

The Heroes of Yuksam

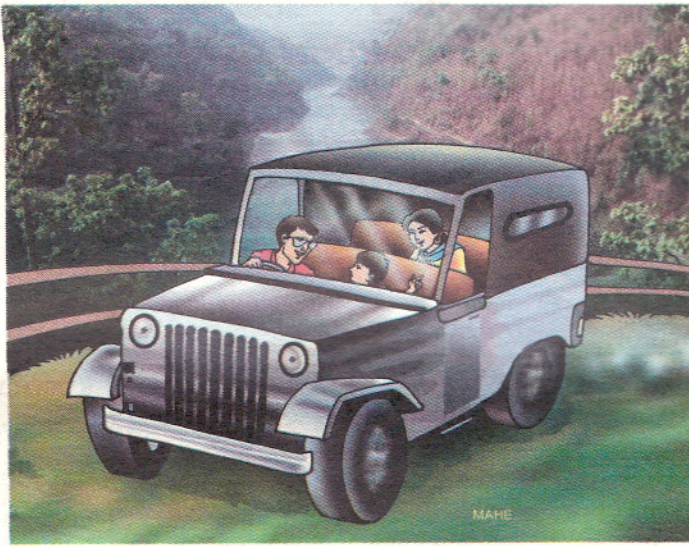
It was the last day of school for the term. Ten year old Niraj was excited as he was going to his 'forever home' to spend a month with his grandparents. But just before he thought it was going to be a perfect holiday, he heard the teacher utter the words 'holiday homework'. "There it goes," he grumbled, "my perfect holiday! Now I'm going to have to sit doing this instead

of spending time listening to grandpa's stories about the birds and animals, like the tragopans and the Red Pandas that he encountered during his many treks on Mount Khangchendzonga."

However, the topic of the essay that he was supposed to write lifted his spirits a little. 'Heroes of our land', he said to himself, while his mind was racing through the number of story books he had read. Anyway, he would have to think of this later as he had to rush back home. His dad would drive them to their home in Yuksam, in his jeep. At 5,800 ft above sea level, Yuksam was nestled at the foot of the mountains. Through Yuksam flows the glorious Rathong river, considered sacred by the Buddhists of Sikkim, as it has 109 lakes which are the abode of local deities.

The drive from Siliguri to Yuksam took five hours. In the jeep, Niraj could never doze off like his mom did. Instead, he would watch his dad smoothly manoeuvre the sharp bends of the road. And as they got past bend after bend, the mighty Rathong Chu (*Chu* means river in Sikkimese), would appear and disappear from their sight. His thought went back to his homework. "Who's your hero, papa?" he turned in his seat to face his dad.

The question set Gyaltsen thinking. He thought of Sonam and Chukie and Pema and many others who had



worked night and day to save Yuksam from a very destructive plan. They were all heroes, he thought. "In our sacred land of the Rathong Chu, every person is a hero and blessed by the deity who lives on Mount Khangchendzonga," he said. "Let me tell you a story of what happened in our village and then you'll know that what I say is true."

"On an unusually warm day in the summer of 1993, some of us were sitting at the entrance of the village. We saw a truck full of cement bags and digging implements coming towards us. The truck driver told us that some people, who stayed far away and had never visited our village or seen our glorious Rathong Chu, had decided to build a huge wall across the river. Their idea was to stop the river from flowing and make electricity from that water. For days after that, my friends and I sat arguing and wondering. It would be good if all the homes in the village could be lit up by that electricity, but what would the construction do to our village and our Rathong Chu?"

"Over the next few days, this was the only matter that was discussed in all the families in Yuksam. Some of the elders decided that this matter was important enough to be discussed and so everyone sat in the shade of the huge willow tree in the centre of the village. Lamas from the nearby *gompas* (monastery) had also walked to Yuksam for the meeting. And there, the lamas, together with our elders, made us realise that Yuksam was too special a place to be sacrificed for anything. 'The *Naysol*, our sacred book, says that the soil on which we live is blessed by Guru Rinpoche. Our sacred deities lived in these rocks, hills, trees, and lakes right here,' explained one of the frail old lamas. 'If we allow this construction in

Sikkim is a small State, in the northeast region of India and is best known for its mountainous landscape dotted with colourful prayer flags, beautiful monasteries, gushing rivers, and a huge variety of exotic plant and animal life.

This story is based on the struggle that took place in Sikkim, to save the Rathong Chu valley from the hydro-electric project that was proposed to be built at Yuksam. One wonders why this project was planned when the people of Yuksam did not want it! Does anyone have a right to take away or do things to somebody else's home?

Today, 169 large hydro-electric projects are being proposed in the entire northeastern region of the country that comprises the eight States of Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. For those in the region, who are working to protect their homes, trees and rivers that may be destroyed by these projects, the Rathong Chu story is an inspiration.

the village, the trees along Rathong Chu will be cut down and the rocks will be broken up to build the wall. The birds and the butterflies, whom we share this land with, will fly far away and our deities will leave, too. We will never be happy after that.' he said in a low, sad voice."

Niraj, who was following this story with rapt attention, quickly added, "Grandpa did tell me last year that some people had once tried to dump mud into the Kathok

lake. Did nobody ever tell them that grandpa and so many others prayed to the deity at the lake?"

