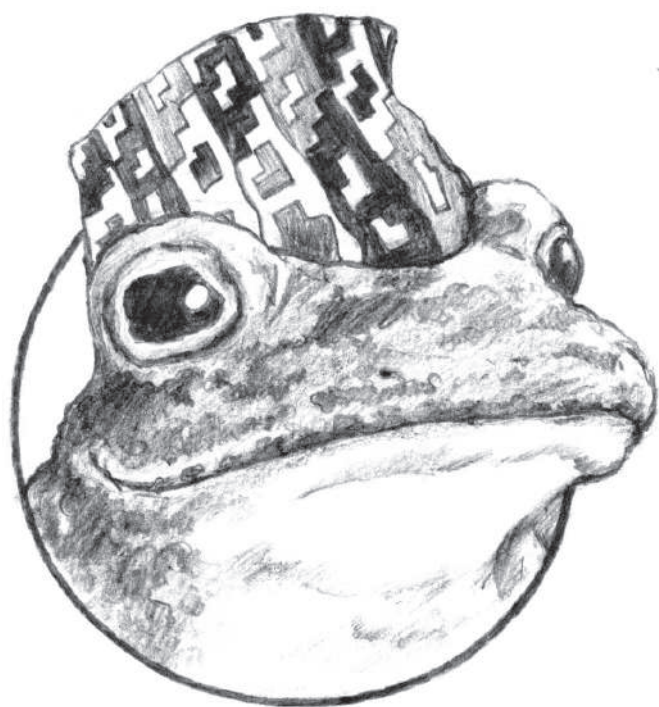


ADVENTURES OF A
**NEPALI
FROG**



Kanak Mani Dixit
Illustrations by Subhas Rai





India

Tibet



Lingling

Kathmandu

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Rato Bangala Kitab

Lalitpur, Nepal

Foreword

The story of Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto's adventures took shape over successive nights back in 1989 at my children's bedside. The frog just kept hopping farther afield until I had to bring back to Kathmandu on an airplane.

Thereafter, Bhaktaprasad's saga developed further – in a weekly serial I did for the children's page of Kathmandu's *Rising Nepal*, and then in the actual preparation of this book in the monsoon of 1996.

The route taken by the frog through Nepal's hills and valleys are mostly, but not entirely, based on my own treks. I have seen the marmots at the Changtang border, tried befriending Tarai bullocks, heard the bullfrog's call by Phewa Lake, and flown out of Jufaal's precarious airstrip, but I have not been to Chharkabhot or seen a snow leopard.

I believe that Bhaktay has enjoyed his adventures as much as I have enjoyed writing them. We both hope that you will find excitement in this journey with us.

Kanak Mani Dixit
2 November 1996

Note on revised ninth printing

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto is 15 years old in 2011. The adventurous frog and I, as the author, are both happy that Rato Bangala Kitab has decided to bring out this revised edition, now in its ninth printing. While written as a children's story, which received the Sajha Bal Sahitya Award in the year BS 2054 (1997), this book has proved popular among visitors to Nepal as well. I am happy that it serves that purpose, as trekking and tourism are set to increase in a country at peace.

The Nepal that Bhaktay traversed in 1996 has changed considerably by now. The decade of conflict which started that very year has left its mark on society, large numbers of young people have left the villages, many trekking trails have been overtaken by motor roads, and the country has converted into a republic. Over and above these transformations, Nepal remains the same in the openness that marks its people and the singularity of its natural landscape.

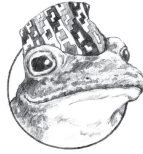
I remain grateful to Rato Bangala Kitab for making it possible for this story to reach out to so many children and adults in so many languages, in Nepal, Southasia and overseas. I thank my son Eelum for reviewing the text of a story he first heard as a four-year-old, together with his seven-year-old sister Himali. Subhas Rai's pencil-art continues to bring life and energy to Bhaktay's great trek. Thanks also to Sworup Nhasiju, who extended the backdrop to Subhas Rai's watercolour cover illustration.

There have been some revisions in this edition, also reflecting changes that have overtaken Nepal, but the adventures of Bhaktay remain the same.

Kanak Mani Dixit
17 September 2011

Contents

Kathmandu Calling	1
The Mango Porter	7
A Trip to the Tarai	10
Along the East West Highway	12
Chitwan's Wild Sanctuary	17
A Wild and Wet Party	22
Trucking It North	26
Rivers and Mountains	30
Pokhara Party	34
Checking out Machhapuchharay	39
Of Apples and Ammonites	45
Howling Winds of Kali Gandaki	50
The Encyclopaedia of Kagbeni	53
Pilgrim Frog at Muktinath	57
High and Dry Desert	62
The Last La-Toh	66
Frontier Marmots of Changtang	72
Travels with Kaili	76
Myyaaah Goes Counter-Clockwise	79
Lamolama the Tall	83
Frog (Finds Himself) in Dolpo	86
Goodbye to All That	89
Flying Friendly Skies	93
Back to Mangalman	98
Glossary	103
Characters	107



Kathmandu Calling

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto was a young Kathmandu froglet who had just reached his tadpole teens. He lived in a rice terrace on a hillside by the village of Ichangu, behind the great Swayambhu Stupa. Being an amphibian, Bhaktaprasad was curious by nature, but his grandfather Buddhiprasad and his mother Sanomaiya found out early on that he was “more curious than most” of his generation. He was the quickest among his brothers and sisters to learn to hop, and had lately taken to venture out on his own – out of the muddy paddies and onto the path used by humans. He would sit and watch men, women and children walk up and down the trail, and wonder where they were coming from or going to.

Normally frogs do not worry too much about things beyond the paddies. Their lives consist of crouching in wait for the next insect to fly within range and watching out for garden snakes that tend to sneak upon while the frogs wallow and croak. But Bhaktaprasad was different. He was intrigued by these humans – they walked along the narrow trail as if they were headed somewhere. They seemed to have some sort of *intention* – a reason to move forward towards something in their lives.

“Well, I too will find my *intention*,” young Bhaktaprasad decided one early summer morning, “As soon as I lose my tail, I’ll hop down that trail and head somewhere.”

Bhaktaprasad took to hanging around the *chautara*, the platform by the trail where the humans rested and exchanged



stories. From their conversations, a delighted Bhaktay was able to form images of the worlds that lay beyond the secure paddy of his childhood. He noted details about "The City", about which he had heard since a baby. He learnt of cars and buses, streetlamps and telephone poles, and buildings that contained hundreds of rooms!

One evening, Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto was looking towards the mass of tile-roofed houses that the humans of the *chautara* had pointed out, imagining what life there would be like. As he watched the sun set behind the darkening hills that rose above green rice-fields, he realised that the last remnant of his tail had finally disappeared. With a sense of freedom that he had not felt before, Bhaktaprasad hopped home as fast as he could and announced his intention to leave the family paddy.

"But why?!" The entire clan croaked in unison, not believing that anyone would want to leave the Ichangu rice terraces. Bhaktaprasad was no longer a froglet, and he replied with confidence, "Because I want to experience life beyond these terraces. I want to see the city, where the humans live. I want to go to the Tarai that is so flat that you can hop forever without feeling tired, and where they say the sun sets on the horizon instead of on a hillside. I want to see the vast plains, wide rivers, deep gorges, great mountains! I want to meet all the creatures there are to meet!"

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 great and everlasting regret he had done nothing about it. He did not want his grandfrog Bhaktay 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 family circle of concerned frogs,

Buddhiprasad said, "Let Bhaktay go. He will see the world and return to tell us about his experiences."

There was a chorus of surprised croaks and Sanomaiya turned quickly to look at her father. Before she could say anything, however, Bhaktaprasad had bid a quick farewell and was bounding down the trail towards The City.

"Thank you, Hajurba!" he shouted over his shoulder.

The young frog did not look back until he arrived at the bottom of the slope and a strip of tarmac called the Ring Road. He knew from his research that this road circled The City. Taking one last look up at the terraces of Ichangu, Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto joined the Ring Road and hopped until the Swayambhu Stupa came into view, situated on a hill all of its own. As he passed the great dome, 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 bounded forth with even more vigour.

After a few minutes on the hard-topped tarmac, however, the frog found himself tiring. He remembered that the men and women at the *chautara* had talked often 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 green Sajha Yatayat bus arrived. To his surprise, the bus conductor refused to let him hop on, saying that the Sajha Yatayat company policy forbade frogs, toads, worms, snakes and rats from riding public transport.

"And besides," said the conductor, sneeringly "we only go to Ratna Park - why would a frog from the outskirts want to go to the center of town?"

"Ratna Park would be fine, *hajur*," said Bhaktaprasad with exaggerated humility.

Now, the scruffy-looking conductor had never been addressed so respectfully. His life's work was dealing with

rude passengers who constantly pushed him around, refused to pay the proper fare, and called him names when he insisted. The young man's attitude towards the Bhaktaprasad softened immediately.

"Hop on, be quick!" he said.

The conductor hit the side of the bus twice, quickly, with his palm – the signal for the bus driver to move. They passed by some fields, new housing colonies, went over the Bishnumati river, then up a steep slope that swerved to the left. Soon enough the bus entered The City – a signboard told him that this was "Kathmandu".

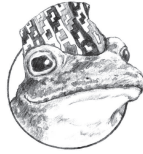
Night fell as he watched the Narayanhiti Palace Museum go by, and the bus zoomed past the big pond of Rani Pokhari before it finally arrived at the Ratna Park bus stop.

The city 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. From his perch on the window-sill of his bus, Bhaktaprasad could see hundreds of people milling about, and going in every which direction. They were joined by cars, buses, pushcarts, *riksas*, motorcycles and bicycles, whose bells and horns screeched and howled in unison. It would have been an immediate and messy death for a frog to descend to ground level amidst such bedlam.

"Not such a good idea," the conductor advised. Bhaktaprasad agreed.







The Mango Porter

For a while, Bhaktaprasad wondered what action to take. If he did not get off the bus before too long, it would begin its return trip and take him back to the Ring Road. Before he knew, he would be right back in Ichangu.

"That would be the shortest adventure ever," thought the frog, just as he saw a porter coming close by the side of the bus with a *doko* on his back. Using the quick wittedness that would serve him so well in the days ahead Bhaktaprasad shouted a quick, "Thank you, *hajooooor!*" 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 of 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 have 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 the fruits to a shop on the far side of Asan Bazaar," said Jagat Bahadur. "Go ahead, have a mango."

Bhaktaprasad selected an ripe and juicy mango. He made a small hole on its tip and sucked on it as they passed the

brightly lit shopfronts of Asan. There were stores selling pots and pans, paint and brushes, wall clocks and cellphones. Out in the open, there were stalls selling fruits, vegetables, spices and grains.

Bhaktaprasad reflected, partly to himself, "Wow! I never thought there could be so many things to buy and sell!"

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

Frog and porter passed the three tiered temple of Annapurna, goddess of plenty. Further on, they paid their respects to the fearful visage of Kali, who seemed ready to grab a few passers-by and add to her garland of skulls. They passed the enchanting courtyards and temples of the Kathmandu Darbar from where, Jagat Bahadur told him, the most powerful kings of Nepal Valley had ruled in centuries past.

All too soon, the tour was over. Jagat Bahadur heaved his basket down on the plinth of a single-storied temple dedicated to Ganesh, the pot-bellied elephant-headed god.

"The Ganesh temple is a good place to begin a 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, Bhaktaprasad followed a lane that sloped westward. 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. Acting instinctively, Bhaktaprasad managed a mighty hop. He bounded over the dog and was off down the slope, taking huge hops. Not able to plan where he would land in the darkness, he flew into a gutter and crashed with a splash on some muck, which cushioned his fall. Bhaktaprasad had found refuge, however filthy, while the fangs of his dogged pursuer bit the air inches above.

The mongrel waited there, barking and whining for some time, but Bhaktaprasad was too tired to care. The combination



of bus-ride, porter-ride and chase by an unfriendly urban mongrel was enough to make anyone exhausted – and certainly a frog from Ichangu on his first evening out.

“This city is not without danger, that’s for sure,” said the frog. “Tomorrow, I must head down to the Tarai, where the land is flat and the dogs are hopefully more civilised.” He was secure in the little drain, and sleep caught up with Bhaktaprasad.



A Trip to the Tarai

Bhaktaprasad slept lightly. He dreamt of his grandfather Buddhiprasad Bhyaguto, who was 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 gutter filled up with rushing water. The frog willingly joined the flow and soon found himself at the point where the drain met the river Bishnumati. This holy river, which in the dry months carried only city sewage and garbage, had been cleansed by the monsoon's flow.

Bhaktaprasad found a rusty tin can by the river's edge. After checking that it did not leak, he edged it into the water. Once it was floating, Bhaktaprasad hopped in. Slowly, the tin can and its passenger joined the current of the Bishnumati and they were swept along, swaying and spinning.

