

From rags to riches

The story of a man who never lost hope

By Rinchen Phuntsho

1996. It was the year for the eradication of poverty. Palestine re-elected Yasser Arafat as its president. Osama Bin Ladin wrote, "The Declaration of Jihad on the Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Sacred Places," his first open call for war. And Mother Teresa received an honorary U.S. citizenship. In Trashi Yangtse, Bhutan a 17-year-old man rode to Thimphu with Nu. 600 in his pocket and a time-tested rucksack on his back. He had no one in the capital.

Today, after 11 years of labour, he owns a tour company, Blue Poppy Travels and Tours, with one office in Kawajangsa, Thimphu, and the other in Islington, London. He has more than ten employees and five cars. Every year, he attends to more than 150 tourists.

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"Physical work was not my cup of tea," he says. To free himself from the spades and the fields he began looking for other alternatives.

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Standing 5 feet 8 inches tall, the story of Choki Dorji, 28, from Chorten Kora, Trashi Yangtse, is not a fairy tale. His is a journey from scrap to skyscrapers.

It was a chilly evening when I went to meet him in his office. Sitting in his cozy office with an apple laptop in front of him he gets up to greet me. He is in a *matha gho* and offers me a seat. Before starting the interview he asks one of his employees for tea.

Settling down in his chair he begins. "Sweat, blood, tears, hopes and a bit of luck are the secret of my success," he says in his low-pitched voice.

Elders in the family with two younger sisters and a younger brother, he was forced to leave school after his parents divorced. He was then studying in class IV in Trashi Yangtse Primary School.

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One of his employees brings tea. He continues. "At the age of 16, I was appointed a messenger at the Trashi Yangtse District court."

He worked there for almost nine months. In 1996, he was selected by the *Lhongkhag* to undergo a training for electric linemen at Begana, Thimphu. Yangtse was then about to receive electricity connection.

An electrician was not what he wanted to become. After a few months at Begana, he gave up the training. "I used to get electric shocks for more than hundred times in a day," he recounts with a little humour.

Taking a sip of hot tea, he continues. "After leaving Begana I came to Thimphu. I had no relatives and knew nobody here," he says. Left with only Nu.400 he recollects sitting in front of the Lugal theatre wondering where to go and what to do?

"Suddenly someone patted me from behind, it was one of my school mates." It was a blessing. The friend took him to his house and sheltered him for three days.

Luck did not give up on him. Choki met Tenzin from Trashi Yangtse, who was then the manager of Tandin Hotel. Tenzin got him a job at Taksang Hotel as a waiter where he earned Nu.900 a month.

As a waiter he had to work from early in the morning to late at night. "I had to do all sorts of jobs."

Just a few months away from home Choki began to see the real world. He started taking Japanese language course. He had to pay Nu.500 a month for the course and Nu.700 as his house rent.

"I had difficult time to meet my needs. Somehow I managed it with the tips I got from the tourists," he recollects.

A waiter was not what he wanted to become. After nine months, he left the job looking for greener pastures.

"Then I started selling vegetable. I brought vegetables from Siliguri, India, and supplied it to hotels, the Royal Bhutan Army and the Royal Bhutan police in Thimphu," he says emptying the tea in his cup.

A vegetable vendor was not what he wanted to become. He discontinued the business as there was more hard work than profit.

In 1999, he read an advertise-



Choki Dorji with his daughter Tashi Dema

ment in Kuensel for tourist guide training. Though he did not have the required qualification of class X, he sat for the interview.

"I told the interviewers that I will produce my class X certificate after the interview."

Choki was amongst the 23 selected for the trekking guide course.

"Though I was selected I was worried about the certificate."

He was desperate to pursue the course since he knew that guides made good money. He went to DoT and told the officer-in-charge the truth about his qualification.

"The officer asked me a couple of questions in English and since I worked in a tourist hotel I was able to reply him in English. I guess he was impressed with my English so he allowed me to pursue the course."

For one and half month he had to trek from Bumthang to Lunana. "I was the youngest among the trainees and I suffered from altitude sickness." He managed to pass the course and became a trekking guide.

Luck was with him. In 2000, he went for a 22-day trekking to Laya Lingshi with 13 tourists from England. During the trek, he became close to a young woman, Naomi Feinstein, from London. "I got along with her very well and we got to know each other better."

After the trek she left for London but the two continued to keep in touch. Distance makes the heart grow fonder. After three months, she invited him to come to London. "I had always wanted to see the outside world and did not want to miss the chance."

"London was too big for me.

Everything was new and it was difficult for me to adjust."

After three months, he came back to Bhutan. "My friends thought I was a fool. They encouraged me to go back."

After three months he was again in London. This time he joined Sacels College and took up English language course after which he enrolled himself in King's College to study cinema photography, film direction and editing, and script writing.

By then his relationship with Naomi Feinstein had become stronger and in July 2004 she bore him a daughter, Tashi Dema.

Though trained in cinema photography he saw the prospect of making money in travel business. In December 2004, he set up a travel office in London.

"I focused my business on independent travellers. I developed itinerary by meeting people who wanted to visit Bhutan."

The same year, he opened his office in Thimphu, which is looked after by his partner Karma. It took him almost one year to set up office in London and Thimphu. Proper business started only from 2006 with 52 tourists. This year, till date, he had more than 270 tourists.

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With his business doing well, he keeps travelling between London and Thimphu. He is in Thimphu from September to November and goes back to London in December. He returns in February and after three months goes back to London.

"I do marketing when I am in London. I go for travel shows where I present and sell information about Bhutan and also advertise in papers and magazines about my travel company."

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Talking about his future, he says he would like to make movies. "I would like to utilise my skills as a cinema photographer and a director."

It is 7 p.m., we had been talking for almost two hours. He winds up revealing a religious side of himself. "I believe in God and what I am is due to the blessings of *kenchog sum*."

He drops me till the door and as I bid him farewell, I can see a broad smile on his face. A smile of a satisfied man.

Corrigendum

Refer to the profiles of NC candidates in the 30 November issue. The qualification of Jigme Rinzin from Shumar Gewog in Pema Gatsel was mistakenly reflected as "Degree in BA".

Jigme Rinzin has a B.Com degree from Sherubtse, and a masters degree in Chartered Accountancy from the United Kingdom.