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HIGHLIGHTS

- Special Story:** Mallika to Monali
- Travelogue:** Darjeeling, Bhutan
- Summer Recipe:** Litti - Chokha
- Special Feature:** Higher Education
- Environment:** Ecological Software





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timesofnorth.IN is the first online news magazine from North Bengal plains which is dedicated for news and reviews. **timesofnorth.IN** was created with an objective to highlight North Bengal, North East India, Sikkim, North Bihar and many more. Updated news reviews with an analytical perspective are going to be the main feature of **TIMES OF NORTH**. It is not only going to depict reviews of North Bengal but also is going to feature news analysis from around the country and the globe with National and International importance.

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Mallika for Monali

Nidhu Bhushan Das

Dear Monali,

Festival of colour is on here to-day. We are shrouded in colours – roseate, green and azure. Sweetmeats are aplenty. I don't know how you spend the day in New York. Perhaps, you tend to reminisce how we enjoyed the day in Shantiniketan where Vasantutsav (Vernal Festival) attracts people from home and abroad. Can you remember how the inspiration of the spring would colour our thought and we would renew our vow to remain together? I understand you can, since you are nostalgic. I expected a Facebook Wall Post from you ahead of the day. Maybe, you are otherwise preoccupied. Since I live in a country where even to-day one can choose not to remain busy, I have the luxury to address this letter to you. I don't know how much time of your busy schedule will be spoilt when this letter will come to your notice.



I did not have the mind to write this letter. In fact, the routine of sending mails to friends on occasions reminded me of your being in New York. I collected your e-mail address from Mallika. She is all praise of you. We are now good friends. She often visits me at my office and residence. I come to know about your progress in study from her. She says she likes to stay back in India, would do PhD in Microbiology at Symbiosis, Pune. What is interesting is that she tries to explore possibilities of my transfer to Pune where our company has its headquarters for Indian operation. Last Sunday night during our candle light dinner at Oberoi Grand she whispered, "I have heard ..." She paused and with a glow on her cheeks resumed: "The head office of your

company for India is in Pune, isn't it? Why don't you try to get transferred to Pune?' I could not at once understand the significance of the query. Rather, I thought she would like to send me away to end the intimacy that has grown between us in your absence. I have felt so far that her overtures towards me have an element of jealousy, possibly, against you. I am not sure I am correct; you may have the proper assessment, after all Mallika is your sibling.

I confess I have developed as much tenderness to her as she has for me. She is handsome, if not a paragon of beauty like you, and has profundity of feeling and an animal spirit, which, you know, I like most. I understand Mallika does not quite feel the pull towards you. I don't know why. She often asks me how I could develop friendship with you. According to her, you are impudent and the arrogance engendered from your academic excellence. I argue that it is not bad. It helps one to maintain distance necessary for pursuing research. Mallika sneers at such suggestion and says one cannot have an emotional relation with such a girl. She is self-centered and can sacrifice even relation for academic and other achievements. I don't have such a summary judgment.

I tend to believe Mallika loves me. She is not willing to leave me. She often says we are made for each other. Do you think so and believe we would be the right couple? If not, please advise her. She is now with me. We are two-in-one in the living room of my flat in Salt Lake, Kolkata. She would not talk to you right now by telephone, and is against my making a call to you. So, I write this letter of confession of my love. I may keep you in memory having Mallika with me. You may forget me but I would not like to bury the memory of many exclusive moments with you. Can't you remember that how we dated every alternate day, and what naughty things we did in our retreat?

I wish that you reach the pinnacle of academic achievement.

Your now- forgotten- friend

Swapan

 The writer is an eminent Journalist from North Bengal

Indian Higher Education: A Hunting Ground of Commercialization and Profit

Prof. Tapas Kr. Chatterjee



It is anybody's knowledge that our Higher Education sector, as the tertiary sector of Education in post-secondary stage, has undergone massive expansion since the 1990s. In less than 30 years, as per UGC Annual Report of 2016-17, the number of students enrolled is a staggering 29.43 million of which Girls constitute about 49%. The annual rate growth of enrolment is about 3.3%. The total number of Colleges and Universities are 42,338 and 895 respectively. Out of all Universities, the Central Universities are 47 (5.2%), State-aided Universities are 364 (41%), Deemed Universities are 123 (14%) and Institutes of National Importance are 96 (11%). The total strength of faculty is 14, 70,190. Despite such expansion, mainly horizontally , the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER, being the % enrolment in higher education in 18-23 age group) is only 24.5% which means that about 3/4th of eligible students have no seat to be admitted.

