

Conversation with the Bhutanese farmer

Kinley Dorji

Chimmi Dem, 57, is a Bhutanese farmer living in a village not far from Thimphu. This interview is extracted from my conversations with her.

Q. What is life like in the village these days?

Village life is village life. I guess it's the same. But these days you have electricity, refrigerators, rice cookers, TV, power tillers. Things must have changed. Electricity has made life easier. You don't need to use so much strength to do household chores. Of course the power tiller has made farming so much easier but you need to have a strong man handling it... like Ap Tandi, our neighbour. He ploughs his own fields and also makes money by ploughing other people's fields. We can take our produce to the market, collect firewood and construction timber. The latest sign of success is the electric rice mill.

Q. How about television? What is your favourite programme?

BBS news. We watch singing competitions and other entertainment programmes. We watch the tshechus and dromchoe dances all day.

Q. Who lives with you?

There are just the two of us. (meaning 60-year old husband, Dophu.)

Q. Where are your children?

They are all over the place. Our oldest son is in the education ministry in Thimphu. The second is an army officer. Our daughter was with us until two years ago but has now gone to live with her husband who works in a factory in Pasakha. We can't really keep up with the relatives because they go so far these days.

Q. Do they visit you? Do you visit them?

They visit us sometimes. We don't go because there's no one to feed the cows.

Q. None of them will come back to the farm?

Why would they? They are educated. Also, they can't do physical work, but they do send money for the transplantation season so that's okay.

Q. Do you like Thimphu?

It seems to be a good place for rich people. We are too poor to and uneducated to enjoy the throm (town). Our own children have no time to talk because they are too busy. It's easier to talk to them on the mobile from here. And we are scared to walk around because of the cars.

Q. How has your daily routine life changed?

These days we grow maize to roast and sell along the highway, along with seasonal vegetables. We can get several crops of maize, with irrigation in the paddy fields and on dry land during the rainy season. This goes on for several months, usually from the fifth month to ninth month.

Q. Do you make much money?

When we first started three years ago, with both of us working together, carrying the cobs down to the road, collecting firewood, and roasting the corn, we were sometimes making up to Nu 5,000 a day. Now everyone is doing it so we earn less. And they are even bringing maize from India by bus and taxi.

Q. But it means that you grow less rice. Aren't you worried that one day Bhutan will not have enough rice to eat?

We can buy white rice from FCB and from India. With the extra money we are able to buy utilities like power tillers, TV, CGI sheets for the roof etc..

Q. And a lot of beer?

(Laughs) Yes, roasting maize makes you thirsty.

Q. Do people drink much more these days?

Yes, but we drink beer, not alcohol. It's much easier to buy it now. We don't have to brew it.

Q. What do you do with the empty bottles? We hear of empty bottles being stacked all over rural Bhutan.

In our area someone comes to buy the empty bottles.

Q. Are the rice fields becoming fallow?

The two of us, of course, are leaving most of the land fallow. We don't have the strength to farm. Our village is not too bad because we still have more than half the families farming. But it is reducing.

Q. Who did you vote for?

I can't remember.

Q. What do you mean you can't remember?

(laughs)

Q. I think you don't want to say it because of the tension among party supporters in the village. Am I right?

Something like that.

Q. Do you think democracy is working?

I don't know.

Q. Has the election brought tension into the village society?

Yes. Yes there is a lot of tension.

Q. Has that affected the traditional social life?

Yes, when we were growing up, we all worked and played together. We were poorer but we shared everything. I remember my father shouting to the neighbours to borrow tools and sending me to get them.

Q. Do you think the Government is doing a good job?

The government has built roads, schools, hospitals, so life is becoming easier. In that sense, yes.

Q. Is this government doing better than the last?

I don't know.

Q. Do you believe the campaign promises?

I don't know (laughs). But people do remember campaign promises.

Q. Do you still conduct your lochhoe and rimdros? And do you invite all your neighbours?

Yes. So far our children are helping with the annual lochhoe. But it is getting more difficult to get monks. These days it's mostly relatives and friends who come for the lochhoe. It is a trend now that guests are based on political parties.

Q. Does it matter that you are not allowed to serve the traditional paa (meat) at the Lochhoe meals? It was considered a delicacy, right?

Many people still serve meat discreetly. But most guests don't care as long as there is enough alcohol. People used to ask if the food was good at a certain house. They talked about the size of the phaksha paa. Now they ask about the alcohol. Some are serving wine and the more expensive drinks.

Q. How about other social activities? Does your village archery team challenge the neighbouring villages?

No, we don't have a village team any more. I've never been interested in

archery but my husband and our neighbours used to get all excited and plan the matches for days. And they would talk about it for days after. We used to go to the matches to support the men, to sing and dance, and meet friends. The children used to love it.

Q. Are you happy?

Because of the blessings of the Triple Gem, I am not sick. I'm grateful for that.

Q. What do you look forward to these days?

In my old age, I wish I could go to a Goemba to practise. But we may have to go and live with our children soon, that is if they want us.