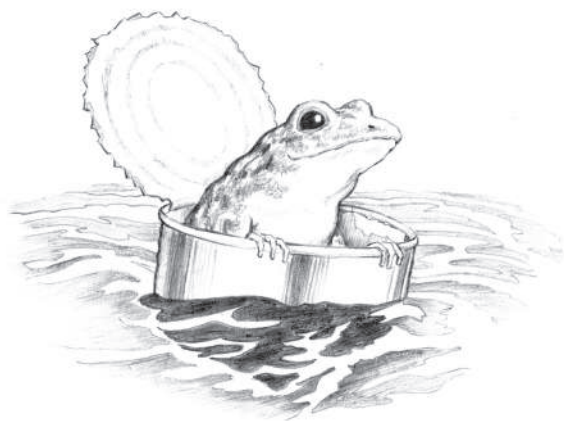
A few minutes downstream, the Bishnumati joined the larger river Bagmati, which came in from the left. Beyond the confluence, after some smooth sailing, the tin can went crazy

as it entered the Chobar Gorge. Bhaktaprasad felt nauseous as he slipped past huge boulders and bounced over rapids; he was grateful that he had chosen a sturdy tin can for a boat.

After the Chobar rapids, the cruise was slightly calmer, but not for long. Throughout the day, tributaries met the Bagmati – the Kulekhani from the west, the Kokrajhar and the Marin from the east – until the river grew into a massive, roaring, frothing force. Spinning around in his little boat as the river descended to the plains, Bhaktaprasad became dizzy once again. He decided to try to get some sleep. After all, it was already evening.

The bright light of dawn woke Bhaktaprasad, and he got up to look around. Gone was the turbulent Bagmati of the hills. Instead, the river was wide and its flow smooth. Water lapped softly on the side of the can. Peeking over the edge of the tin can, Bhaktaprasad saw the sun rise 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. This 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. He relaxed for a while in his tin-can boat, and as it rotated the morning sun warmed his skin from all sides. After sunbathing for a while, the frog stretched out one long leg over the side of his boat and paddled over to the muddy bank. He landed close to where a plover was busy dipping his beak under stones and pebbles, searching for an insect breakfast.

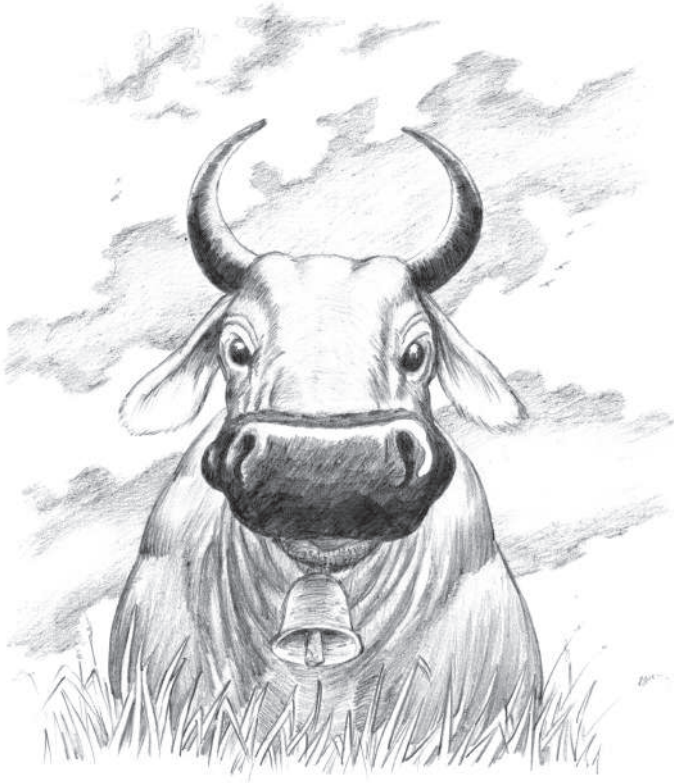
As Bhaktaprasad came closer, the bird looked up from his search and introduced himself: “Hello, I’m Prachanda Plover. What are you doing, shipping yourself somewhere in that ridiculous little tin can?”

Taken aback that a Tarai bird could speak the same tongue as a hill 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. The live insect tasted bitter and was clawing around inside his mouth. He quickly swallowed the bug and asked, “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, I myself haven't been to the far ends." Then the plover said, "The bugs are all 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 slanting sunlight.

The frog hopped in the direction he'd been given, and saw the bridge that spanned the Bagmati. Climbing an incline, he suddenly came upon a smooth stretch of metalled road, the East West Highway. Bhaktaprasad was about to hop across the road 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 Bayel is my name and this is my friend Altaf Bayel. Pulling carts is our game," said the bullock, sounding very cross. "Hmph! Do you know what happens when you cross this road without a *stop, look and go*? You will be squished and flattened into a pretty little meat pancake. Trucks and buses will not stop for you. Don't they teach you things like this where you come from?"

"Oh thank you, kind bullock, for saving my life!" exclaimed Bhaktaprasad, as suddenly two buses roared past, racing each other over the bridge and headed to destinations out east. They certainly would not have stopped for me, thought Bhaktaprasad, watching the two buses become specks in the distance.

When Bhaktaprasad confided his mission of exploring the Tarai and then the rest of Nepal, Tulsi Bayel turned out to be a helpful comrade. Switching on the voice of an experienced tour guide, the bullock said, "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 than in the hills I say. And then, yes sir, we have the Tarai jungle, unmatched in its wildness by anything you have to show in the hills."

Bhaktaprasad said enthusiastically, "Mr Bayel, I have seen many cats, cows and humans, but I have never seen a real jungle! What is it like?"

As a creature from the paddy terraces of Ichangu, Bhaktaprasad knew only of the Nagarjun forest, known as the Queen's Forest, Raniban. But there was a tall brick wall that surrounded the woods and even frogs with the strongest

hind-legs could not make it over. This was why Bhaktaprasad had never been in a jungle before.

Altaf Bayel, who had only been listening to the conversation so far, explained that a jungle was a place with trees, bushes, tall grasses and, most importantly, wild birds and animals. Said the buffalo, "What you want to do, frog, is to visit the Chitwan National Park. It has wild animals the kind you will never find anywhere else, in Nepal and even in the world!"

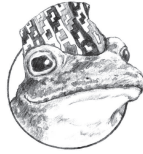
Tulsi invited Bhaktaprasad to jump on top of the straw stacked on the bullock cart. Two bulls and a frog trundled westward along the East West Highway, which ran straight as an arrow as far as the eye could see.

"You know," said Altaf, leaning over to Tulsi, "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 cracked a joke. Appearances could be deceiving – even the most dour-looking bullock could have a sense of humour!



After a day's slow journey, the cart rolled into the cross-road settlement of Pathlaiya. Tulsi Bayel said, "Here we must turn south, while you continue north and then west. Keep going to where the planes land at Bharatpur, where you must turn left and hop southward till you reach the Chitwan jungle."

As an afterthought the bullock added, "Remember Bhaktay, those are wild animals out there, untamed creatures of the jungle – quite different from us domestics. Be aware!"



Chitwan's Wild Sanctuary

One morning, after two days and three nights of hopping along the highway shoulder, Bhaktaprasad arrived at 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 'Chitwan National Park'. There was a bamboo barricade manned by a man in olives – one of the soldiers who guarded the jungle and protected its rare 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 that was headed home after a tour outside the national park. The soldier stretched his foot and blocked Bhaktaprasad's way. It was touch-and-go.

"Hey, Sher Bahadur! Come over here!" cried the soldier. "Look at that one! He does not look like any amphibian mentioned in our manual of park species."

Sher Bahadur came out of a nearby tent and carefully scanned the frog's markings, "Well, you can never tell with frogs, Ram Bilas. There are so many species."

"But this guy was out, coming in."

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

Before the words were out of Sher Bahadur's lips, Bhaktaprasad was off. What if Ram Bilas disagreed and suggested putting him behind bars? There was no chance to be taken. The frog was already several metres into the forest before he stopped behind the trunk of a tree. He heaved a sigh of relief, "Phew!" Up above, the *simal* tree went up forever, half-way to the heavens.

A "croak-croak" greeting came from under a nearby bush. It was an amphibian, who called out, "Hello, hill 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 *Bufo melanostictus*, or the Black Spined Toad."

Bhaktaprasad returned the greeting, "*Rana tigrina*, a frog from Kathmandu."

Tarai Toad was larger, more muscular and darker-skinned than Bhaktaprasad, and as his name suggested, he had black spots along his back. According to him, while the Chitwan wildlife had seen many human tourists come visit, this was the first time that a non human tourist had arrived.

"This is an occasion to celebrate!" said Tarai Toad.

The toad was quick to 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, "Hiya..."

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 the tree's seeds, which came wrapped in a cottony substance. A fussy male peacock landed in a flurry of colourful tail feathers. He was obviously a well-known showoff, as everybody pretended not to notice. The peacock started his insistent "*ngnnnaaaaaa ngnaaaaaaa*"



call, which nagged everybody no end.

A strange creature, almost as large as a thatched-roof hut, with thick folds of grey skin cascading down her sides, lumbered over and shook a large horn that grew straight out of her snout. One small eye of Madame 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?"

"One horned rhino," peeped a small voice from the other side.

"And where do you find the *two* horned rhino?"

"In Africa!" said Ekraj, getting bolder.

The frog and baby rhino instantly became friends, and they played hide-and-seek among the tall reeds and the thick elephant grass.

The hustle and bustle in the jungle clearing suddenly became subdued as a black-striped yellow 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 tiger 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 surprised everyone by starting a conversation with the frog. "You are one lucky frog, free to go where you want," she said, a certain melancholy in her voice. Bhaktaprasad indicated that he did not understand. Everyone, even the shrill peacock, fell silent in order to hear the wise words of the elderly cat.

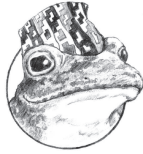
Royal Bengal explained, "Once, the jungle was spread like a huge, thick carpet across this entire wide valley of Chitwan. The humans used to call it the *Char Kosay Jhadi*, for them a fearful stretch of dense woodland full of demons and spirits, not to mention wild animals. Back then, we creatures of 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 place, and it is adequate for frogs and toads. But we larger creatures need to move about for food and forage. Each of us tigers and rhinos needs a substantial bit of territory if we are to survive, and what the humans have left us is just not enough."

The wistful words of the Jungle Queen had everyone captivated. She ended by saying, "The long stretches of the *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 here."



A Wild and Wet Party

All the creatures, including the guest from Kathmandu, had become increasingly morose as they learnt from Royal Bengal how lovely and wild all of Chitwan Valley once was. 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, loud enough to set the heart racing. Winds came from nowhere and swooped down on the forest canopy, bending the branches of trees great and small. 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 not experienced. This 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 langurs slithered down the wet tree trunks and swung by the vines. Parrots, turtle doves and ravens competed in a screeching racket and flew awkwardly about, their plumage disheveled by the wind and rain. Even Royal Bengal became animated. She 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 froglet brothers and sisters. Look at him now, riding a Chitwan tiger! And all these new friends! He could not hold himself back.

"Yay!" cried Bhaktaprasad for the second time during his adventure, "I'm a hero!"

The squall departed as quickly as it had arrived, and the forest became suddenly quiet. There was nothing to be heard other than drops of water falling off the leaves and vines. Then from high up in the forest canopy 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 or underwater. Mugger shuffled down to the river, took a deep breath, and sank to the bottom to wait out the intruders. Royal Bengal glanced back apologetically and said "Sorry, Bhaktay!" as she flicked the frog off her back into a patch of rhino dung, where he made a soft landing. The tiger disappeared into the tall grass. The party was clearly over, but something else was beginning.

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 came to stand by his side, and he explained the strange procession as it went past. "Those are domesticated elephants, trained by the humans to do what they want. Those are tourists riding *howdahs* on the elephants' backs. They come to Chitwan to look at us wildlife."

As frog and toad peered out 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. No wonder they were not smiling.

This is most curious, thought Bhaktaprasad. There were rhinos, tigers, sloth bears and wild boar all around in the undergrowth, but the humans had not a clue! As far as they were concerned, Chitwan's jungle was just trees and more trees. 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.

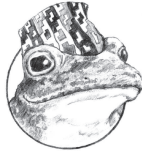


The tame elephants, looking as unhappy as their human passengers, heaved and swayed past the frog and toad. All around the clearing, you could hear the wild animals tittering as they tried desperately to suppress their laughter.

"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 to look for Tarai Toad. But he was nowhere to be seen. Concerned, Bhaktaprasad hopped this way and that. All the other animals were still in hiding, and he only saw Mugger the crocodile, his great jaws chewing on some tiny morsel.

Mugger then returned to the water's edge. Before he slipped into the slowly moving current, the crocodile gave a backward glance at Bhaktaprasad, who was shaking with shock and sorrow. He said, "Mister Frog from Kathmandu, never forget that Chitwan is a jungle. Here, 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 Chitwan as fast as his hind legs could hop him.



Trucking It North

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

Bhaktaprasad, by now a seasoned traveler, decided he would stow away in a truck to Pokhara, for which he first had to get to 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 'micro' carrying some tourists back from the national park.

It was already dark when they arrived at Narayanghat's busy crossroad. Mighty 'night-buses', with mightier pneumatic horns, continuously screamed their way in and out of the junction. By morning, these buses would be depositing their passengers at far west towns like Nepalganj, or at the eastern border point of Kakarbhitta. Narayanghat's bazaar lights and floodlit billboards made it as if it were daylight. This fast-paced Narayanghat market was quite different from the pedestrian-only bazaar of Asan in Kathmandu. You could buy bigger things in Narayanghat than at Asan, the frog noted – from motorcycles to tractors, from hand-pumps to electric generators.