On the other hand, it is extremely disappointing that out of 42,338 colleges, only 2164 colleges (5.1%) are accredited by UGC under Sec. 2 (f) of UGC Act, 1956. This approval under 2(f) is

mandatory and no institution can operate without 2(f). Colleges having accreditation under both 2(f) and 12(B) Sections number just 9,414 (22%). This is a reflection of the nexus operating in socio-political system enabling as many as 95% of colleges to function, notwithstanding gross transgression to rules and by means of pitiable infrastructure. The institutions hardly ever care to meet the UGC norms of infrastructure in order to be approved under 12(B). What is even more glaring to note, the result of NAAC assessment reveals that only 32% of Universities visited by the Peer Team and 9% of Colleges are of A Grade. The rest, about 68% Universities and as large as 81% Colleges are of average or poor quality. The piquant situation can be illustrated like a few islands of quality education providers in an ocean of deplorable mediocrity. Bulk of the students has no choice but to pursue education in these “yet another” type of low-standard establishments. What happens to their employable skills in the perspective of loud national objectives of access with equity and excellence is anyone’s guess.

Let us now examine the issues of affordability of the cost of higher education and research. The quantum of state funding has declined over the years since the phase of ‘less government’ began as our country became a signatory to the WTO Agreement in the 1900s, thereby finding a place in a so-called networked globalised world. The bottom-line of this policy in WTO regime is to undertake economic reforms to ensure liberalization of Govt. Rules &/ Regulations, privatization of industrial enterprises in the public sector including health and education, incentivize private investments and allow unfettered free competition in each and every sector of economic activity. The clutch of the reforms consternated the entire education sector from pre-primary to university levels. The data of public expenditure on education vindicates this contention. Data is available for 2013-14 which show that 4.44% of GDP was spent on education, the share of higher education being only 1.35%. Incidentally, this level has remained rather stagnant since 2009-10 (1.29%) although the Kothari Commission recommended decades ago (1966) that at least 6% of GDP must be allocated for education sector as a whole. The share of total public expenditure for education sector was 15.76% and that of higher education sub-sector was about 5% only.

The policy shift to private investment in education, particularly in higher education is, therefore, not difficult to appreciate. As per WTO regulations, the federal and state Governments must

move away from public investment in education and the resultant vacant space has to be usurped by private investors. Already the school sector is heavily dominated by private entrepreneurs, the ratio of aided to non-aided being 7:5 up to the 10+2 stage. Now comes an aggressive intrusion in the tertiary sector. U.G. & P.G. combined. The present situation is captured in the statistical data of 2016-17 session, revealing that about 67% of students are now pursuing education in private institutions in the tertiary sector where the Govts. have given them enough elbow room to charge hefty fees without any control whatsoever. Gone are those old days of either centrally funded or state-funded Colleges or Universities, with a few private institutions operating here and there, mainly by Christian philanthropic bodies and other non-profit Society / Trusts.

It is readily discernible that our higher education system has finally broken free of decades of public intervention in terms of policy guidelines, supervision and control. In recent years, the country has undertaken massive structural and systemic changes. The present scenario has been captured in a Report on Higher Education prepared by FICCI in 2016.

About two decades ago, India consciously moved to a differentiated academic system with a three-tiered structure comprising (i) highly selective elite research universities at the top (ii) comprehensive universities and colleges in the middle and (iii) an array of highly accessible establishments at the bottom. The first tier is destined to cater exclusively to furthering India's intellectual capital. The other two are mandated to focus on delivering economic and social value respectively. The top-tier Universities are to be developed as Centres of Excellence for receiving best quality world-class education and research for creation of new knowledge. These are being set up with the vision to emerge as national and international leaders in education with skills and research output with intellectual prowess. They are enrolling a selective small set of talented, research-oriented students to be taught by stellar faculty. Faculty and students at the university will be entitled to receive handsome research grants and exhibit the greatest international diversity. Going beyond traditional scientific and applied research, these universities will have phenomenally broadened the scope of India's research capabilities to new interdisciplinary areas of scholarship that present the greatest opportunity for the creation of new knowledge and hold

