parlance, we describe as India's strategic neighbourhood. ●

(Sourced from Internet)



# A Divine Pilgrimage

*Varanasi, Ayodhya and Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj*

**Rajesh Kumar Saraf**



Some journeys are about discovering new places while others are about discovering ourselves. My recent pilgrimage to Varanasi, Ayodhya and Prayagraj with 17 family members, including kids, senior citizens and ladies, was one such journey — a mix of devotion, endurance, and divine blessings.

The highlight of this sacred trip was our experience at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, a once-in-a-lifetime event that occurs only once every 144 years. Being part of this rare gathering, where millions bathed in the sacred Triveni Sangam, was not just a journey but a soul-stirring experience that will stay with us forever.

Our spiritual quest began in Varanasi — the eternal city of Shiva — where devotion fills every street and faith flows like the Ganga. The moment we stepped into the city, we felt a shift in energy — a divine pull that drew us deeper into its sacred embrace.

We first visited Kaal Bhairav temple, seeking the blessings of Lord Kaal Bhairav, the protector of Kashi. The aura of this temple was mystical and we felt a deep sense of security and strength after the *darshan*. Next, we proceeded to Sankat Mochan temple, where Lord Hanuman is believed to remove all our troubles. Chanting Hanuman Chalisa in the temple premises filled us with divine energy and courage.

The true test of our devotion came at the Kashi Vishwanath temple. Due to the overwhelming crowd, we attempted twice to enter but had to turn back. However, our faith was stronger than any obstacle, and finally, at 4 am, after hours of waiting, we stood before the *Jyotirlinga* of Lord Shiva.

In that sacred moment, time stood still. The chaotic crowds, the long wait, the exhaustion — all disappeared. Standing before Baba Vishwanath was like standing before universe itself. We could feel an indescribable energy, as if Shiva himself was blessing us for our patience and perseverance.

With our hearts full of divine blessings, we continued to Ayodhya, the sacred land of Lord Ram. This journey was not just a physical one but was akin to an emotional and spiritual homecoming.

As we approached the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi temple, we could hear chants of Jai Shri Ram echoing in the air. The temple, newly developed, stood as a symbol of unwavering faith and devotion that has spanned over centuries.

We also visited Hanuman Garhi, climbing the sacred steps to seek the blessings of Lord Hanuman. The experience was surreal, as if every stone and pillar carried stories of



**The moment we stepped into the holy confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati and the sacred water touched our skin, all fatigue vanished**



Lord Ram's legacy.

Our journey from Ayodhya to Prayagraj, which should have taken four hours, stretched to 14 due to the massive influx of pilgrims for the Maha Kumbh. Yet,

despite the exhaustion, the thought of taking a dip at Triveni Sangam during this once-in-

144-year event kept us motivated.

As we reached the Sangam, the sight before us was overwhelming yet divine — millions of devotees had gathered, standing in freezing cold water, chanting prayers and surrendering themselves to the sacred rivers.

We stepped into the holy confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati, and the moment the sacred water touched our skin, all fatigue vanished. It felt as if every burden, every worry and every pain was being washed away, leaving behind a renewed soul filled with divine peace. This wasn't just an ordinary bath — it was a spiritual rebirth, a cleansing of past *karmas*, and a moment where we felt truly connected to the divine. Witnessing the Maha Kumbh, where millions of devotees, saints and sages had gathered for the same purpose, reminded us that faith is the greatest force that unites humanity.

The grand arrangements made by the government for over 450 million people were commendable. Managing such a vast event, ensuring safety, sanitation, and transport for so many was a challenge beyond imagination; and yet, everything was in place. The

efforts of the administration and the spiritual strength of the people made the Maha Kumbh a truly divine spectacle.

After the holy dip, our return journey took an unexpected turn. Our train was scheduled to depart from Prayagraj Junction, just 13 km away. But due to unbearable rush, we were forced to change plans and travel to Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Junction, 150 km away.

Navigating through the sea of people at the railway station was another challenge, but with the help of the railway police, we somehow managed to board the train safely. As we finally settled into our seats, looking at the tired yet content faces of our family members, we realized this journey had changed us forever.

As I reflect on this journey, I realize that Maha Kumbh is not just an event; it is a spiritual phenomenon. To be part of something that happens once in 144 years is a rare blessing — one I will cherish for the rest of my life.

The essence of this journey was summed up in a simple yet profound realization — faith has the power to move mountains, cross rivers and endure hardships. When devotion is pure, every struggle becomes a prayer and every step leads closer to the divine.

Would I do this journey again? Without a doubt! Would I recommend it? Absolutely, to anyone seeking a transformational experience.