"I can't wait to tell Grandfather Buddhiprasad about all

this," the frog said to himself as he watched hawkers trying to sell oranges and bottles of mineral water bottles to groggy looking night-bus passengers. Then the frog set about trying to hitch a ride to Pokhara. He chose a drain to slip along so that he would not be trampled or crushed by the heavy road traffic. Bhaktaprasad made his way to what seemed like a truck-stop, an eatery patronised by long-distance drivers.

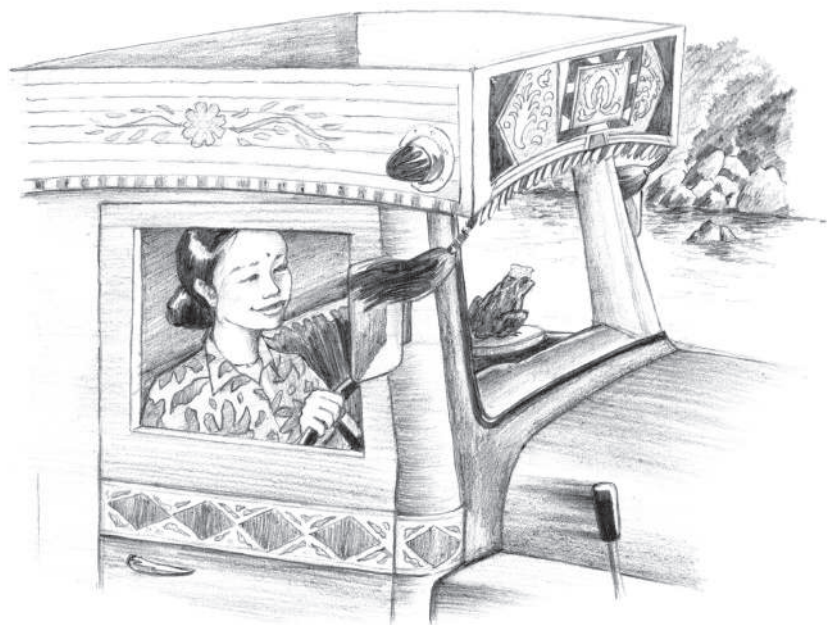
Bhaktaprasad entered the shack and crept under a bench so that he could listen in on the truckers' conversation. From the banter of relaxing drivers, he learnt that a truck was about to leave for Pokhara. The driver of the truck in question was a lady, Phulmaya by name. From the conversation, the frog gathered that Phulmaya was the first-ever truck driver in Nepal 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 man, clearly the waiter, was holding forth loudly. "Even in Pakistan and Bangladesh!"

"*Chup!* Do be quiet!" Phulmaya said. She had obviously heard this introduction many times before.

Bhaktaprasad leaned forward from under the table to get a glimpse of Phulmaya, and for his troubles he came within an inch of being crushed under the waiter's slippers. Driver Phulmaya had golden-brown skin, a large forehead, and a pug nose with a *phuli* ring shining on the side. As Bhaktaprasad watched mesmerised, she gathered her long black hair into a bun, getting ready to leave.

Her tresses firmly out of the way, Phulmaya said a friendly "*Jaun la bhai!*" to the waiter, left a generous tip on the table, and headed out to the heavily-laden goods truck that was parked nearby. Walking around the vehicle, she gave one tyre a practiced kick, inspected the exhaust pipe, and checked the engine oil. 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 on the driver's seat. At eye-level with a startled Phulmaya, he said, "Listen, Phulmaya! You are the first woman trucker in Nepal and I am the first frog traveler of the country. So you have to help me. Will you please let me hitch a ride with you to Pokhara?"

While clearly taken aback by the presence of the talking frog, Phulmaya was nothing if not adaptable to strange and sudden circumstances. This quick-wittedness, 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, my dear!" replied Phulmaya. There was genuine warmth in her voice. 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, Phulmaya replied, "There's always

a first time. Come, let's get you something." The frog accompanied the truck driver around some of Narayanghat all-night shops. 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 covered her mouth with her fingers as she laughed. This was the first time Bhaktaprasad was wearing *anything*. "Well, better a cap than a t-shirt or shorts," he consoled himself.

They went back to the truck, and Phulmaya 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

Phulmaya, who was from the Tarai town of Malangwa, was quite knowledgeable about the country's hilly geography. Upon leaving Narayanghat, she provided a running commentary en-route. As the highway headed upriver along the Narayani, the river Kali Gandaki came in from the left. "Beyond this point, the main branch which we will follow is called the Trisuli," explained Phulmaya.

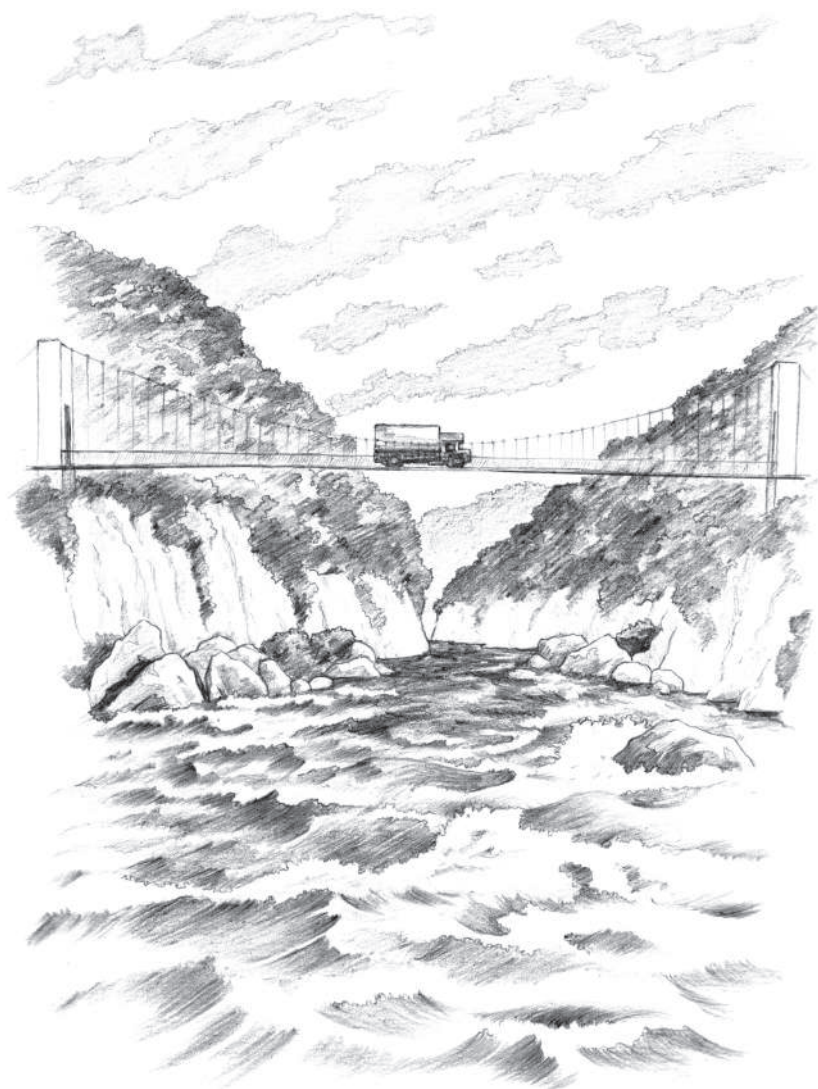
After about an hour, the Seti river came in from the north. Another hour's drive, and the Marsyangdi joined the Trisuli. At that point, the road jumped to the other side over a massive bridge that hung on cables. "This is the truck-stop of Mugling," said Phulmaya, "and from here we follow the Marsyangdi."

Phulmaya realised that Bhaktaprasad was finding it difficult to keep track of the rivers and their names. She wanted to make him feel good during the journey to Pokhara, and thought of something else. As the dawn lit up the steep mountain slopes above the highway, Phulmaya switched to singing gentle songs of travel. Her voice was soft but controlled. One song was about crossing of the river Marsyangdi by dugout and climbing "the long climb of Bandipur".

Bandipur was a historical trading post on a hilltop which had been bypassed by the highway, and so it became like a ghost town. The families moved to Narayanghat and elsewhere. Bhaktaprasad became sad. "But the story has a happy ending, Bhaktay," said Phulmaya. "Because it was protected

from trucks and motor cars, the old town was preserved. Now a lot of tourists visit Bandipur."

Bhaktay looked out of the windshield as first shafts of the morning sun hit the *himals* that towered to the north. They had entered Pokhara Valley and were driving towards the



town. The view was breathtaking. Bhaktaprasad had seen the snowy mountains from the ridge above his village of Ichangu, but this was an entirely different perspective. The *himals* seemed to lean over Pokhara Valley, and you almost had to bend backwards to look at them!

Phulmaya seemed to be as good at mountains as she was with rivers and carburetors. "That mountain, above which the sun has just risen, that's 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, that broad ridge with no prominent summit, that's Annapurna One, the highest."

"Frog, is she one for listing names!" Bhaktaprasad thought, lost among the mountains just as he had been confused earlier by the rivers. But he perked up when he heard Phulmaya say, pointing straight ahead, "That, Bhaktay, is Machhapuchharay!" It was a name every froglet 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, his *topi* fell off. But wait! If this was Machhapuchharay, where was the tail of the fish? Since infancy, when he himself was no more than a dot with a tail, Bhaktaprasad knew what a fish-tail looked like.

"But *didi*, how can this be Machhapuchharay when it does not look anything like the *puchhar* of a *machha*?!"

"Silly Bhaktay!" Phulmaya responded, 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 claim. When he said as much, the trucker replied, "Of course you must trek to Ghandrung, Bhaktay. But first you must see Pokhara, 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 over of Bhaktaprasad. He could not place the feeling exactly. 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 at Phulmaya, who, of course, knew what was up.

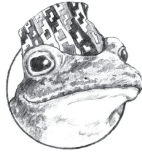
Phulmaya explained, "As an amphibian, Bhaktay, your instinct has just told you that there is a large body of still water nearby. You have been away from stagnant pools for too long, and it is time to get wet!"

Not to prolong the frog's state, Phulmaya took a short cut and drove the truck over to the shores of the great lake of Phewa. Phulmaya suddenly looked melancholic, 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! Oh, if only *hajurba* Buddhiprasad could see me now!"



Pokhara Party

As he bounded towards the shore, a frog who looked like he could be Bhaktaprasad's twin brother joined him. Only a scar on his forehead distinguished him from Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto.

"Hey, you! 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 lit up his face. Bhaktaprasad let the wetness seep in through the pores of his skin. It had been such a long time since he had taken a dip, not since the Bagmati.

After a while, a contented Bhaktaprasad paddled back to land and slipped into a muddy patch by the shore. "Ahh, wallow, wallow, wallow! How lovely to wallow!" he murmured in ecstasy. It took some time before he became aware of his amphibian counterpart, hunched on a rock and glaring 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 ask."

"You, sir, are on my portion of the lakefront. If we did not look so like each other, which tells me we may be related, I'd have had you hauled up before the Lakeside Security Tribunal. Who are 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. All of Nepal is *Rana tigrina* territory!"

Now, that even sounded like the learned Phulmaya; 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 which is in Mugu District in the west. And on its banks lives a frog species which is found only in Nepal and nowhere else in the world. Its scientific name is *Rana rara*."

Bhaktaprasad's interrogator couldn't help but be im-

pressed. "Oh, all right then. I'm Prajapati Pokhreli, from a clan that is specific to the valley of Pokhara. Call me PP."

"You know, you should call yourself 'BB', that would sound good," 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. The two frogs became engrossed in exchanging notes about the valleys of Pokhara and Kathmandu – the creatures, people, hills and *himals* – so much so that they did not notice that darkness had 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 Pokhreli family, which had for centuries lived along the Phewa lakeside, was having a gala event 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, damselflies, 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, most tourists do not like rain, so they do not come during the monsoon." PP and Bhaktaprasad both

laughed at the thought of creatures that did not like rain. How strange!

Still giggling, the two friends entered the restaurant where the Pokhreli 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, skipped and leapt to the music. There were frisky young ones with their tails still on, and there were wrinkled old geezers. Human waiters moved about with trays of the most delectable flies imported from the state of Bihar south of the border. The variety was unimaginable: fried flies, sauteed flies, flies in oil garnish, deliciously mushy greenfly soup, and flied rice.

Coming from a village in Kathmandu's *kaanth*, Bhaktaprasad was taken aback by the sophistication and sumptuousness of the party hosted by his fellow-species of Pokhara. Sitting at a corner table, a tall glass of freshly squeezed fly juice in hand, he sensed the tempo build up as the froggy-rap boomed louder and louder.

"This is unreal," he muttered. 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 Bhaktaprasad's own Ichangu clan.

"Same species, but what a world of difference," thought a bemused Bhaktaprasad. He understood that, with their exposure to the modern world of commerce and tourism, these cosmopolitan Pokhara frogs now had achieved standards that 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 amphibian evolution. As to whether this was good or bad for the Pokhrelis and the universe of 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 by his forehead scar. He waved to indicate that 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, wonderful Lake Phewa. He had to wake up early to make it to Ghandrung tomorrow; 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 Pokhrelis party, Grandfather Buddhiprasad visited in a dream. "To be modern is nice, Bhaktay. We must all move with the times, and adjust to anything that make the lives of all frogs better. 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. Transformation must be for the better, but that is not always the case. I know it is all a bit confusing, Bhaktay. I guess it is best you sleep it off."



