

Games Children Play: Memories of a Himalayan village

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This article records my observations of the games children played in a village called Gnathang in Sikkim, which used to be the last stop for traders on the Silk Route before they entered Bhutan. Although of late, people have moved out of the village and tourists have made inroads, life in Gnathang is tough. Situated at a height of 13800 feet above sea level, the weather in Gnathang is intimidating, with mostly snow and rains and just a few months of sunshine thrown in. Sometimes, snow and landslides seal the village off from the outer world; at other times, there were a few days of sunshine to break the monotony. A middle school existed in Gnathang, when I was there—it is no longer functional, given the migration of people to cities.

Although a few homes in the village had television sets, thanks to the infrequent supply of electricity and the inclement weather compromising the use of the dish, children in the village were quite independent of television-watching. But the radio kept them abreast of Hindi film songs. On one of my frequent walks, I stopped to admire the view in a valley when I spotted a line of women and children making their way up a slope with firewood in baskets on their backs. I could hear them singing, and although I could not make out the words, it seemed hauntingly beautiful, wafting up over the trees. When they came closer, I realised that they were singing the popular Hindi film song, *Pardesi, pardesi, jaana nahin, mujhe chod ke....* (Stranger, do not go away leaving me behind)

On a sunny Sunday, an impromptu tambola session was usually organised for the elders in one of the lanes in the village. People would squat on the sunny side of the lane where the snow had melted, on roofs or on one of the yak skins laid out to dry. Even grown-ups would sit in the sun and play cards. If the sun was hidden by mist or clouds, or there was nothing else to do, they would meet in the one or two shops licensed to sell alcohol. With almost everyone related to everyone else, gossip was aplenty, as is generally the case with adults.

But for children, gossip did not hold the fascination

it did for adults, and their participation in tambola was restricted to finding vantage points and joining in the shouting and general excitement. Sports, like a synthesis of rugby and football, played on the school grounds were restricted to fair weather, which is just a few months in the year. Cards are closer to their hearts—I carry this picture in my mind of tiny, straight-backs in a circle, self-consciously holding cards carefully arranged like fans in their small hands, pretending very seriously to play.

Of course, the children in Gnathang are as imaginative in inventing games as children elsewhere—the difference is that their games are virtually seasonal. In my opinion, their creative skills are at their best when it snows. There is almost an element of genius in the simplicity, yet versatility, of their inventions. During deep winter with its heavy snow, these children created workable, efficient skis and sledges from discarded stuff. They fashioned skis out of a piece of slightly curved rubber sliced into half lengthways, with wooden sticks for poles. Their sledges were the sides of old crates, with wooden blocks nailed along the sides. They used their hands for steering these sledges, with the result that their mothers often complained about the number of gloves they ran through in one winter! But it was a sight to see them rushing down the frozen snow over roads and slopes, red in the face, eyes streaming, screaming with excitement.

There was something very interesting that I learned to do with snow from them. If you ever find yourself standing at the head of a gentle slope covered with snow, make a tiny ball of snow and roll it gently down the slope. You will see that it keeps gathering more snow as it rolls down, leaving a very intriguing track, which could pass off as a baby yeti's footprints! And when a group of children does this simultaneously, the result is extremely striking.

When the thaw set in, families that run out of their stock of firewood would send their children to collect juniper branches. This was a major expedition—friends formed gangs, younger brothers and sisters tagged along and a couple of

older women accompanied them for supervision. The children had kid-sized baskets, identical to the ones used by their elders, hanging from their backs, with knives and axes, again identical to the ones used by their elders, pushed dramatically into their belts or the cloth tied around their waists. There was much singing and fooling around, with a great deal of shouting between groups.

Then the rains would come, and the children would be left pretty much to themselves. They would go down to the Army establishment in the valley below the village, where the home-sick soldiers, missing their children, would pamper them. They would swagger up-hill and down-hill, sticks in hand, snipping off the heads of innumerable flowers growing wild across the slopes. A favourite game was to make their way to the stream that cut across the valley to try and catch fish with makeshift fishing rods. Although they were rarely successful, their efforts were rewarded by the tasty treat the wild strawberries growing in abundance around the banks provided.

Of course, there was room for make-believe in the repertoire of their games and they tended to imitate the most interesting adults around, in their case the soldiers of whichever Army unit was posted in the valley. Any celebration in the unit premises was closely watched by groups of children perched conveniently on high ground. Most of them said they would join the Army when they grew up. Whatever they did eventually, at that point in time, the children were fascinated by these adults. I saw evidence of it one day, as I was making my way up a steep slope. I came across a procession of near-toddlers 'marching' efficiently out-of-step in a crooked line, led by a teenaged boy holding a stick in hand, presumably to scare some of the over-enthusiastic make-believe soldiers. The leader whispered something to them as they came close to me. As they passed, I received a toothy-grinned namaste accompanied by a salute consisting of tiny, grubby hands raised awkwardly to their foreheads, even as their arms strained against the constraint of the layers of sweaters and coats they wore.

Like everywhere else, the days of celebration in the village were days of excitement for the children. One was Lossar, the Tibetan New Year, which

meant a lot of fun and lots of eats for the children, both Tibetan and Nepalese. Another was Buddha Purnima, which held a lot of appeal for them since some of the adults dressed in colourful robes, wigs and masks, and led a procession to a village two valleys away. Similarly, on Tibet Day, Tibetan adults in traditional costume and all the children gathered at the tiny Gompa, or temple, where a few speeches were made, followed by a procession winding through the village, carrying a picture of the Dalai Lama and banners brought out of the storage for the day, shouting slogans till it found its way back to the Gompa.

Weddings were a source of great enjoyment, with the entire village invited to partake of the feast prepared by cooks especially brought in from Gangtok or Kalimpong to make special dishes like the geika, full of meat-balls and noodles. On these occasions, it almost seemed like the children were holding a mini celebration of their own, within the larger celebration.

The children of Gnathang were my friends and it thrills me that I helped them learn new games. Before the snows came in during my last winter in Gnathang, it was so windy that going for a walk became a perpetual struggle with the wind chill factor accompanying the already low temperatures. So, I picked up a couple of golf clubs and a pack of balls and started swinging balls onto the tin roof of an empty hut. Soon I had gathered a small audience of children quietly watching me. Used to the children occasionally eyeing me with curiosity, I ignored their interest till one day I came across a couple of boys swinging a slightly curved stick and successfully sending a ball up into the air in a graceful arc.

But a form of quasi-golf was not my only contribution to the repertoire of Gnathang's games. Once the snows settled, and I went out for a walk on a sunny day, I came across a group of red-nosed, bundled-up children varying in age from three to ten, working diligently at making a snow person. And, once again, as when it snows, the adults huddled close to the huge stoves in the centre of their living rooms. And the cycle of games began anew for the children!

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