6. A MOUNTAIN OF QUESTIONS ON YOUR PLATE

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I started working on a book on Bhutan in 2005, slowly trying to find substantial reading on the country – there was very little to be found – before making my first trip at the end of 2007. It was the hundredth year of the founding of the Wangchuck monarchy, the remarkable ruling family of Bhutan, which has many progressive acts to its credit – not least the pushing through of the democratic transition in a country that knew little of the term.

I had travelled by rail and road, taking the train to Siliguri, in West Bengal, before catching a series of buses to the Bhutan border town (Jaigaon on the Indian side, Phuentsholing on the Bhutanese, which also translates to messy on our side, neat on theirs). After the paperwork, I took a taxi from Phuentsholing, which is almost on the plains, up to Thimphu, the capital, about 7,700 feet above sea level. It was midway through December, and I was cold, and suffering from a headache brought on by the swift climb up into the mountains.

I was not thinking much about food in the night, but in the morning, as I made my way to the Druk Hotel at Druk Square – the central open space in Thimphu – my stomach had things to say to me, and they were not kind things. Druk Hotel is one of the oldest in the country – which does not mean all that much as the oldest hotel, Hotel Taktsang, only dates back to the 1980s – but it is the "official" hotel chain – where the official guests stay. It also has some of the better food in Thimphu, except, I found little on their menu that I could understand to be Bhutanese. It was dominated by either North Indian recipes or European ones. I ordered a cheese omelette instead, somewhat guiltily, but my stomach stopped its grumbling at the least.

Chillies and Cheese

So much of knowledge about a place and its culture is found on the plate, and I realised that I was lost on this score. Pretty soon, though, I was introduced to chillies. They were hanging from shops in Thimphu, so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible. When I drove with some friends from Thimphu to Paro, the richest, widest valley of Bhutan, the December

sun shone on rooftops coloured a bright joyous red with the chillies drying there. My first indigenous meal was at the Red Rice restaurant in Paro. The name of the restaurant comes from an indigenous form of rice grown in Bhutan. It has a reddish colour because of its husk. It remains partially shelled, and takes longer to cook, giving it a slightly nutty flavour. The red rice worked very well with a dish of ema datsi, or chillies and cheese. The gravy, if it can be called that, was a powerful hit to my saliva glands, which went into overdrive at the taste of the chillies.

Whether it was to drawn out of the pain, or was a reflection of how delicious the food was, I gobbled up rather embarrassing amounts of red rice, ema datsi, and a dish of vegetables, the main component of which was potatoes. I have never lost my love for ema datsi since then, but I soon came to realise that it was one of the only dishes that was ever presented as uniquely "Bhutanese". While in many of the places I ate, there were varieties of vegetables cooked in a number of ways, it was always the ema, the chilli, that was presented as the heart of authentic Bhutanese food. In Bhutan the chilli is a vegetable, not a flavouring. Of course, as everybody knows, red chillis are not indigenous to Bhutan, or even Asia, and come from the Americas. They would have arrived in Bhutan around four hundred years ago, at the earliest. The staple food, maize, is also an American import, as are pumpkins, dolichos bean and the common bean. Only mustard green, among the five most common vegetables grown in Bhutan, is indigenous to the region.

Rice is grown as a national crop, while the white rice of India is largely imported. The elite families of Bhutan, influenced by Calcutta, Delhi, and Bangkok, find the red rice of their homeland somewhat gauche. Rising prosperity has led to a certain sense of shame at Bhutan's own roots. Buckwheat is grown freely in the valley of Bumthang, but most people who can afford it, prefer the breads made from the wheat brought in from India plains. To top it, these products from the plains are often cheaper. Labour is cheaper in India, and fertilisers and chemicals to take care of pests are freely used, so a kilo of imported tomatoes may cost half of what the indigenously grown varieties would be priced at. However, the foodstuff that Bhutan imports the most of is meat.