Checking out 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 wide valley. He passed the main *bazaar*, built along a long and winding road, which the frog followed all the way to the end of the town. Continuing on, he passed many villages and finally arrived at a place where a sign said was Phedi. From here, the real trek began.

Bhaktaprasad began to climb. At the top was Dhampus, a ridgetop settlement famous for its view of the Annapurna Himal range. As he gained height, Bhaktaprasad's breathing became more laboured and he hopped with less enthusiasm. His hind legs began to ache, he felt dizzy, and his outer skin began to dry up.

"Hey, slow-poke!" came a shout from behind. "Out of the way, unless you want to be trampled!" It was a perspiring porter, bent low with a basketful of heavy baggage.

"Please help me up this climb, sir!" beseeched Bhaktaprasad, remembering the comfort of riding Jagat Bahadur's basket back in Asan bazaar.

All Porters have a kindly disposition, and this one on the Dhampus climb was no exception. "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 began to regain his composure. Before long, he was enjoying himself, especially when a passing cloud decided to release a cool shower on them. A little later, the wind came up the valley to rustle the leaves of the massive *pipals* on the slope. This was rather good!

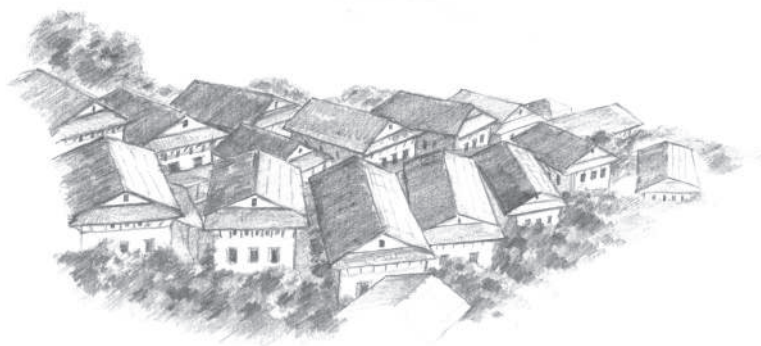
"Trekking is fun when you don't have to walk, eh?" said the porter between deep intakes of breath. It took quite an effort for him to climb with a load that weighed more than 50 kilograms. The porter's name was Hira Bahadur, and he was lugging the baggage of trekking tourists who were headed for Ghandrung.

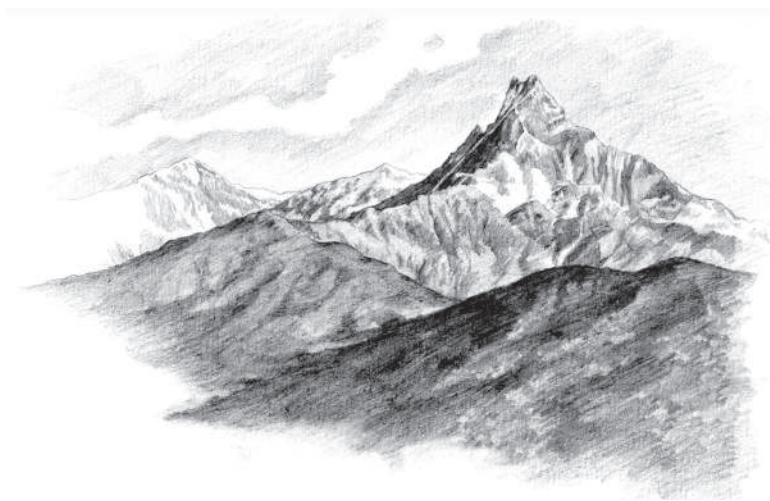
"Oh, goodie! Then can I go with you all the way?!"

"Sure, no problem. You do not add that much weight, Bhaktay!"

Like Phulmaya, Hira Bahadur, too, was quite knowledgeable about his country's geography. As he drank sparkling cold water from a stone spout on the side of the trail, he nodded when the frog asked him about the fishtailed mountain. "Yes, you can see the tail. You can see it change shape as you walk from Dhampus towards Ghandrung. I'll point it out."

As they came up the ridge at Dhampus, the peaks of the Annapurnas came into view. And, lo and behold, the top of Machhapuchharay was no longer the pointed spire seen from Pokhara. 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 along the ridgeline towards the village of 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 complete tail. To Bhaktaprasad, it was a thrilling moment of confirmation.

"This is the real thing," Hira Bahadur assured him, "This is the picture that you see on all those postcards."

Ghandrung was a famous stop for trekkers, sporting a vista of the Annapurna Himal 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 helped each other in all matters, 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 all the way, Bhaktaprasad put up in one of Ghandrung's many beautiful lodges. The one he chose had a beautiful grassy lawn on one side, and sign that proclaimed, "The Ghandrung Mountain View and Chocolate Pudding Lodge with Hot Water Shower and Wifi". Bhaktaprasad shuddered at the thought of a hot water shower, which would not do a frog any good, and decided to do without one. If grandfather Buddhiprasad were internet savvy or held a mobile phone, Bhaktaprasad would have sent him an email or sms message.

The frog settled into a easy chair in the front lawn of The Ghandrung Mountain View and Chocolate Pudding Lodge and took in his fill of Machhapuchharay's twin-peaked 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 little cloud that had strayed near the summit.

Bhaktaprasad spent the rest of the day there, watching as the sun slid down behind him, casting the Modi Khola valley below in deep shadow. The scene became even more captivating as the snowfields on the Annapurnas high up beyond Machhapucharay 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 just too beautiful for Bhaktaprasad to remain silent, out there on the lawn of the lodge. He could not hold back his feelings. "Yay! I'm a hero!" he cried into the moonlit night, his personal expression of delight and discovery.

An insistent “Ding dong, ding dong” from the trail that ran by the wall of the lodge caught the frog’s attention. In the semi-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, which was doing the dinging and donging.

The mule stopped by the fence and looked over. “What is all this ‘hero’ talk, eh? I didn’t even know that frogs could talk!”

Always ready for conversation and quite self-confident by now, Bhaktaprasad hopped over and replied, “I am Bhaktaprasad, from Kathmandu. I had no idea that *mules* could talk, sir!”

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 and trekkers’ baggage.

The mule said to the frog, “I came by Ghandrung to drop off some sacks of apples, and am headed back up to Jomsom. It is behind the Annapurna mountains, north of here. You want to come along? We can travel by night, there is enough moonlight to walk.”

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 midhills, and here was an opportunity to actually penetrate the Himalaya and see 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 topmost sack of rice he was carrying. He said, “Hold on to the stay ropes. The trail is precipitous, and I do not want you falling into the river. Don’t look down!”

Bhaktaprasad looked up one last time at the fishtail

mountain, lit up by the moon and whispered a farewell. He could have been mistaken, but Bhaktaprasad thought he saw the tail flap ever so faintly – a goodbye wave from the mountain sentinel. 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. Having left his bed at the lodge empty, 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, Saligram took care of that. The Kali Gandaki river valley cut a deep gorge between the 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." That was 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, like a saw. The higher the mountains reached, the deeper this valley became."

The trail was wide at times, and they passed trekkers, 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 misstep by Saligram, and they would be trout meal. In the days that followed, the two friends passed through lush forests, walked through misty waterfalls, and watched the massifs on two sides change shape in keeping with their progress. Always by their side was the roaring, frothing Kali Gandaki – one



of the mightiest rivers of the Himalaya.

"Do you know how long the Himalayan range is?" asked Saligram. "Just to make it harder, I need the answer in kilometres and miles".

But Bhaktaprasad was well prepared, as a student of Plulmaya: "The Himalaya is 2,400 kilometres, 1,500 miles long."

He added, "One third of the Himalaya falls within Nepal. Now did you know that, Saligram *dai*?"

"Hmph!"

A few days into their trip up from Ghandrung, Bhaktaprasad noticed that the landscape had begun to change. The forested hillsides 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 side-valleys where there was some cultivation, Bhaktaprasad observed, rather than rice and maize there was barley.

This region of the upper Kali Gandaki also had many apple orchards. Bhaktaprasad enjoyed munching on the fruit he plucked off branches which hung low over the trail, heavy with fruit. 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 louder racket with their bells.

Saligram shared some news with the frog: the jobs of the mules on the Kali Gandaki trail would not last much longer, because a motorable road had now been constructed from Pokhara, going all the way up to the northern border. Indeed, loud jeeps and trucks were already a part of the daily life of the valley, as Bhaktaprasad had noticed. When the frog expressed distress at the thought of Saligram losing his job, the mule replied, "I myself do not mind the thought of retirement, but what of our descendants?" Neither the frog nor the mule had the answer.

The two friends thus entered Marpha in a serious frame of mind. It was a pretty hamlet, houses all daubed in whitewash,

with a central thoroughfare lined with inns and cafes. The dwellings all had flat roofs of beaten mud, with what seemed like a year's supply of firewood neatly stacked on top. Seeing Bhaktaprasad eye these strange houses which had no slanting roofs or eaves, Saligram intoned, "There is no need for sloping roofs here, because it does not rain much."

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

"Foolish frog!" said Saligram. "The weather can be different in different parts of the same country. Here we are still in Nepal, but north of the Himalayan range. Even though it is the monsoon season, 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. Bhaktaprasad wondered, why were villages like Marpha and Ghandrung so much cleaner than Kathmandu or Pokhara towns? Bhaktaprasad could not ask Saligram, because, while the mule was quite knowledgeable on this region, he knew little about the rest of Nepal. The mule was not able to compare and contrast.

The mule 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," Saligram said. Bhaktaprasad saw that the exhibited items had strange markings on them.

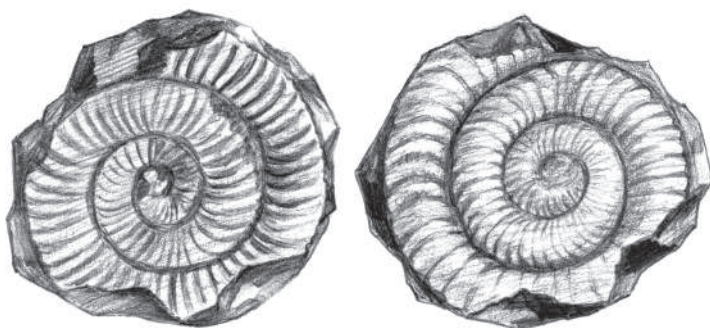
Saligram explained, "These black rocks are known as ammonites, and the markings are the remains of creatures which lived in the ocean millions of years ago. Before it rose to become a mountain chain, the Himalaya was part of the ocean floor. Today, Kali Gandaki's cutting action exposes these fossils to our eyes."

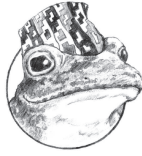
Indeed, Bhaktaprasad knew that the Kali Gandaki area

was famous in the world 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 remembered, "*Saligram!*" he cried. "*They are called saligram!*"





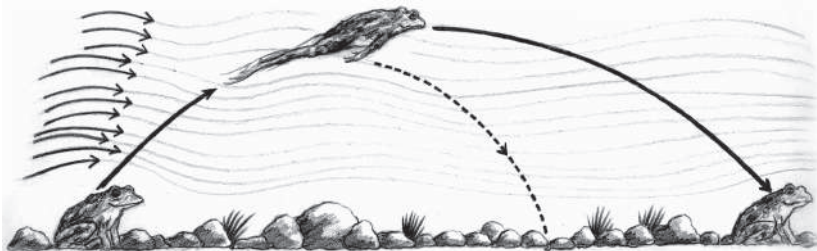
Howling Winds of Kali Gandaki

After the mule had finished his lunch of cornmeal and had his fill at Marpha's dugout drinking trough, the two companions travelled the few remaining kilometres north to Jomsom. This was the most important trading post of Mustang District and would be the turnaround point for Saligram. It was getting to be late morning, and Bhaktaprasad noticed that the wind had picked up. It soon grew into a howling storm, except that there were no clouds or rain. The wind came up from behind, downriver, picking up little pebbles from the ground and hitting the frog in stinging bursts.

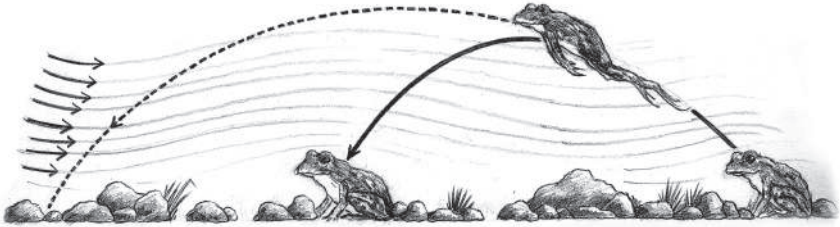
A gust picked up Bhaktaprasad's cap, and before he could reach out it had flown beyond reach. Saligram gave chase, but the *topi* flew higher than the treetops before falling on a nearby field and rolling along. Just as the galloping mule's forefoot was about to step on the cap and halt its careening it took off again, carried by a fresh gust of wind.

"Go, Saligram, go!" Bhaktaprasad felt like a jockey on a

*Frog hopping with
the wind.*



*Frog hopping against
the wind*



racehorse. The chase continued for a while, but the heavily laden mule was no match for the airstream of the Kali Gandaki. A strong draft suddenly picked up the topi and shot it forward into the distance, and soon it turned into a speck and disappeared as the two looked on helplessly. Wheezing, his nostrils flaring, Saligram took some time to catch his breath.