Because in the end, it is not just about where we travel; it is about what we carry back in our hearts. This journey has left us with faith, gratitude and memories that will last a lifetime. ●

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR FUTURE PILGRIMS

**This pilgrimage was not just about visiting temples and taking a holy dip — it was an experience that tested our endurance, strengthened our faith and taught us the power of devotion.**

- Carry homemade food and light snacks like *thekua*, *kachoris*, *litti*, biscuits — they were a lifesaver during long waits and uncertain meal times.
- Pack essential medicines for fever, fatigue, digestion issues and body aches.
- Minimal luggage is best — just warm clothes, a wool cap and comfortable walking shoes.
- Plan train and transport bookings well in advance, keeping alternative routes in mind.
- Be prepared for crowds — spiritual journeys come with challenges, but they are part of the experience.



*(Rajesh Kumar Saraf is the owner of Hotel Vinayak, Siliguri, and a hospitality and tourism expert. Opinions and facts expressed in this article are those of the author and may not reflect newsletter's position — Editor.)*



# Path to Peace

*Zen spirituality makes the mind attentive and focused*

**Nilima Tamang**

**I**N TODAY'S fast-paced world, stress and anxiety have become common struggles. The whole generation has plunged into the risk of anxiety, depression, irritability and absentmindedness, confined by the solitary chains of our smart gadgets. While gadgets and technology can be beneficial, finding balance is the key to protecting our mental health. While modern solutions like therapy and medication help, an ancient practice of meditation offers a timeless path to inner peace.

Spiritual connection with our inner self plays a vital role in mental health. It is said to be a protective shield against harmful impact on our mental and physical health. Zen spirituality is to cultivate peace with oneself and wisdom through focused mindfulness in everyday life. It is about training the mind to be attentive, focused and non-judgemental.

You wake up before sunrise, with the world still wrapped in silence. You make a warm cup of tea, feeling the heat against your palms. Outside, the sky transforms from deep blue to attain golden hues. There is no rush...just the moment, this is the spirit of Zen meditation.

Zen meditation rooted in Buddhist philosophy, emphasizes mindfulness, simplicity and living the present moment. The word Zen translates to *dhyana* in Sanskrit, meaning meditation and abandoning evil. At the heart of Zen spirituality is Zazen, a seated meditation practice to perform *dhyana*. Zen meditation is similar to mindfulness but Zen emphasizes on general awareness, mindfulness and focuses on specific objects.

Mindfulness is a meditative Buddhist practice. It means living in the moment and awakening to awareness. You wake up in the morning, but instead of rushing to your auto pilot, you pause. You hear the birds singing, feel the softness of your blanket and notice the golden morning spilling into your room. You are awake...not just physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually...this is mindfulness, not just a practice but a superpower that turns the ordinary into something magical.

Right mindfulness is deeply rooted in the seventh factor of the eight-fold path of Buddhism. This practise focuses our awareness of the present moment, our feelings, thoughts and actions. It is the awakening of all our senses. Right mindfulness relates to *kaya*: activities of our body, *vedana*: feelings and sensations, *citta*: activities of the mind and *dhamma*: conceptions, ideas and things.

Zen spirituality and mindful meditation offer a powerful antidote to modern stress. With Zazen — cultivating awareness and embracing simplicity — we can experience greater mental clarity, emotional balance and inner peace. The path of Zen and mindfulness provides profound benefits for the mind, body and soul. ●



*(Nilima Tamang is a Perma culturist and also a Zen Practitioner. Opinions and facts expressed in this article are those of the author and may not reflect the newsletter's position — Editor.)*

**January 31 to February 1:** Chullyu Agro Tourism Festival 2025 was held at Chullyu School Ground, Keyi Panyor, Arunachal Pradesh. ACT and Arunachal Pradesh Society for



Education & Development were festival partners. The Chullyu Agro Tourism Festival 2025 is a unique initiative that aims to promote the rich agro-diversity of Chullyu village, blending agricultural heritage with rural and agro-tourism. This festival serves as a platform to showcase high-quality local produce like oranges, pineapples, sugarcane, pumpkin, ginger, chilies, bananas and a variety of seasonal vegetables. By integrating agro-tourism with

responsible tourism practices, the event aspires to position Chullyu as a recognized agro-tourism destination in Asia.

Festival highlights:

- Trekking trail: Launch of scenic trekking routes through orange and pineapple orchards, offering visitors an immersive experience of the region's lush farmlands.
- Waste management awareness: A dedicated session on eco-friendly practices and sustainable waste disposal to promote responsible tourism.
- Angling and rafting Inauguration:

**Chullyu Agro Tourism Festival serves as a platform to showcase high-quality local produce. By integrating agro-tourism with responsible tourism practices, the event will position Chullyu as a recognized agro-tourism destination in Asia**



- Introduction of eco-adventure activities such as fishing and rafting to enhance the tourism experience while preserving the natural ecosystem.