most relevance for India in the new world. For example, Indian universities are at the forefront of research in bioscience, environment and climate change, inclusive development and leadership. Leveraging their cost and competitive advantage, Indian research universities have pioneered the model of blended research where they collaboratively produce cutting-edge research with other top-rung universities around the world. Further, despite directly educating only a small group of elite students, these universities are also expected to emerge as role-models, the indirect wellspring of content and curriculum for millions of other students admitted in the second and third categories mentioned above. These students will be allowed seamless access to high-quality content from these universities through the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) model. The UGC has put in place a Regulation in this respect in 2016. The second tier of universities and colleges are supposed to be industry-aligned professional institutions. It is a fact that this category of institutions has seen the greatest growth over the last two decades. At present (2016-17) about 35% of students are pursuing education in market-driven professional courses but no one knows their actual placement data in the industry. Focused on quality teaching and producing highly employable graduates, these institutions are advertised as passport to white-collar jobs in a knowledge economy. They are expected, as per policy, to impart knowledge and technical know-how on the one hand and broad-based critical thinking and problem-solving skills on the other, to produce well-rounded industry leaders. The curricular focus in these institutions is on content delivery than on content creation, where faculty borrow from the best open courseware and customize it to the needs of their students and this is how this category is distinct from the previous or the first type. While a section of the faculty are academic researchers, these universities also draw faculty from experienced practitioners and industry professionals who are subject matter experts and can act as mentors to students in the early stages of their professional careers.

The last cluster of broad-based highly-accessible universities endowed with the egalitarian principle of access with equity is designed to expand the reach of higher education to all eligible and deserving students in the country. They will offer a wide range of courses aimed at providing a holistic education to India's masses. Their distinguishing characteristic is a varied student population with significant regional and linguistic diversity and a balanced gender profile. They have poor infrastructure and physical resources. But these inputs are compensated by relying

heavily upon on-line methods of teaching and learning, often combining even ODL modes of delivery.

All these points of policy directives are found in the draft New Education Policy (NEP) which is likely to be enforced soon. The present policy of planned expansion has helped create capacity for ever-increasing numbers, the differentiated systems have been instrumental in directing these numbers to the right streams and the appropriate kinds of institutions in order to effectively meet the needs of Indian society. It is also very interesting to note setting up of ‘education cities’ has also been envisaged. Tracts of land in many B- Grade cities are to be acquired to create such education cities which will emerge to be thriving inner-city university campuses, tightly integrated with their host cities. Unlike the erstwhile ideal of a mono-functional and isolated Greenfield campus removed from the city, providing academics and students the distance to reflect on humanity, these campuses are located in the heart of the city, with several universities collocating on a single campus. They share a close relationship with the host city and are embedded in ‘knowledge ecosystems’ enabling them to perform better.

The corporate sector and other private investors deeply appreciate the human dividend. They know much more than others that India, the world’s oldest civilisation in the world, is also its youngest nation. Today, the median age of India’s 1.3 billion strong population is a mere 32; a good ten years lower than most other nations in the world. Today, India is the largest contributor to the global workforce, its working age population surpassing 950 million. It is no surprise then that, India has emerged to be the world’s third largest economy – an achievement underpinned, no doubt, by its unique demographic advantage, but also a prospect that will not translate into reality unless pioneering reforms are carried out in higher education sector.

Over the last two decades, India has remarkably transformed its higher education landscape. However, who cares about the stress it has created in the society, already deeply ridden with differentials of cast, race, religions and poverty, often accentuated by a group of political parties who keep the poor and marginalized people as captives for their vote-bank designs. Whether a

differentiated three-tiered university system, each tier having a distinct strategic objective, will indeed enable the institutions to build on their strengths and cater across different categories of educational needs remains a redoubtable apprehension in as much such a system is built on the principle of division and absence of democracy. Since the coming into force of the UGC Regulations 2003 relating to private Universities and several other policy interventions to attract foreign universities and FDI in higher education, the scenario has undergone and continues to undergo significant transformation through rapid and continuing expansion in the number of institutions largely outside the public sphere.- Notwithstanding the emergence of new disciplines and pedagogy clubbed with huge doses of ICT, the products of education supposed to be market-ready and more employable, the available data on employment hardly support such great exhortations of the private investors.. On the contrary, there are authentic evidences that the private institutions are making huge profit so that they feel free to establish more and more institutions, even separate campuses. There is no regulatory authority whatsoever to take note of the wider public concern of increasing commercialization, dilution of academic standards and threats to institutional stability, all of which have the potential to endanger the future of our society. We cannot allow elitism to grow at such uncontrolled rates as of now and to vitiate our education system. We cannot be silent witnesses to showcasing of both 'India' and 'Bharat' to co-exist in our education system in as much as such disparaging diversity will destroy the society. The central government must assert itself to re-orient the priorities and control the reigns of commercialization.