Then he said, "Sorry about that! I should have warned you!" "What is *with* this wind?" asked the frog.

As soon as he could speak, the mule replied, "The explanation is a little complex, Bhaktay. 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 north is cold and has low pressure, like a vacuum. The mass of air from the south naturally wants to move north, but the mountains form a barrier. The easiest way is for the air to go through Kali Gandaki's deep gorge, which acts like a funnel. This is why by mid-morning, the wind picks up, heading up to Tibet."

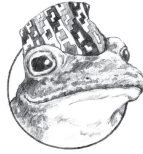
As Bhaktaprasad was trying to understand the science behind what Saligram was saying, the mule continued, "The wind can either help or hinder travelers on this trail. If you are going down-river, you have to lean against it, which makes the journey harder and longer. However, if you are headed upriver, 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 were misleading in the highlands. What looked very close could take days of hard hopping to reach.

Saligram's load was taken over by his *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 powerful, and Bhaktaprasad made quick progress. Every time he hopped, the wind took 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.

Bhaktaprasad was surprised to see frogs on the trail, headed the other way. They were having a hard time, of course, going against the airflow. With every hop that would have taken them two feet under no-wind conditions, they were achieving only a single foot's advance. They would not reach Jomsom before nightfall at this rate, thought Bhaktaprasad as he whizzed past. He would have liked to have stopped and said hello to these local amphibians, but the wind would not allow it.



The Encyclopaedia of Kagbeni

The superhops brought the cap-less amphibian 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 the place. But as night fell, there were no lights in Kagbeni. The village was as dark as any of the thousands of Village Development Committees of Nepal.

"Wonder why this is so," the frog wondered. 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. She lived in a stall by the trail-side, and her life's mission was clearly to corral passersby and have talk sessions.

Dzo had watched Bhaktaprasad enter the village as it became evening. She 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 cautiously.

"Sit down, sit down, and I will tell all," confirmed Dzo.

The frog seated himself on some straw by the feeding trough. Without losing a second, Dzo was off: "Once upon a time, some engineers – human development-wallahs, you know – came up from Kathmandu and promised us electricity. They said they would use the valley's great winds to turn windmills, you know, which would in turn spin the generators to make enough electricity for all of Kagbeni. Unfortunately, you know, the engineers underestimated, you know,

the power of our local winds. 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, can these humans be!"

"Yes, yes, I know, you know? We all 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 us to have the hardiness of the highlander and the productivity of the lowlander, you know?"

"Tell me, you know, 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, you know, it is the camel that should be called the yak of the desert."

"Go on, go on," said Bhaktay, afraid that Dzo might go off on a tangent.

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

"And what do *you* do, Dzo *di*?"

"Me? I do as little as I can," chuckled Dzo. "My mistress at

the tourist lodge keeps me for milk, but I give as little as I can!"

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

On days when she felt more immobile than normally, Dzo would not even saunter over to the pastures just above Kagbeni. She would lean out of the stall window and, you know, help herself to the grass and straw from 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 thus far. 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 in to gossip and trail information – when bad weather had caused cancellation of a flight into Jomsom; where a new landslide had washed away a footbridge; and – far out – what the President of the Republic in Kathmandu had said in his annual address to 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, you know, are susceptible to altitude sickness, also known to medical science as Acute Mountain Sickness, or AMS, which includes the symp-

toms of, you know, pulmonary and/or cerebral oedema. Ahem!" Clearing her throat, Dzo added, a bit sheepishly, "That's what the Director of the Himalayan Rescue Association said, you know, 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 itinerary. "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 outsiders had seen till recently. I suggest that you first visit the temple of Muktinath, collect your blessings, and then travel north."





Pilgrim Frog at Muktinath

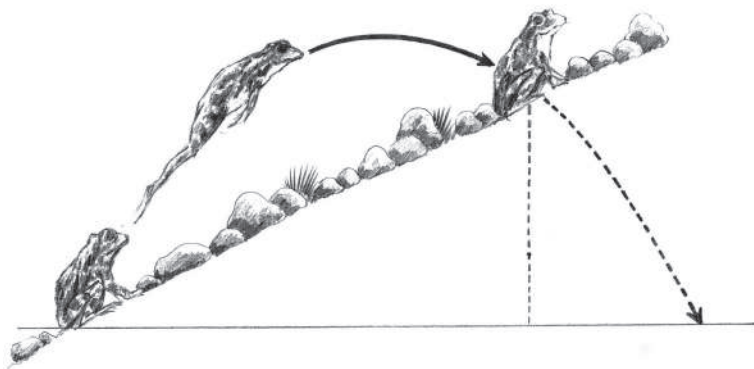
It took a full day of hopping up a relentlessly steep incline for Bhaktaprasad to reach the holy precincts of Muktinath. As he traveled upwards in ever-weakening hops, Bhaktaprasad had occasion once again to study further the science of movement as it related to frogs. Down by the Kali Gandaki, he had observed how wind helped and hindered progress. On an upwards slope, such as this one, he noted that 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 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 now be, "A scientist!"

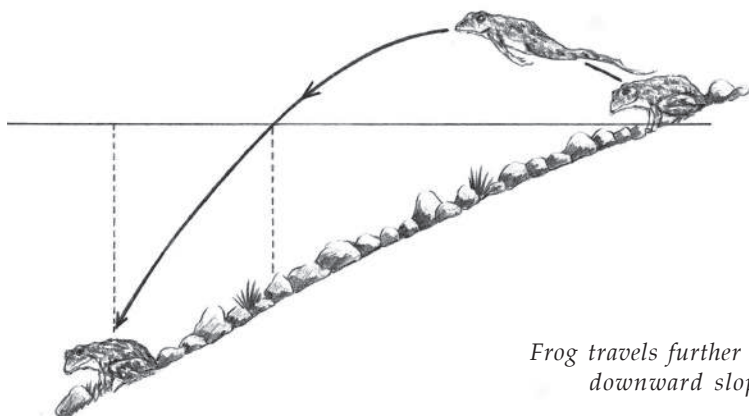
With his mind distracted by matters scientific, the frog did not notice the distance he had covered, and he had arrived at Muktinath. It was already dark, however, and he scurried over to an abandoned trailside *pati* to spend the night. Tomorrow, there would be enough time for exploration.

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. However,

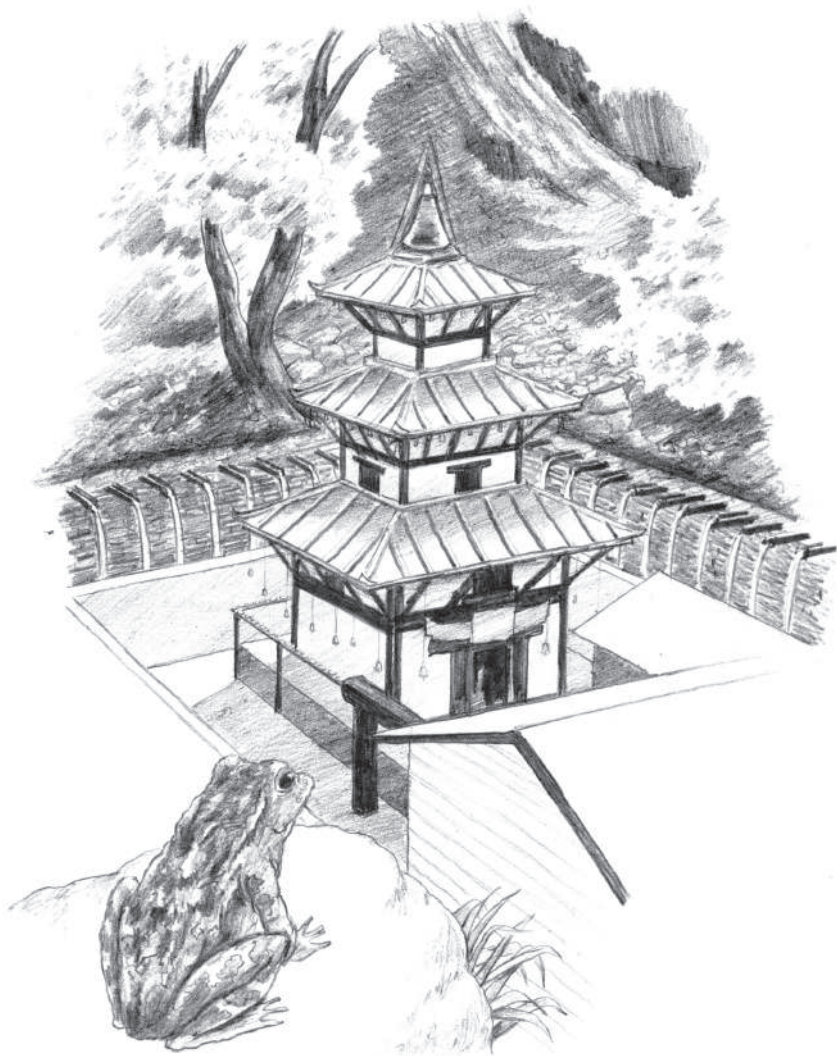
*On upward slope,
it is a shorter hop.*



the area was lit up by sunlight bouncing off the hillsides on the far side of the valley. Looking around, he saw that though the landscape was dry as a desert, Muktinath was located where water emerged from a spring in the mountainside. The immediate area was therefore green and inviting, with shady poplars and, everywhere, 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 temple of Annapurna and others he had seen during his porter-ride through Asan bazaar.



*Frog travels further on
downward slope.*



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 *mukti* (emancipation) from worldly concerns. On the sides of the temple were 108 small waterfalls which emerged from spouts shaped like cattle heads, an odd feature which reminded Bhaktaprasad of Dzo a hundred and eight times over.

In the courtyard that surrounded the temple, Bhaktaprasad met pilgrim creatures from east, west, north and south. There was an elderly couple, a female-male 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 30 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. The frog found that the temple was dedicated simultaneously to the Hindu god Vishnu, who sustains the universe, and Avalokitesvara of Buddhism, who spreads compassion. The Muktinath temple was known as Chumig Gyatsa to Himalayan Buddhists, or a “hundred taps”.

The frog and the pheasants 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 also an underground spring somewhere beneath the sacred place.

The monk who protected the flame looked down at Bhaktaprasad and said in a whisper, “Muktinath is a place of great significance, where fire, water, sky and earth meet. This is a powerful place, where the energy from the depths of the earth comes up to meet us and to remind us to be respectful of the planet.”

In the dark of the temple's sanctum, as the blue flame danced before his eyes, Bhaktaprasad felt a surge of understanding of the need to value the earth and everything that was in it. He had come away 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 the right thing.

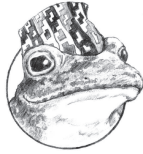
After the pheasants completed their prayers by the flame, Bhaktaprasad emerged with them into the bright light outside. The frog decided to move on, and he politely declined the old couple's invitation to travel west with them to Jumla. Close by the temple, Bhaktaprasad saw a stall with a sign that said "Tourist Information" and went up to the counter. A human lady looked down and asked if she could help.

"Can I have some trekking information, please?"

She replied, "Well, you could either go back down to Kagbeni and Jomson, or north to Lo Manthang, which is the capital of Upper Mustang. Or you could take this trail straight up to Thorung Pass, and descend into Manang District on the other side." She warned that the climb up the pass was steep and long. There were no settlements along the way. No frog had been known to have made the Thorung La crossing before, and one could catch Acute Mountain Sickness, as Dzo Dzopa too had warned.

"Like other lowland creatures, frogs become sick and can even die of AMS," explained the information lady. Bhaktaprasad had no intention of dying this young. If fact, he had no intention of dying, period. He decided to follow the suggestion of Dzo *di* 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 describe their adventures, Bhaktaprasad's wanderlust was not yet satisfied. And he had an important reason to go to Upper Mustang, or the principality of Lo.

Bhaktaprasad knew from Dzo Dzopa's descriptions that Upper Mustang had a different kind of society compared to everything he had experienced thus far in the midhills and even Lower Mustang. Unlike much of the rest of Nepal, this region had been isolated from all developments till very recently. Upper Mustang had therefore remained an ancient society where the old ways had not yet changed. It still had an elderly *raja* of its own, whose queen was from Tibet. They lived in the walled township of Lo Manthang, the capital. The people of Lo were known as the Loba.

After taking a final dip in the wading pool under the 108 bovine-headed taps of Muktinath, the frog headed north, towards Lo Manthang. Before long, he had left all habitation behind and entered a true desert. He hopped along dry riverbeds and over barren rocky slopes. Powdery dust rose underfoot as he passed, and all the while the bright Himalayan sun beat down on his back.

All kinds of amphibians, by their very name, are meant to live on land and water. But up here there was only land, very dry land. Even the lakes further north 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* that frog, lost in the desert!

Bhaktaprasad was on the verge of panicking 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 exhausted desert travelers. So he inspected the view closely, blinked several times and looked again. He closed one eye and turned his head sideways to check the result. This was not a mirage, and very much an oasis.

That 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 mouth of valleys, invariably, there were rivulets with their source in the melting snows higher up. The water gushed clear and cold, and canals were used to channel the flow into carefully tended fields where buckwheat, mountain barley and potatoes grew. Next to the fields were little villages with their earthen-roof dwellings, amidst swaying poplars and willows, and lovely green grass. And above all, mud!

