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Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

August, 2009



Anushka Comes to Taktse

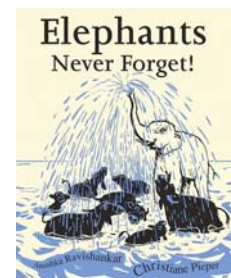
by Reshma Thapa

"I'll come to Taktse next year." Those were [Anushka Ravishankar's](#) exact words. We first met Anushka in November 2008 at [Bookaroo](#), the children's literature festival in Delhi. We had read several of her picture books and it was really exciting to meet her in person. Interacting with such an accomplished children's author and learning from her sparked excitement in us.



In July 2009 Taktse International School sponsored a reading and writing symposium and Anushka agreed to lead it. It had been a long wait since that moment at Bookaroo, so when she finally arrived, we were eager to see her again. Among the numerous read-aloud sessions, and fiction and poetry writing workshops with both teachers and students, the read-aloud session with the first and the third graders stays in my mind. I remember sitting in the dark A.V. room surrounded by an excited

group of students all eager for the read-aloud to start. "Oh! So she is Anushka Ravishankar. I've read many of her books," says a student in the back of the room. I can't help smiling. The projector is turned on and [Elephants Never Forget](#) comes on the screen. Anushka starts reading and I find myself totally hooked on her narrative. It is a wonderful book and Anushka reads it beautifully. I wish I could write like she does. With each page my inspiration to write a picture book grows stronger.



After the read-aloud, the kids peppered Anushka with questions. "What inspired you to become an author?" "What's your favorite book?" "Have you illustrated

any of your own books?" "Where do you get your ideas?" "What did you do before you became an author?" "What did you do before you became an author?" One great question after another. I could see that Anushka was relishing the interactions. She kept asking if we had more time and if we could extend the session. I was struck by how self-assured our kids have become and how comfortable they are asking questions. I thought about how reticent I had been at their age, and I saw a big difference. When I was a student we were never encouraged to ask questions. Our curiosity was never rewarded. By contrast, the Taktse kids are confident and articulate. Asking questions and talking to people comes easily to them. What Anushka said later sums it up. "In all the other Indian schools I visited, the kids kept looking at their teachers to check if they were asking the right questions. Taktse is the only school where this did not happen." It was a proud moment for me. I thought to myself, we've come a long way!



At the end, Anushka added, "We desperately need more children's books in India, ones that are written by Indians." Then she looked around the circle of eager faces. "It's up to us to help fill that gap."



Rice in Sajong *by Suman Lata Pradhan*

Whenever I've traveled along the curvy roads between Gangtok and the outside world, I've been fascinated by the rice paddies along the way. I always wondered how it felt to wait for the rain and to know when to plant. I wondered, Is it still profitable to grow rice in the terraces? How much do the farmers earn? Why plant rice rather than other crops? More than anything else, I wanted to experience rice planting, which has been a tradition of our mountain people for generations.

I thought of this trip to Sajong, a small village tucked away between the capital city of Gangtok and the famed Rumtek Monastery, as a great opportunity for us teachers and students to connect with the rural life of Sikkim, which is rapidly disappearing. We had very little time to plan the long bus trip to Sajong. We divided ourselves into small groups. Each group had specific tasks to perform. But the most memorable parts of the



trip happened in unexpected ways. Like taking the first steps into a rice paddy and feeling the mud squish through our toes, or carrying water to the outhouse because there was no running water.



The kids laughed and giggled as they tried to keep their balance while planting rice. Getting to know the villagers and experience their life-style made the trip a success. It gave me great satisfaction to see our Taktse kids having so much fun experiencing traditional village life. I wish I had had that opportunity as a student. Overhearing comments like, “Only boys get to work the plough with the oxen! Why not us girls?” assured me

that our students were applying their critical thinking skills to traditional norms. I also overheard a student say, “This is the best field trip ever!” We plan to return to Sajong to harvest the rice that we planted.

I will no longer have to wonder when I see the rice paddies along the roads anymore.

Planting Trees

On July 15 students, teachers and staff of Taktse School took part in a government-sponsored green initiative called “[Ten Minutes to Greenery](#).” This is the fourth year of the initiative which encourages all the people of Sikkim to participate, taking 10 minutes out of their day to plant saplings. The goal was to plant 600,000 saplings in ten minutes. All of Taktse’s students and staff took part, digging holes, planting saplings, watering their future trees and becoming more environmentally conscious.



Ten Minutes to Greenery perfectly supplemented Taktse’s Environmental Science curriculum, which is specifically designed for Sikkim’s environment. It concentrates on hands-on experiential knowledge, with projects ranging from composting, to building butterfly gardens, to investigating the incredible diversity of insects found on our campus.



A Librarian's Take on Taktse

by Nancy Bonne

Over twenty years ago, as a children's librarian at the Beverly, Massachusetts Public Library, I noticed two brothers who came in every day after school to do their homework. When they finished, they'd play computer games, and talk to me. They told me their names were Pintso, age eight, and Aka, age six, and that their father was from Sikkim, in the Himalayas.

Both boys were both very bright - they seldom asked for help with their homework. However, I remember one occasion when Pintso wanted to do a paper on yaks. Books on yaks may be easy to find in Sikkim, but I spent a lot of time trying to get books from other libraries for Pintso's project.