The Writer is the Ex Registrar of the University of North Bengal

Sensational Darjeeling Hills – A Paradise of Mesmerizing Offbeat Destinations

Shomnath Dutta

“The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at least to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land” ----- G.K. Chesterton

Ours Bengal has no scarcity of ravishing destinations to call in on right from highest snow capped Himalayan peaks to deepest waters, from serene beaches to dense forests even to the wilderness of the mangroves. Some particular destinations are much explored and commercialized while some other heavenly locales are left untouched and ignored as if they are existing in disguise. Myself being that sort of a traveler who wants to explore the places which seldom appear in regular tourist manuals or Google maps, love to wake up to chirping birds flying merrily over the mist-covered hills, like enjoying the richness of nature rather than artificial ambience created by luxury hotels, frequently move to these offbeat and underrated virgin destinations in hilly North Bengal called touristy Darjeeling to quench my traveloholics thirst for knowing the unknown & seeing the unseen. Being in the limelight for its manicured tea gardens, undulating terrains, and salubrious weather, Darjeeling is popularly known as Hill Queen of Bengal and the hill queen has mesmerized the avid travelers like me to explore its untouched spots in the lap of nature. Let's have a pen-sketch of the four of such fantabulous offbeat sites that I visited so that the nature lovers can flock together & enlist these places to their forthcoming tour itinerary.

MAJUA – the secluded hill hamlet of Darjeeling

During the first week-end of March'18, I took a decision to enjoy a relaxed “do-as-you-like-no-sightseeing-pressure” type trip and picked up an offbeat less known spot Majua, near Manebhanjang of Darjeeling district. Majua is located in Pulbazar tehsil in Darjeeling district at an altitude of 5042 ft with a population of 1079 people and is nestled on the banks of Sawaji Khola River. This village is surrounded by Singalila Forest range and on the way to Bijanbari

from Manebhanjang (roughly 4 km) & from Ghoom it is only 21 Km. It was a wonderful experience as we could come closer with the spot. This is a place where none can find any luxurious stay rather one can enjoy the warmth of home stay. Our stay (Singalila Jungle Lodge, 09635109201) happened to be a pleasant one wherein we relaxed in absolute solitude amidst beautiful flora and fauna along with the pollution free environment. Travelers as we did, can just sit outside in the dining area in the lawn of the cottage and see how the clouds and the sun plays hide & seek, listen to the chirrups of birds or can see the beautiful colored butterflies dancing around. We enjoyed the view of the dancing river and its mesmerizing music. It is suitable for both group and solo traveler as well, since it is an ideal place to relax, rejuvenate and to get refreshed. We were quite lucky that we got a glimpse of it. The other family members of mine were so happy that they began to dance with joy. Those were the memories, I treasure and it still lingers in my heart, whenever I think of them. On our way back to Siliguri, we rewarded ourselves with our night-stay in this paradise, at Majua, embedded in wilderness of alpine forest as green as a parrot's wing.