This is not such an inhospitable terrain after all, Bhaktaprasad decided, as he cooled himself with a chilly mud bath. He rejected all thought of retreat, and resumed the journey north. He made progress towards Lo Manthang, going from green valley up to high pass and down to the next green valley. Along the way, where there were oases, were villages with enchanting names like Chailey, Ghemi and Charang.

At each high point between the villages, there was a *la-toh*. These were conical piles of rocks and pebbles placed there as offerings to the gods by travelers 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 a *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. Faintly, he could see the ridge where the Muktinath shrine nuzzled.

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. But here, the border was up on what was geographically the Tibetan plateau, north of Lo Manthang. From Kathmandu, Pokhara, Narayanghat and almost everywhere else in Nepal, you had to turn to the north to see the Himalayan range, and here he was looking south!

The idea took some getting used to, and Bhaktaprasad marveled yet again at the diversity of Nepal's topography. 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 Himalayan Buddhist prayer *Om mani padme hum* inscribed in beautiful calligraphy.

"*Om mani padme hum!*" announced a large, 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. Deliberately 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 seemed permanently locked in a crooked grin.

"Eh?" he said, cocking his head, pretending to suddenly notice the travel-weary Bhaktaprasad by his side. He snapped his fingers, and pointed dramatically at Bhaktaprasad. "You're a frog, right? Now how did I know? I've seen the likes of you down in Pokhara and in India. That's how I know. None of your kind up here in this high desert. What're you doing up this far? You have come rather far if you have lost your way!" He slapped his sides 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, pointing with his snout. Getting up on his two hind feet, he then proceeded to introduce himself.

"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 plateau beyond Lo Manthang."

"Why were you called a rat if you are not one?" asked Bhaktaprasad.

"Our schoolmaster in Lo Manthang was from the Tarai. He had never seen a marmot before and thought I looked like a rat, or at the very least a mouse, so he named me '*musa*'. But I don't really mind, for the name serves me well when I travel down south for trading."

"You are a trader marmot?"

"That's it, I am a trader. When it is winter and freezing cold up here, I travel all over Nepal and India selling herbs from the mountains. I am biw home for the holidays, and my pockets are full, heh-heh!"

Changing the subject, Pemba pointed to the compact settlement that was their destination, full of flat-roofed houses and completely enclosed by a tall wall. He said, "Lo Manthang's the main village of the Loba people. It is the only walled community left in Nepal, and they close the one gate at dusk."

Bhaktaprasad learned that the surrounding wall and the tradition of closing the gate at sundown was a legacy of a violent past, when bandits from the north used to raid Lo Manthang, as they did other isolated settlements. Even though there were no robbers these days, the custom continued.

Pemba glanced at the setting sun and cried, "Hey, bro! Let's go! Otherwise we will be locked out! If the gate is closed, we will have to spend the night with a rock for a pillow and sand for mattress!"

It was a steep path down to Lo Manthang and Pemba was off like a rocket. The frog followed him but was so tired he gave up hopping altogether; he just let himself slither and roll down the sandy slope after the rushing marmot. The huge gate was just creaking shut when the twosome arrived, and they barely made it through.

"Phew, that was close!" 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 lodge run by a hostess whose name, Pemba said, was "Dolma also-known-as Hema Malini". Bhaktaprasad was taken aback, for he knew this to be the name of a famous Bollywood film heroine. He remembered the people at the *chautara* in Ichangu gossiping about Hema Malini, how her captivating looks and great dancing had millions of sober men swooning.

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', and so the name just stuck. Bollywood has its Hema Malini, we have our's."

They entered a crowded room full of loud talk, laughter and wood smoke. In one corner, some men were playing cards, while others were seated on a dusty rug sipping yak-butter tea.

A lady dressed in the traditional wrap-around *chuba* called out from the hearth, "Hello, Pemba, you rascal! Back from the plains, eh? I am sure you have come loaded with cash!"

"Well just a little bit," said Pemba meekly; his bravado disappearing in front of Hema Malini of Upper Mustang.

"And who is this strange new face that I have the pleasure of welcoming?" she asked, looking down at Bhaktaprasad. Her features were soft and rounded, her voice high-pitched but pleasant. When she smiled, a gold tooth glittered in the light of the kerosene lantern.

"Ajila, this is Bhaktaprasad. He is a frog. We met up at the *lah-toh* and I'm showing him around," said Pemba, uncharacteristically subdued. As if Bhaktaprasad did not already know, he whispered, "This is Dolma." Then added, "Didn't I tell you? She has the prettiest human face north of the Himalaya."

"Here, sit down," Dolma a.k.a. Hema Malini said, pointing to a low, carved 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 before going off to attend to the other guests.

Pemba taught Bhaktaprasad to eat the *tsampa* flour by mixing it with the tea, which was salty and had yak butter aroma. Bhaktaprasad liked the taste of the tea, and the way it flavoured the roasted flour. "It is actually best when you put popcorn in the tea," Pemba whispered, as if letting the frog in on a secret.

The marmot then took Bhaktaprasad out for a quick tour

of Lo Manthang. The lanes winded between two-storied houses where yaks lived on the ground floor and the people above. They visited huge gombas with dark interiors, where brooding statues of deities stared intently down at the devotees. It was late evening now. Monks prayed in monotone, gongs and bells rang out, the aroma of incense and burning juniper pervaded the air. The people of Lo Manthang prayed for the safety and prosperity of all.

The frog and marmot came to a tall white building which overlooked the main square next to the town gate. It had a wildly barking Tibetan Mastiff tied to a balcony on the first floor.

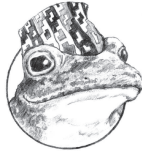
"That is the palace of the *raja*," Pemba said, pointing up. "For a long time, even though Mustang was within the much larger Nepal, the king in Kathmandu allowed Mustang to keep its own little king. Our *raja* does not have much power now, but he still commands respect for the history and tradition he represents."

Bhaktaprasad confided to Pemba his surprise at 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."

It was late, and the door to the lodge was locked from the inside. They banged several times before Dolma a.k.a. Hema Malini came down to let them in. She opened the door, and whispered, "Shhh! The children will wake up!"

Pemba Musa seemed to go into shock, "You have children?!"



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 leveled off and seemed to go on forever.

"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 our country from Tibet. Long ago, a team of Nepali and Chinese officials came to this 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.

Bhaktaprasad looked again at the holes. Out of each, he now noticed, was peering the face of a marmot. They were Pemba's cousins and relations, and all were eyeing Bhaktaprasad, this strange warty creature who was certainly not a native of Changtang.

"Emerge, all of you!" shouted Pemba. "This is my friend from Kathmandu: Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto, the frog!"

The air was suddenly full of noise and dust as scores of yapping marmots 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 are by nature inquisitive creatures who are forever investigating this thing or that; they 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 Ratna 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, "Lady marmots, gentlemen marmots! The marmots of the plateau propose to mark Pemba's return and the arrival of the visiting frog. Let the celebrations begin!"

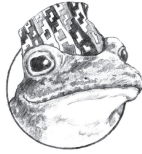
All marmots great and small abandoned their burrows and joined in the singing and dancing. The dance steps involved standing on two feet and shuffling backwards while twisting the hips. It was known as the Changtang Shuffle. Bhaktaprasad's froggy frame could not execute the Changtang Shuffle, so he demonstrated how the frogs danced in the fields of Ichangu. It required letting the hands hang loose in front, palms inward, and jumping lazily (but high), with knees bent,

to the beat of the music. There was merriment all around as the marmots tried the Ichangu Hop, but *they* were not made to jump the way of the frogs.

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 listened 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 went over to the window and looked out. “I recognise that croak,” she said, turning to a guest, with wonder in her voice. “It’s that little frog from Kathmandu!”



Travels with Kaili

The morning after any wild party, everybody sleeps late, and when they finally wake up they are 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. The frog peered out. There was nothing to show for the night's frolic, other than trampled ground and a drum that someone had forgotten to drag away 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 - the frog had neither a passport nor a visa, which are required to go from one country into another. What would he do next?

Lost in contemplation, Bhaktay did not notice as one by one the marmots emerged from their holes yawning, stretching and wiping their eyes with their fists. Pemba too got out and saw Bhaktaprasad. He asked, "Brother! Did you sleep well? Something seems to be bugging you!"

Bhaktaprasad confessed that, for once, he was at a loss what to do next. The ever-helpful marmots quickly went into a huddle, in order to suggest the frog's course of action. One elderly rodent suggested that Bhaktaprasad go back down to Jomson and Pokhara, as there was only so much travel one could do; 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. There was no sense in Bhaktaprasad retracing his hops to Pokhara, and East Nepal was too far away. Staying here in the Changtang was out of the question because the frog would never survive the harsh winter.

Pemba announced, "I have what I think is the best plan for Bhaktay. He should go to Dolpo and visit the monasteries there. A caravan will soon be going from Lo Manthang to the great Shey Gomba in the north of Dolpo." 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 gate. 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 *raja*. By now, Bhakta was used to lodging himself on the top of a load, whether on a porter-back, mule-back or yak-back. Before long, the line of yaks and their handlers began the long journey to Dolpo, many days' travel to the west.

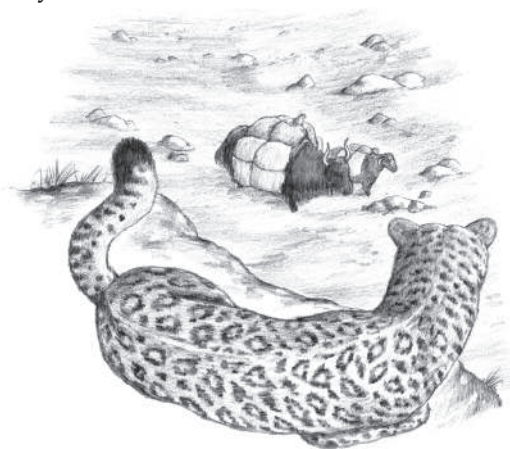
Bhaktaprasad's mount, Kaili, was the most uncommunicative creature in all of Bhaktaprasad's adventures. She did not speak unless she had to, and never said a word more than was necessary. Mostly, she made do with grunts. This yak did not moo, she did not yak. When she stopped at a spring, Kaili would jiggle load to get the frog's attention, in case he was thirsty. "Water," she would utter tonelessly. Over the course of the trek to Dolpo, Bhaktaprasad learnt to interpret terse commands like "camp," "food," and "shoo fly" – this last when the

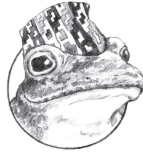
yak wanted the frog to flick away a troublesome insect from where her tail could not reach.

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 with its jingle of bells.

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

The snow leopard serenely met Bhaktaprasad's gaze, looking deep into his eyes for what seemed like an eon. He got up languidly, suddenly tensed his muscles, and leapt on to a rock ledge higher up, and then to another further up. In a flash, 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?" But she did not say it.





Myyaaah Goes Counter-Clockwise

Riding on Kaili's back, Bhaktaprasad was able to watch nature up close. It was pleasant to observe dawn turn to day and day turn to dusk up while moving through 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 range. He tried to initiate conversation with the other yaks in the caravan, but it was difficult because of the distance between the animals in the caravan.

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 half a frog. What to do? Bhaktaprasad wish something would happen to get him off this enforced silence.

The frog's prayers were answered. As luck would have it, Bhaktaprasad's melancholic demeanour 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. His was a life 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 woolen 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. Myyaaah was carrying Tibetan salt headed for the monasteries of Dolpo, where the monks did not like the iodised variety of sea salt sold in the Nepali markets.

Myyaaah looked up at Bhaktaprasad atop the sack on top of the yak, and said, "Why are you looking so sad?"

"I am not sad, whatever gave you the impression?" responded the frog, "But I am sorry that you, as a goat, have to carry such a heavy load. The sheep and goats I know live 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 Bhaktaprasad. "Can't you see what happens to those well-fed sheep and goats! 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 happy to hear a refreshing point of view. However, the frog felt that perhaps this was the Myyaaah's way of reconciling himself to a tough situation. After some conversation, it was revealed that the goat's trail also led past Shey Gomba. Myyaaah, Kaili and Bhaktaprasad became a friendly threesome, even though Kaili was most uncommunicative. Now that he had someone to talk to, the journey passed more quickly 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 named "Back-to-Back".

The landscape was stark and life seemed hard in Dolpo, the largest but most remote district of Nepal. Myyaaah had been to Dolpo many times before. He said, "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 thought this was wrong. 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 did they circle the *chhortens* counter-clockwise whereas everywhere else in Nepal they do it clockwise?"

Myyaaah came up and explained, "In Dolpo, we circumambulate 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 faith that it had remained unaffected by changes that had transformed religious traditions in many other parts of Tibet and Nepal.

Myyaaah explained, "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 about life and death. It all came out while they were 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?! In this, 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 Europe, particularly a country named France. They do not eat the whole of you, but I hear they like the legs. The muscles of your hind legs, built up from all that hopping, is said to be good meat."

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. Frogs of Nepal are 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. While the frog had been dreaming, the caravan had arrived at Shey Gomba and come to a halt before the monastery. The novice monk had been given the task of unloading Kaili, which was when he had been surprised to see the dozing frog.

"How now, little frog! You can talk? My name is Lamolama. And you? Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto? Well,

Bhaktaprasad Ji, 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 questions.