Meat, Hypocritical Meat

In 2014 Bhutan imported more than 10,000 tons of meat from India and Thailand, paying

1.4 billion Ngultrum – the Ngultrum is pegged to the Indian Rupee - so this would also be INR 1.4 billion. Bhutan has the highest per capita meat consumption in South Asia, at about 13.5 kilograms per person per year. Almost all of this comes from abroad. In 2012, 44 percent of the chickens consumed, 85 percent of the pork consumed, 92 percent of the beef consumed, and 95 percent of the fish consumed in Bhutan, was imported. This is not because Bhutan lacks for any of these animals within its borders, although some of them have come there only recently. The lovely trout are a product of British intervention. They were introduced to Bhutan in the 19th Century through a long relay, starting with young trout fry carried in earthenware containers by coolies from the Kashmir Valley to the Jammu railhead, and then transported to Siliguri, and from there carried to the rivers of Bhutan.

When I was enjoying a meal of trout in 2008, when I had gone to report on the coronation of the young fifth King of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Wangchuck, I was told I was tucking into imported food. The fish had been bought from West Bengal – after having swum through Bhutan's rivers. When I asked why, the hotel owner grinned ironically, "Because we are hypocrites. As Buddhists we don't want to kill sentient beings, but if Indians kill them and sell them to us, we eat the flesh with pleasure." This hypocrisy continues to plague Bhutan. In April this year the Kuensel, Bhutan's main newspaper, announced that the government had proposed setting up a meat plant in Bhutan. The response was so negative that the government then immediately clarified that no such plans existed, and said instead that what they planned was a dairy farm.

Is Immigrant Food also National Food?

Maybe more damaging than the hypocrisy was the bigotry I also heard in this context. Some Bhutanese mentioned that the few butchers there were lived in the south, in Tsirang and Gelephu, among the non-Buddhist people of Nepali origin, who did not mind taking life. This was an odd, convoluted logic, and made me consider the question a little more closely. Bhutan has never come to terms with its large population of Nepali origin. In the northeast of India this population is an outcome of both the Gorkha kingdom, and then the British use of cheap labour to

set up tea plantations across the malarial forested regions. In Bhutan there were a few elite families of Nepali origin, but the real start of arrivals was in the late 1950s, when Bhutan opened up to the outside world, and with the help of Indian aid, started building its first major roads. The Nepali labourers who were recruited by the then Haa Drung, and later Prime Minister, Jigme Dorji, modernised Bhutan, but also led to a large flood of new inhabitants. Some of these were given citizenship, but many of them existed in a complex limbo between an increasingly illiberal and monarchist Nepal and an increasingly wary Bhutan.

In the late 1980s, as both Nepal and Bhutan started tightening border controls and citizenship, these people found themselves caught in a difficult situation that soon descended into violent confrontations, and something close to a civil war. Tens of thousands fled Bhutan in 1990-91, although even larger numbers stayed, secure in their citizenship. About twenty percent of the Bhutanese population still remains of Nepali citizenship.

And here comes the difficult question, what is their food? And can it be called national food? I have had the most amazing puris and subzi next to Paro airport, but I don't know if the Bhutanese who cooked it for us thought it was Bhutanese food or not.

Unanswered Questions

Kunzang Choden, arguably Bhutan's best-known author, has written a very interesting book called, "Chilli and Cheese- Food and Society in Bhutan", published in 2008. She talks of the recipes that are disappearing, of the herbs that many Bhutanese do not know that their ancestors ate. She could go further and talk of the lifestyles that are changing, of a country that is changing from one of subsistence economy and nomads, to that of sedentary, city-living people, hyper-connected to the world, plagued by questions of identity, nationality and all that goes with it. In all of this the humble meal that a Bhutanese has in front of him seems a small thing, and yet in that plate you can see playing out all the questions and conflicts that this tiny kingdom has to grapple with, and which it seeks to resolve. For my part, I wish them luck, if for no other reason that I have only ever had meals with friends in Bhutan, and all such meals have been happy ones.

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His last book was on Bhutan, and his previous novels are published by Speaking Tiger.

[1] Nanaiah Chettira, *Borderline*
21cm x 29.7cm, Watercolor on acid free paper, 2015