CHUIKHIM – an offbeat amidst Kalimpong hills

Chuikhim, a tiny village, an offbeat place with handful of houses scattered along the very picturesque Himalayan ridges is a part of Darjeeling district and is known for its spectacular jungle trail, clear springs and a world view of Kalimpong mountain ranges. This small mountain village of 250 families where SHARE (Support Himalayan Agro Rural Enterprise) led by Prasant Mullik, an unassuming youth in his thirties, has initiated a unique experiment in the form of community based tourism. Wishing to cut ourselves away and for detoxing our body and soul, I planned for next weekend offbeat trip to Chuikhim, which I heard from my colleague Dr. Mondal. Our journey started on next bright sunny morning in 2nd week-end of April this year and as we are not habitual with mountain journey we got acclimatized first. However after few hours journey, we finally reached to Chuikhim via Bagrakote tea garden of Dooars at around 11 am. Reaching at Chuikhim we found it is dotted with attractive little homes scattered across the hills and lush valleys which have been terraced for cultivation. Our resort was beautifully placed on the steps of a hill which showed the tea cultivation around. As we entered the balcony, we really got swayed away by the beauty of the climate & nature around. After having snacks & tea we walked into the village, which stretches across a few hills, emerged to us with some pleasant surprises. Locals showed us their homes and their minuscule gardens bright with colorful flowers nodding in the sun. After lunch during early afternoon we took a stroll along the forest route on the banks of Leesh River. Later our spidery trails through the surrounding forest ended up to the river Juranti. Chuikhim is so quiet & calm that at first we felt quite uncomfortable; then it started to sink-in and an overwhelming sense of peace & calmness took over our whole body. Here silence reigns and sweet fragrant gentle breeze blows. The silence that engulfs Chuikhim is broken only by bird-call. Visitors can trek around the village trail and in the forest. There are excellent opportunities for bird-watching. Lolegaon (23km) and Samtahar (25kms) are nearby tourist spots. Life in Chuikhim was organic, and lived in consonance with the seasons — the air was crisp; vegetables were fresh, unmarred by the taste of fertilizers; and no ugly hotels dotted the skyline. Chuikhim has a handful of home stays that are clean and picturesque. The tariff is Rs 600 per day, meals included. (Pavitra Khawas 09635584949; Green Valley View, 08906418130).



Chuikhim village located around 51 km from Siliguri through National Highway 31 and take a left turn at Bagrakote. It is located only 31 km away from Mal Bazar. ICCHEY GAON – upcoming tourist destination of Kalimpong Having been exhausted by the financial year ending work-stress, my travel savvy inner soul craved to stay away from the hustle & bustle of daily life and enjoy the calmness of the environment by sitting in the lap of the Mother Nature. Hence I with my wife & kid started for offbeat trip around Kalimpong in 1st week end of April'18. As per the suggestion of local tea seller Smt. Preksha Ji of Kalimpong, we set out for Icchey Gaon (via Ramdhura) a truly village atmosphere with panoramic view of mountains with the cheerful simple village people. After reaching there we had our lunch & found that it is an Organic Village Tourism spot; about 17 km from Kalimpong at a height of 5,800 ft. We sheltered at the accommodation in the form of homestay (Mukhia Homestay, +91 89724 70220 / 96144 34292) by the local very friendly and simple villagers. It was so lovely that we spent the whole day there giggling around and chomping good sniffs then I went to the famous Ramitey Dara view point in evening. It is a renowned vantage point, which presents a wide view of the meandering River

Teesta, featuring 14 turns along with the mighty Kanchenjunga range. It is one of the best-kept secrets of this region. The evenings at Icchey Gaon became very exciting when lights of Darjeeling, Ravangla and Namchi twinkle all along the slopes of the mighty Himalayas. The breathtaking beauty of the Silence Valley, small grassy woodland offered us the ultimate tranquility. The next fine morning, we moved to another famous viewpoint Jalsa (as guided by Mr. Manoj Mukhia) located 4 km away from Icchey Gaon within the Cinchona plantation and a British Bungalow. The site portrayed one of the widest view of the Teesta River and a gorgeous view of the Mt. Kanchenjunga range. The fresh green village houses approximate 30 families. The place appears as God's own place since no fear, no crowed no tension, no stress but has only happiness. Just imagine staying in a wooden cottage in the midst of dense alpine forest. Icche Gaon is 86 KM from Siliguri. From Siliguri take NH -31 to reach Kalimpong & then take the route to Pedong. Triveni View Point (Confluence of Teesta & Rangeet) – Darjeeling There are numerous places in North Bengal and Sikkim which are the favorite haunts for many people from the plains but there are some places which are cut off, less travelled and very quiet yet enriched with natural and breathtaking beauty. I had heard a lot about the scenic charm of Triveni spot which is the confluence point of two rivers, after Teesta Bazar and was quiet eager to take a trip to Triveni as soon as possible. This confluence of Teesta and Rangeet is also known as Triveni. I must say, I was not disappointed a bit. It is a fantastic place full of greenery & beauty of nature surrounded by hills. However on our way from Siliguri to Triveni spot via Kalijhora, Rambhi when we crossed Teesta bazaar & headed through Peshoke road, it was nothing short of a surreal experience. The mere sight of Teesta has a tranquilizing effect on you, it soothes your senses. We got down from the vehicle had a walk on the bedrock of rounded pebbles; the water was pristine and cool. Just sitting on the shores listening to the river flow takes you to a different world as if you are in a trance. Some call it Lover's point. It is considered to be a holy place where two great Rivers meet. Rangeet is considered to be a male river who meets his beloved Teesta at this point, hence the name 'Lover's point'. The two rivers have two distinct colors merging together and moving ahead with a forceful vigor. It was breezy day with a slight pinch of cold, when we put our foots forward to touch the sandy beach of Triveni. Designed and planned to sooth our exhausted nerves, the trip turned out to be a splendid one instead of routine trip of any destination. River Rangeet with its deep green and crystal clear water gushes in and meets the forceful mountain stream of Teesta at this confluence 'Triveni'.