After the boy had disposed of the sack in the monastery's storeroom, he walked towards the main building, with Bhaktaprasad balanced on his left shoulder clutching the collar. The monastery was an imposing, if coarsely built, structure of rock and mud, with walls that slanted slightly outward. The doors, windows, pillars and rafters were of rough-cut timber. From inside came the deep *thrrrrrngng* of gongs, and the tinkling of tiny bells.

They entered a long, darkened assembly hall full of the strong aroma of incense and yak butter. 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 pouring over written texts and reciting them in guttural singsong. The 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 loose leaves with his fingers. Lamolama joined in the recitation, rocking backward and forward like the others as he did so. An assistant came down the line pouring butter tea, the kind which Bhaktaprasad had 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 low desk, lifted the cup to his mouth, and drank in deep. Ahhhh, this was bliss, his reward for making the long journey from Mustang to Dolpo.



Frog (Finds Himself) in Dolpo

Having quenched his thirst with the yak-butter flavoured tea, Bhaktaprasad hopped back on to his perch on Lamolama's shoulder. 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 intently. The words of Lamolama revolved around 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 frogs have additional responsibilities as we go through the cycle. Above all, we have to show compassion and understanding to fellow creatures," said Lamolama.

"You see, Bhaktaprasad, the best quality in any thinking creature is the ability to see things from the other being's point of view. This ability makes one good and wise. It is inconsideration towards others and selfishness, prevalent especially in human beings, that causes all conflict and quarrel. This is why communities fight each other, why countries go to war."

"But of course that is true!" A window opened in Bhaktaprasad's mind. It also dawned on him that frogs were not the most important creatures on earth, something he had

assumed unquestioningly until this 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 species he had not even met.

This earth was home to earthworms, squirrels, Siberian cranes, Lammergeier vultures, wasps, mosquitoes, butterflies, snow leopards, blue sheep, humans, and *khumray kira* that 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. In the rivers, lakes and seas, there were fish. The rest of the world was made up of inanimate objects such as rocks, boulders, pebbles, sand and, of course, mud. And blue skies, billowing clouds, rain, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, mountains with snow, mountains without snow, valleys, flatlands . . .

Bhaktaprasad was but a tiny part of this enormous world of animals, plants and the rest – a mere frog, of the species *Rana tigrina*. All these beings and things had separate existences, and yet they were all connected with each other and all a part of some unfathomable 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. And that’s only a small example of 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, and Bhaktaprasad heard the novice's voice as if it were coming from somewhere within himself. "When you begin to understand life, you realise the importance of humility, 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. You also learn empathy, to understand the point of view of others."

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 now jostling with each other in his brain.

The novice said gently, "There is always something else to learn in life, Bhaktaprasad. One is never done with learning. You have just begun."

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

But today Bhaktaprasad was silent. He felt good, but felt no need to shout.

"You are happy because others have been nice to you and have guided you, because the view has been good, or the food has been tasty." the frog told himself. "Bhaktay, how does this make *you* a hero?"

Feeling better than ever because of this new thinking, 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 trekked so 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 traveling, which must be so much fun!"

Before turning in, the two discussed the frog's plans. Lamolama suggested it was time for him to head back home to his family in Ichangu. The frog found himself agreeing.

"They must be waiting for you to return, Bhaktaprasad, your family in Ichangu. Tomorrow, you must travel south. Go past Phoksumdo Lake, along the Suligad stream, over the great Bheri River. You must get to Jufaal airport."

Bhaktaprasad woke up as a shaft of morning sunlight lit up Lamolama's tiny room. Biting cold air entered from the tiny window. Through it, he saw that the Crystal Mountain was already blazing in the sunshine. Lamolama was already outside, having completed the morning's chores and rituals.

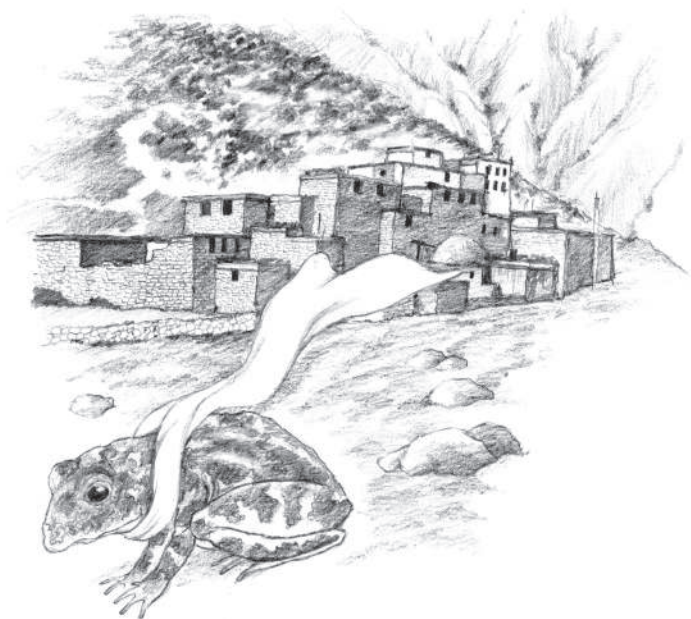
Some monks came down to bid Bhaktaprasad farewell, and Lamolama brought out a *khada* which he had cut to frog-size. He reached down and put the silken scarf around Bhaktaprasad's neck. Deeply moved, the frog bowed with folded hands in farewell to all the gathered monks. He then turned, and started his journey down and out of Dolpo.

Off the frog hopped, the scarf flapping behind, making

good time as he headed for the airfield at Jufaal down to the south. He arrived at a turquoise lake set amidst mountains that dipped straight down to the water's edge. This was the Phoksundo, which he skirted on a very narrow trail, feeling dizzy as he looked down at the water far below. He followed the stream which led from the lake, and came to a waterfall that fell hundreds of feet.

At the base of the waterfall was a sumptuous pond, where the frog stopped for a while to bathe and wallow. He washed away many days of dust, sweat and grime, for it had been too cold in Mustang and Dolpo to even think of a wash.

Refreshed at the waterfall, Bhaktaprasad hopped along once more with greater confidence, 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 that, without effort, Bhaktaprasad now hopped farther than the champion athlete frogs back home.





Lamolama had suggested Jufaal airfield because an over-land trip back to Kathmandu was out of the question. It would take months to make the trip, 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 realised that he could not recall the faces of his brothers and sisters. Even grandfather Buddhiprasad's features were becoming a little indistinct. His mother Sanomaiya's face, however, was as sharp in his mind as ever, and it was the yearning to be by her side that kept him maintaining long strides in the days it took him to reach the airfield.

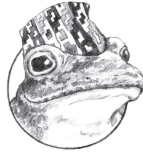
When Bhaktaprasad arrived at Jufaal, however, the man at the airline counter was most unhelpful. He said that regulations forbade issuing tickets to worms, frogs, toads, snakes and rats, and that the "amphibian" – he said with derogatory sneer – might as well start the long trek back to Kathmandu Valley. 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.

He decided to argue, because not to get on the airplane would be a disaster now that he had made up his mind to return home. He looked up at the airline official and said, "No, I cannot accept this. This regulation is unfair. I will have a chat with the pilot when the plane lands tomorrow. I have to fly."

"You can try your luck, mister," said the man.

Bhaktaprasad remembered that he had managed to get on to the Sajha Bus on the Ring Road. Phulmaya has also allowed him on her truck from Narayanghat to Pokhara. She was a driver of trucks, and the pilot was a 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*, to the warmth of family and friends at Ichangu.



Flying Friendly Skies

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto was jolted awake by the sudden roar of a landing Twin Otter aircraft. Jufaal had a sloping dirt runway and the plane kicked up a lot of dust as it put its engine on reverse, and then 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.

The passengers exited from the back of the plane, but now a small door opened at the front, in front of the propeller which had stopped spinning. A smartly dressed man dropped to the ground, the captain. He was wearing a starched white shirt with epaulettes on the shoulders, a peaked cap, and dark glasses. The pilot circled the plane, inspecting the flaps, propellers and the tail.

The plane would not tarry in Jufaal, so Bhaktaprasad had to be quick. He hopped over to pilot. The man was intently studying the nose wheel of the Twin Otter and failed to notice the frog staring up expectantly at him. Bhaktaprasad summoned all the energy he could to his powerful hind legs and bounced high to come up to the pilot's eye level before gravity pulled him back. The pilot could not avoid seeing him. Removing his goggles, he came down on his knees to inspect this curious sight of a frog wearing a *khada*.

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

"Hi! My name is Akash Bhairav Narayan. You can call me Captain AB. What can I do for you?"

Bhaktaprasad let it all out in one burst, "Well, Captain



AayBee, sir, they won't let me board the plane. I am from Ichangu and I've been travelling all over Nepal for so many months. I'm homesick and I miss my mother and grandfather and brothers and sisters, and I *really* want to go home!"

Captain AB stroked his clean-shaven chin and said, "Ah, a frog with the gift of speech. How positively wonderful! But then, there are the airline regulations!"

Bhaktaprasad's fate hung in balance.

"Yes, yes. There *is* a regulation against taking frogs in the passenger cabin, you know that, Mr. Bhyaguto." Bhaktaprasad looked down at the loose stones scattered on the runway. This pilot had been his last hope.

"But the airline manual says nothing about frogs riding in the cockpit in the captain's shirt pocket, does it?"

Bhaktaprasad turned to look up at the man. Captain AB winked, and Bhaktaprasad jumped with joy. He was as good as home!

"Do you have any luggage? No? Well then, shall we?" The pilot bent forward, pulled his shirt pocket open with two fingers, and gestured at the frog to jump in. A well-aimed hop landed the Bhaktaprasad right inside.

Captain AB walked over to the cockpit door, reached out, and heaved himself in. The human passengers were already seated and belted, and cargo had been loaded; it was time to go! The captain gave a thumbs-up to his colleague, the co-pilot, who was busy checking the instruments.

"We have company," the captain said, lightly patting the lump in his shirt pocket. The co-pilot nodded and smiled. Bhaktaprasad reached up and, putting his arms over the pocket's rim, peered out of the cockpit windscreen. He would be seeing exactly what the pilots saw, what could be more exciting!

Captain AB held the steering column with his left hand and reached up with his right to grasp the throttle. He pushed it forward, revving the airplane's two engines to full power. The propellers swished, whirled and roared, and the aircraft's body began to shudder, straining to go. Upon a gesture from the captain, the co-pilot released the brakes, and the Twin Otter shot off down the rough slope that was the runway. The wheels left the ground, and Bhaktaprasad was sailing in the wind!

The plane banked over the Bheri's river gorge and winged

its way south and then turned east, all the while gaining height amidst the din of straining engines. They overflowed steep forested hillsides and green meadows, and passed rocky and snow capped mountains. Before long, the frog noticed the Annapurnas out of the left window. Machhapuchharay had not lost its fish tail! Far up ahead, he could actually make out the shape of the *himals* which kept guard over his lovely valley of Kathmandu.

All the while, the hills of central Nepal unfolded under the wings of the Twin Otter. Practically all the places of Bhaktaprasad's many months of travel were visible in a rotation of the head from right to left! From the Tarai jungles which lay beyond the last blue-ridge to the south, to the valley of Pokhara beneath, the ridgetop of Dhampus on the side, and across to the dry, yellow-coloured trans-Himalayan valleys visible over the high passes to the north – he could see it all from his perch on the pilots' pocket.

Bhaktaprasad remembered all the friends he had made. Out there in the haze of the Tarai, Tulsiram and Altaf would be pulling their bullock cart to market, and over in the Chitwan jungle, Royal Bengal must be stalking her lunch. Phulmaya was probably somewhere between Narayanghat and Pokhara in her truck, singing as she drove. In Pokhara, Bhaktay thought with a smile, that ruffian Prajapati would be guarding his Phewa lakefront strip as zealously as ever. And Saligram had to be down there between Jomsom and Ghandrung, perspiring under his load. Looking up the valley of the Kali Gandaki, Bhaktaprasad wondered who Dzo Dzopa was regaling at this very moment with her enchanting conversation.

Up in Lo Manthang, Dolma a.k.a Hema Malini must have started churning the morning's round of butter tea, and on the Changtang plateau her ardent admirer Pemba Musa must still be cuddled up in his burrow. Kaili, the taciturn yak, would have arrived back in Lo Manthang, and Lamolama was prob-

ably doing his turn lighting the butter lamps in the assembly hall of Shey Gomba. Turning his head south once more as the sad memory returned to him, Bhaktay thought for a moment of Tarai Toad, the friend he had lost to the jaws of the crocodile, Mugger.





Back to Mangalman

Bhaktaprasad was in a deep reverie, recollecting all the great moments of his journey, when a nudge from Captain AB 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 noise of the engines.

Eagerly, the frog leaned out of the pocket and looked 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 cities, the small towns, and the villages 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 more than half the country from up here - all the way from the Kanchenjunga range in the east to beyond Dhaulagiri Himal in the west!