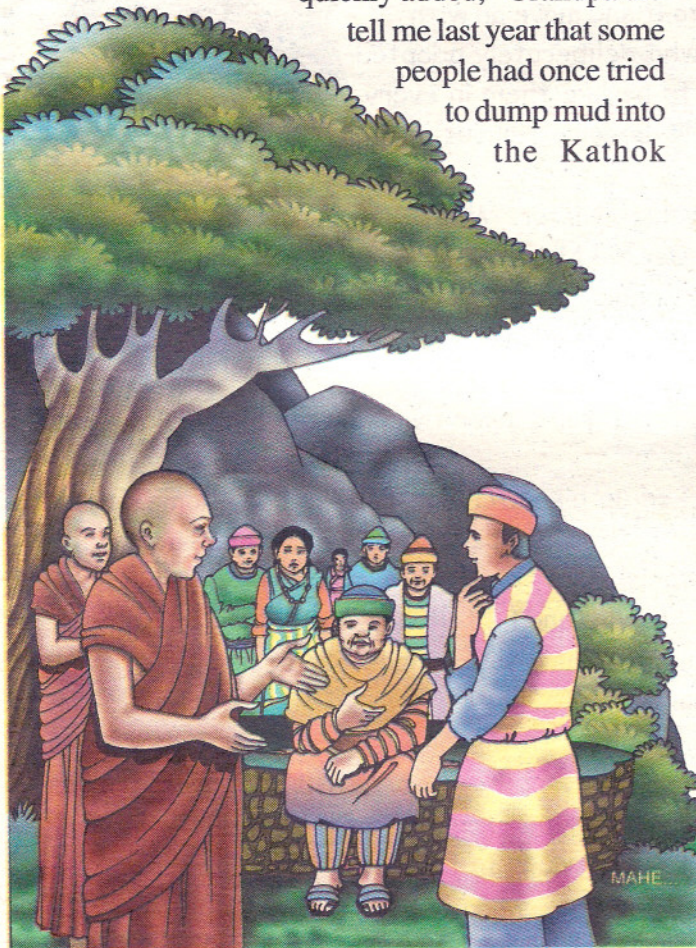
"Yes, it was all part of the same construction plan," said Gyalsten, "and nobody bothered to ask us before doing it! Do you also remember the Bum Chu ritual that grandpa took you to last year?"

"Of course," said Niraj. "He let me sit on his shoulder so that I would get a full view of the huge number of people who had gathered at our monastery. Everyone wanted to drink a drop of water from the special vase."

"The vase contains holy water. Every year the vase is opened and a cup of pure water from the Rathong Chu is added," explained Gyalsten.

"Grandpa told me that once I took a drop of this water, I would never have any illness as I would be blessed by our Guru Padmasambhava," added Niraj very knowledgeably.

Gyalsten said a silent 'thank you' to his father for having taught Niraj about their traditions and their faith. He continued with his story. "Having heard the lamas and our elders at that meeting, we decided that we would not allow bulldozers and dynamite to trample, dig up and destroy our land. We would not drive away the deities who reside in the lakes of the Rathong Chu by allowing the construction on the river to begin. We then needed to convey our decision to those who had planned the project. All of us from the village, led by the lamas from all over Sikkim, marched to Gangtok. It was a sight to watch! We walked the streets beating drums, while the lamas rang their cymbals. Our banners conveyed our



message loud and clear. Never before had people seen so many lamas on the street. People joined us along the way and shared our joy and pride at having decided what was best for our land and our people.

"Uncle Pema, Uncle Sonam, and Auntie Chukie wrote endless number of letters to people telling them what would go wrong if the wall was built. Had it not been for them, neither we nor anyone outside of Sikkim would have known about the project early enough to do something to prevent it.

"In 1997, Uncle Pema brought us the news that the project would not come to Yuksam." Gyaltzen stopped for a moment, winked at Niraj and asked, "Now, don't

you think we are all heroes?" Niraj grinned from ear to ear and his cherub face was bright and happy. He had found a true story of heroes to tell his class.

As the jeep revved up to climb the steep mountain road, Niraj thought of what all the heroes of Yuksam had managed to save. The colourful pheasants and butterflies, the sprawling cardamom fields on the hill slopes, the old but smooth-moving wooden watermills, the million orchids on the trees... Yuksam was forever home to them all.

- Manju Menon

Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan

When they were young...

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

For a person born and brought up in comfort, it is difficult to understand fully the sufferings of the poor. When faced with the sight of penury, what do we do? Close our eyes to it and move on with our lives, perhaps? But there was once a boy who deliberately adopted the life of his less fortunate friends, in order to be like them in every sense. No wonder that he should, in later years, become famous as a great humanitarian.

The boy, Albert, was the son of a German village pastor. Most of the time, he could be seen with his best friend, George Nitschelm.

One evening, as they were returning from school, George challenged Albert for a fight and Albert accepted. Ultimately Albert won and triumphantly asked, "What do you say now?"

"You win!" gasped George. "But if I got good broth for supper twice a week like you do, I bet you wouldn't have won."

Without saying a word, Albert stood up, picked up his satchel and walked off home, leaving George staring after him. That evening, there was broth for supper. Usually Albert had a voracious appetite, but that day, much to the family's astonishment, he did not touch the broth. As he looked at the broth, his friend's words echoed in his ears and he felt sick. Pushing his plate aside, he excused himself from the table. Up in his room, he came to a momentous decision - he would not be different from his poorer friends any more!

From then on, he determinedly stuck to his resolve. In winter he would refuse to wear an overcoat, donning only the ordinary woollens that the other boys wore. All his parents' pleas, threats and scoldings failed to move him. The boy was none other than Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary who rejected a brilliant musical career to follow his dream of serving the needy. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