As they grew up and went to high school and college, Aka and Pintso always kept in touch with me at the library. Then one day Aka dropped by and told me about the Taktse School in Sikkim. I was fascinated to hear that its classes were taught in English, and it was quite progressive. Corporal punishment, common in that part of the world, was never used at Taktse. When Aka said that the school had no picture books, and that Sikkimese parents do not often read to their young children, I told him that the library had about fourteen boxes of surplus picture books. Aka ended up sending them to Taktse one suitcase at a time.



Last year I sent an e-mail to all my contacts announcing my retirement. Twenty minutes later I received an e-mail from Pintso at the Taktse School, congratulating me on my retirement, and asking, "When are you coming to Sikkim?" So I decided to have lunch with Aka and talk it over. When I said, "But I just retired, and I want to spend time with my daughter and grandsons," Aka replied, "Bring them!" Magic words! When I broached the idea of a journey to Sikkim to my daughter Susan and her husband Gary, they were excited, but my grandsons, Evan, 14 and Kyle, 10 were ecstatic!

Aka made the travel arrangements, his mother Maria packed three suitcases of books for the Taktse Library, and we were off. The journey to Sikkim took about 30 hours, including a long and harrowing car trip up narrow mountain roads. We stayed at Chumari House in nearby Gangtok.

We spent our first morning in the shopping district of Gangtok. My grandson, Kyle, has very curly hair, and a woman in a sari ran her fingers through it as she passed him. He caught my eye, and we both laughed. Almost every day

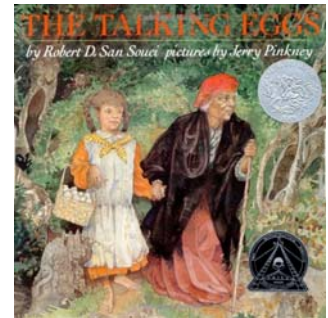
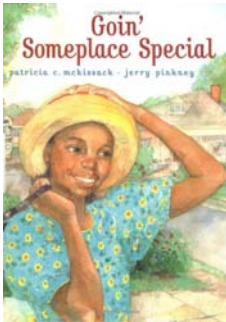
someone would ask to have their pictures taken with us. It was a new sensation to be in the minority!

In the afternoon, after a break for milky tea and sandwiches, Pintso gave us a tour of the school. It felt odd seeing the boy I remembered as Pintso in the role of principal of the school, and being addressed as Mr. Lauenstein.

The next day I worked with Dichen, Taktse's new librarian, showing her what steps to take to up-grade the Taktse library. The first thing I noticed was that none of the books had spine labels, so Dichen and I worked together to print labels and attach them to the books. Then we created a catalog.

A teacher named Sandya arranged my daily schedule. I was assigned to the library, checking books in and out. I also went into the classrooms to give book talks to the older students and read aloud to the younger ones. It was wonderful to be able to interact with the kids.

After reading [The Talking Eggs](#) by Robert San Souci and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, I asked the children what they thought the book was about. One said, "Don't be greedy!" and another said, "Do as you're told!" Then one little girl said, "I love the pictures!" So I told them I had actually met Jerry Pinkney, and he had signed one of his books for me. The children wanted to know, "Was it [The Talking Eggs](#)?" I said, "No, it was a book that always makes me cry." "Tell us!" they pleaded. So I told the story of [Goin' Someplace Special](#), and as usual, I cried at the end. So did the teachers. I also did a presentation to a group of parents, reading them some bedtime stories, and stressing how important it is for parents to read to their children.



At a faculty meeting, I did a book talk, telling the story up to the most exciting part, and then putting the book aside and picking up another. Their reaction was exactly the same one I've gotten in Beverly for years. "Wait! How does it come out?" I replied, as I always do, "You have to read the book!"

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Postscript: Nancy Bonne was featured in an [article in the Beverly Citizen newspaper](#) about her efforts to provide picture books to Taktse. She is planning a presentation about her trip to Taktse at the Beverly Library on Thursday, October 1st at 7:00 p.m.



Thoughts from the Principal

by *Pintso Lauenstein Denjongpa*

Everything begins with a story. The story of Taktse is the story of a vanished kingdom, the story of a colonized Himalayas, the story of the rapid transformation from feudalism to democracy, and the story of a group of Sikkimese who realized that they were starving for education, the kind that would empower instead of humiliate, inspire instead of defeat.

After raising funds both locally and abroad, the school opened in 2006 with 17 students. It is located on a hilltop donated by the son of the last King of Sikkim, in view of the local protecting deity Mt. Kanchendzonga. We now have 138 students ranging from nursery to 9th grade, from Sikkim and Bhutan, 43 of whom live with us on campus (the youngest are 5-year-old twin girls).



Our mission is to cultivate these students into ethical and capable citizens who have the skills to balance the global realities they see in the media with their rich cultural inheritance. And it is equally as important to cultivate our teachers; they have never seen or experienced the kind of education where there is no fear of corporal punishment, where relationships are based on respect and reason, and where the love of reading is the

foundation for a life of achievement, reflection and compassion.

Our faculty comes primarily from nearby Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim itself. Having received a traditional/colonial education themselves, these teachers face the daily challenge of implementing systems which are completely foreign to them and have no precedent here. The traditional model of the autocratic teacher, pacing the classroom with stick in hand, does not exist at Taktse. Instead, teachers encourage open discussion, questioning and reflection, and refrain from corporal punishment.



Some of our students come from educated families, and some not. However, these families share a desire for a better education for their children, avoiding the lecture and rote memorization-based education, with 40 to 50 students in a classroom, that is common in the region. Currently eight of our students receive scholarships. We would like to increase the proportion of scholarship students to one-third of the student body.