Captain AB circled over the valley, 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 of 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 hopping off as he began his journey

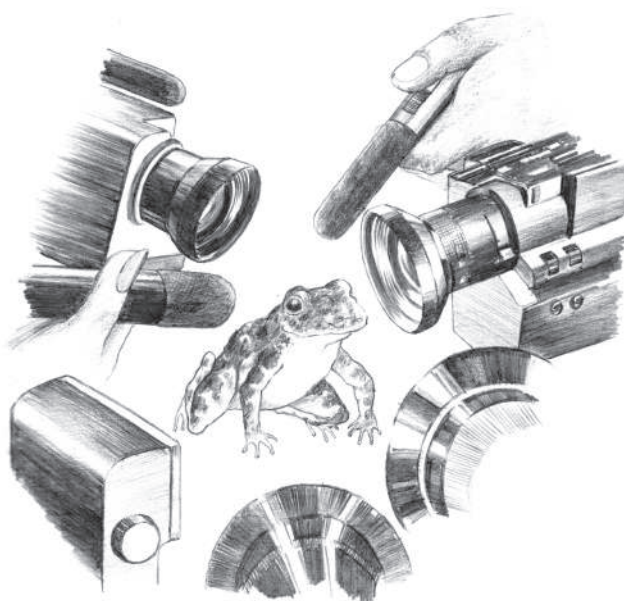
in the early monsoon, and now they watched serenely as he returned by air.

Suddenly, Bhaktaprasad felt the engines slowing down. Captain AB had reached up to the throttle and reduced power. The plane stopped its circling and began to descend. The Twin Otter turned low over Patan town before lining up with the runway at the airport, which once used to be known as Gauchar because it was a cow pasture. The runway came up towards them like a wide and straight highway. The pilot pulled at the steering column, and the Twin Otter settled onto the tarmac with a thud and a squeak.

Captain AB taxied the craft over to where a large crowd seemed to be waiting for the plane to stop.

"There must be a Very Important Person on board they have all come to see," Bhaktaprasad said, wondering who it could be.

Captain AB smiled and replied, "Not a VIP, Mr. Bhyaguto, but a VIA—a Very Important Amphibian. I took the liberty of



radioing ahead to ask the control tower to inform your family and friends of your arrival. It seems the press is also here."

The pilot picked Bhaktaprasad out of his pocket and placed him on the doorway of the cockpit. There was much clapping and shouting as the gathering recognised the returned frog. 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 an address welcoming the Valley's most illustrious amphibian back home, but Bhaktaprasad was too preoccupied with his family to really listen to the flowery speech. It took quite a while just to be introduced to all his siblings, each one more shy than the other. He was clearly their hero.

Suddenly there was a cry of "Speech! Speech!" – from the reporters who had come to cover the return of the Ichangu frog. As the cameras flashed 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 solely with the idea of adding some excitement to my life. 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 speech Bhaktaprasad had ever given. As the crowd erupted in applause, he blushed.

"I have one more thing to add. I realised that the earth is resilient, and can take a lot of beating. But we cannot think that it can be dirtied forever. Frogs as a species are like a barometer of the world; if it gets too toxic, or too polluted, then the frogs will begin to die out. This will be a warning to the humans and everyone else that they are destroying the world. Let us not destroy our world, our environment. This is also what I have learnt during my travels."

Another round of applause greeted Bhaktaprasad. This was the second longest speech he had ever given. He folded his hands in a *namaste*, and mumbled a "Thank you."

Bhaktaprasad then left the microphones and hopped off to join his family, which was eagerly waiting to whisk him home to Ichangu. The Chief Executive Officer of the Sajha Yatayat bus company, who had heard of how Bhaktaprasad had nearly been refused a ride during an earlier episode, had provided free service of a long bright green 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 grandfather Buddhiprasad, the young adventurer suddenly felt a kind of 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 froglets had suddenly gone quiet.

Oh-oh! It couldn't be that time already! Bhaktaprasad looked questioningly up at Buddhiprasad. The elderly one was following his grandfrog's train of thought.

He nodded and said, "Yes, Bhaktay. It's early winter, and hibernation time is upon the frog population of Kathmandu Valley. You have come back just in time. We were all about to go to sleep when we got the phone call from the control Tower.

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 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 hibernatorium, which was a small cavity on a grassy knoll next to the family paddy. 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"* - a Nepali expression used jocularly to indicate "end up where you started from"; origin of saying is unclear.
- bayel* - ox used to pull carts, mostly in the plains.
- bazaar* - marketplace, also used for 'town'.
- bhai* - younger brother.
- bhyaguto* - frog.
- "Ce jeune avec les grandes quisses!"* - "That young one with the big thighs."
- 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; the unit of *kos* has been overtaken by miles and kilometers.
- chautara* - a rock platform rest-stop built by village philanthropists for use by long-distance travelers and porters. Mostly found with *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 can contain relics of a revered lama or guru. The term is of Himalayan-Buddhist origin. *Chhortens* in the lower hills and Kathmandu Valley are known as *stupas*.
- darbar* - palace.
- Dasain* - the autumn festival of Nepal's midhills to mark the victory of good over evil. The harvest has been brought in and the people are in a mood to celebrate.
- didì* - elder sister.

- di* - short for *didi*.
- doko* - bamboo rattan basket carried with a tumpline that goes across the brow of the porter.
- Dolpopa* - people of Dolpo.
- gomba* - a Himalayan Buddhist monastery.
- hajur* - a respectful address for 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 range.
- howdah* - somewhat uncomfortable wooden platform with cushion 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 'n' is nasalised, and the 'th' is strong). *Kaanthay* is a person from the *kaanth*, sometimes 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 shoulders to wish someone well or to show respect. The *khada* is used by the Himalayan communities like the 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 midhill forests.

- machha* - fish (see also *puchhar*).
- musa* - rat or mouse.
- Mustang* - the 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 the Buddha. One acquires merit by repeating this prayer, or by writing it on prayer flags, inscribing it on rocks, or turning prayer wheels which are stuffed with the printed prayers.
- pati* - resting place, with a roof.
- phuli* - ornament placed by women on their noses.
- pipal* - hardy tree (*Ficus religiosa*) that grows wide and tall, is considered holy and 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 the wooded reserve on the Nagarjun hill in Kathmandu Valley.
- riksa* - human-powered three-wheeled public conveyance pulled by a *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. A large part of the Tarai was jungle until recent decades, inhabited only by the local Tharu population. The eradication of malaria has brought settlers from the northern hills 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". The term can be used for either side of the mountain range, but because much Himalayan scholarship has been based in the south, 'trans-Himalaya' is generally used to refer to the northern part towards Tibet.
- 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 refers to *yak* as the name for the species. This is why Kaili, though a *nak*, is deliberately referred to as a *yak*.

A special note on '*trekking*':

Bhaktaprasad Bhyaguto's journey, when he is not riding a truck or mule, is best described as '*trekking*'. In the mid- to late-1960s, a new type of foot travel emerged in the hills of Nepal, a country that had just emerged from centuries of isolation in 1950. The kind of travel could not be called '*hiking*' or '*camping*', and it was more than simply '*walking*' because it extended over days and weeks. It involved traversing scenic landscapes, but in a populated region along village trails. '*Trek*' is a word of the Afrikaans language, with its Dutch origin, meaning '*travel*'. This term was picked up by travel entrepreneurs and employed to describe the new kind of mountain-tourism that had started in Nepal. This modern meaning of '*trekking*' is today used all over the world to mean long distance hill-walking.

Characters

- Aakash Bhairav Narayan** - *Bhairav* refers to the wrathful incarnation of the Lord Shiva, and *Aakash Bhairav* is he who controls the skies. *Narayan*, referring to the god Krishna, is often found attached to Hindu names.
- Altaf Bayel** - a name for males, meaning kindness. *Bayel* refers to the ox used to pull carts.
- 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 for males, like Bahadur and Kumar. *Prasad* can mean 'sacred offering', or 'by the good graces of'. The full name can be said to mean 'He who has received good grace for being reverent'.
- Bhaktay** - Short for *Bhaktaprasad*, used by family members or friends as an endearment; its use can be derogatory if by a stranger.
- 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 film star, popular in the 1970s and early 1980s.
- Dzo Dzopa** - name of the talkative hybrid bovine
 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. The young rhino's name could mean "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 *nak* which carried Bhaktaprasad from Mustang to Dolpo.
- Lamolama** - *Lama* is a Buddhist monk, and *lamo* is 'long' in Nepali, here taken to mean tall.
- Madame One Horn** - the Great One-Horned Asiatic Rhinoceros is one of five remaining species of rhino in the world, all of them endangered. Madame One Horn's species is today limited to the riverine habitats of the Nepal Tarai, West Bengal and Assam, almost exclusively 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*. The other crocodile species, which eats only fish, is the *gharial*.
- Myyaaah** - is the onomatopoeic sound used in the Nepali language to signify the bleating of a goat or sheep. Nepali is one of the richest languages for onomatopoeia.
- Pemba Musa** - *Pemba* means 'Saturday' in Tibetan, and the name is given to mark the day the infant is born, or for some other auspicious purpose.
- Phulmaya** - the name of the lady truck driver is common for women in many parts of Nepal. The name translates as 'lovely flower'.
- Prachanda Plover** - *Prachanda* means "fearfully powerful"; *plovers* are a bird species found along sandy or pebbly riversides in the Nepali lowlands.

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 sub-species of tigers left, all of them close to extinction due to destruction of habitat and poaching. The Royal Bengal Tiger once extended all over the great jungles of Southasia, but is now confined to patches of forest, most in reserves, in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, 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 to her when she was an infant. *Sano* is 'small', and *maiya* can be translated as 'little lady'.

Tarai Toad - *Tarai*, the strip of flatlands along Nepal's south. The Chitwan forest, habitat of the late lamented Tarai Toad's, is actually in the "Inner Tarai," for a range of low hills (Churay/Shivalik) 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 *Ramayan*. *Bayel* refers to the ox used to pull carts.



Rato Bangala Kitab is a children's publisher in Lalitpur, Nepal. This book is part of our continuous 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 readers about life and times in this corner of Southasia.

This book is accompanied by *A Teacher's Guide to Adventures of a Nepali Frog* by Perry Keil Thapa.

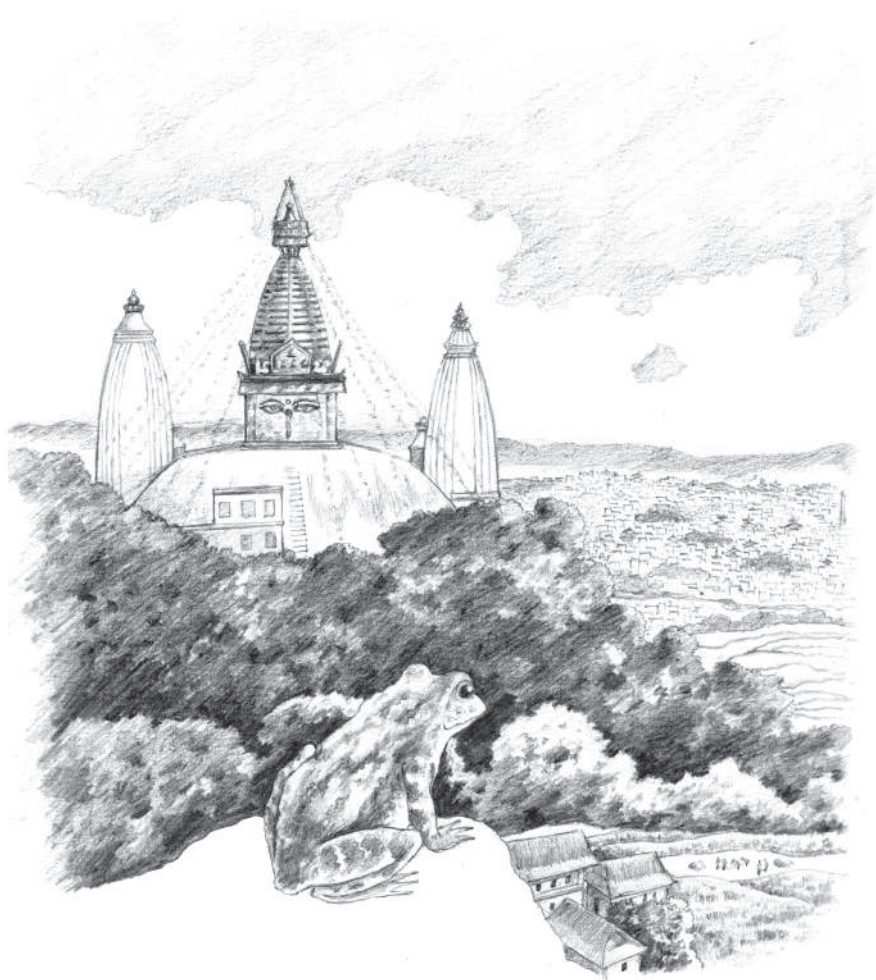
Adventures of a Nepali Frog has been translated into Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Maithili, Nepali, Newa Bhae, Spanish and Urdu, and will soon be available in Chinese. The book has also been published in Assamese and Telegu by the National Book Trust of India, which is also bringing it out in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi and Tamil.

For more information, and orders, go to www.ratobangala.edu.np. Visit also Rato Bangala Kitab's Facebook page.

Other children's books by the author:

The Leech and I and Other Stories (1998) in Nepali and English

The Treaty of Kathmandu (2004) in Nepali and English



Bhaktaprasad: a name common in Nepal
Bhyaguto: 'frog' in the Nepali language

An excitable young froglet from Kathmandu Valley, who has "just reached 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, and 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 plains, hills and mountains presents authentic landscapes and unique characters. It brings the country to life for every reader young at heart, and helps build empathy for creatures, including humans, that inhabit the Nepali countryside.



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