- Traditional games and cultural activities: Celebration of local sports and traditional games, reflecting the indigenous culture and heritage of Arunachal Pradesh.

## FESTIVAL AND EVENTS DIARY

**February 7-9:** The Second Darjeeling Ecotourism and Cultural Festival took place at Ahal Ground, Kurseong. It was in Tinchulay village in Darjeeling from where the first homestay movement under Rural Tourism in India began in the mid-90. Since then, the

area has shown the way to the rest of India and adjoining countries. The area is part of Kanchenjunga Regional Tourism Circuit comprising North Bengal, Sikkim, Eastern Nepal and Bhutan. Rural Tourism stakeholders and policy makers from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Himachal Pradesh, Nepal and Bhutan have visited the villages to understand rural tourism with homestays.



**Rural tourism and homestays have arrested migration from the villages and has given pride to the local communities for their food, culture and lifestyle**



Rural tourism and homestays now dominates Darjeeling Hills which was once famous across the globe for colonial tourism comprising snow-capped mountain view, tea gardens, Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (Toy Train) and Dak Bungalows. This has arrested

migration from the villages and has given pride to the local communities for their food, culture and lifestyle. With active support of GTA Tourism and with technical help from Association for Conservation & Tourism (ACT), the Homestay Owners Association has begun hosting this event since 2024.





**February 23–28:** The 11th BIFA Maha Shivaratri Camp saw devotees from the neighbouring towns of North Bengal, Assam and Bihar visiting the Tumdra Amye Nye (Jayanti Mahakal Dham) at Pasakha, Chhukha Bhutan, in large numbers. Some estimates



put the number of devotees to be more than 3,000. The 160 Desuup volunteers rendered round-the-clock service to the pilgrims, ensuring safety and security along the steep precarious path to the shrine. His

Majesty's Mobile Medical Unit (KMMU) provided emergency medical services to Desuup volunteers who also conducted a massive cleaning exercise from the Nye (Dham) to the campsite and the surrounding areas.

**February 26–28:** Readers Jhapa in collaboration with Dehi Arts and Pariwartan Theatre organized the 5th Kala Sahitya Utsav — an art and literature festival at Kakarvitta. The event saw meaningful dialogue and interactions among renowned



literary figures and social thinkers from across the Himalayas. The panel of eminent speakers included Uttam Babu Shrestha, Vice-Chancellor's Research Fellow at the

Institute for Agriculture and the Environment, University of Southern Queensland, Australia, Ramesh Bhusal, Nepal editor for *Dialogue Earth*, Aruna Upreti, public health

## FESTIVAL AND EVENTS DIARY

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specialist and women's rights activist, Mayalmit Lepcha, human rights advocate from the Lepcha community and Kedar Sharma, expert on Nepali traditional food. The three-day event saw lively discussions and deliberations on issues ranging from environment, food, climate change and politics.

**February 28:** The 5th Bengal Himalayan Carnival, organized by Himalayan Hospitality & Tourism Development Network (HHTDN) in association with Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, and Eco-Tourism Homestay Association, was inaugurated at Toribari-Salugara, Jalpaiguri. The 2025 edition of the carnival was a grand confluence of culture, sustainable tourism and community-driven initiatives. Priyadarshini Bhattacharya, Additional District Magistrate (Tourism), Jalpaiguri district graced the occasion as chief guest. Other dignitaries present were Pratul Chakraborty, Chairman, Siliguri Municipal Corporation, Jyoti Ghosh, Deputy Director, Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, Kabita Chettri, President, Rajgunj Block Dabgram-I, Shobha Subha, Councillor, Ward No. 42, Aarati Roy Pradhan, Representative, Dabgram-I, Abhiram Saibo, Bhaktinagar Police, Samrat Sanyal, Secretary, HHTDN, Abhijit Sengupta, Senior Vice-President, HHTDN, Abhisek Kumar, Assistant Director, Bengal Safari and Shri Subhasish Chakraborty, President, HHTDN. This year's carnival set a benchmark in eco-friendly event management, with a strong focus on sustainability and zero-waste practices. The event demonstrated a commitment to environmental consciousness through the following initiatives:

- Local and organic market: The carnival featured numerous local and organic stalls, offering indigenous handicraft, traditional foods and artisanal products.
- Zero plastic policy: The entire event adhered to a strict no-plastic policy, ensuring minimal environmental footprint.
- Eco-conscious branding: All banners and promotional materials were crafted from cloth, replacing conventional plastic-based signage.



By integrating community participation, environmental responsibility and heritage conservation, the event set a precedence for future tourism initiatives in the region. Moreover, the event also provided the Bengal Himalayas an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to preserving its cultural roots while fostering a sustainable and responsible tourism ecosystem, ensuring a positive impact on both local communities and the environment. ●





**Moods of the month  
from Arunachal Pradesh**





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