Large white sandy delta formation at the confluence can be viewed. This sandy area is a popular rafting into Teesta. This meeting place is known as Triveni and there is a roadway that connects up to the point of the confluence. The confluence of rivers is an amazing treat to the eyes. The entire area is surrounded by lush green hills on all sides. One can simply stand there for hours, doing nothing but absorbing the natural beauty. The edges of the rivers were crystal clear. Rangeet is deep blue while Teesta is Emerald coloured. Triveni is located near Melli, a small town close to Teesta Bazaar. It takes about 1.5 hours to reach Teesta bazaar from Darjeeling & 2.5 hrs from Siliguri by a taxi or shared jeep. From Peshoke View Point (also known locally as 'Lovers Meet') the view of the confluence is simply awesome.



The writer is an eminent travelogue writer from North Bengal

Up the Tiger's Trail

Priyanka Chatterjee

“The Tiger’s Nest is the essence of Bhutan, the real experience of the land”. Sifting through the memories of a trip, I smiled at my childlike enthusiasm then at the literal meaning of it- that a ‘nest’ could be a potential housing for a ‘tiger’ seemed an impossibility, and never did I allow the literary tool of a metaphor to impinge upon my excitement. Imagining a tiger in a nest childishly excited queer interest, and I was engrossed in it. Of course for the ‘essence of Bhutan’, our touristy-spirits were gathering it like souvenirs right from the afternoon we left for Thimpu, Bhutan’s capital, from Phuntsholing, where we got our immigration papers ready. All I can remember of the six hours journey is the lavish broad butter-plain roads(quite unlike those we are used to!), the playfulness of fog and sunshine along the winding roads, the exotic stretch of pine forests bordering the roads and roads which took us across an international border hassle free, just in a car, for the week long holiday in the land of the thunder dragon.



It was not long when I spotted the gorgeously lighted city a little above from where we were. The twinkling lights of the distant hills is not a new sight for me as a clear sky in Siliguri always gives a glimpse of the sparkle in the north. Yet this very sight has unfailingly exuded an indescribable exultation always. We eased through the disciplined traffic and with the assistance of Tshering, our friendly driver, reached the hotel that was already booked to avoid the rush in this festive season. Dumping our luggage and our cell phones(these didn't work here thankfully!) in the hotel rooms, we walked out into the chilled night air of the city.

Next morning after a quick brunch at 'The Rice Bowl', a restaurant offering various Bhutanese delicacies, we began an unguided tour along the city. The awe-inspiring stupendous Buddha statue was our first destination. This gigantic statue can be spotted from anywhere in the capital and the magnanimous Buddha seems to keep a benevolent watch over his around three lakhs followers in this Buddhist nation.

Soaked in religiosity, Thimphu is a city that has been built keeping the natural and artificial in a steady balance. Down the roads the sight of the colourfully decorated valley has its own soothing effect. While hosting huge crowds of foreign visitors all the year round (tourists are a major source of income here) providing them with all modern amenities, Bhutan entertains them by upholding her traditional self. So along with the lakhans, chortens, goempas, dzongs, the typical Bhutanese architecture, the floral motifs, the wall paintings, the sacred symbols that speak of Bhutan's culture and tradition in unison, one could also look into its everyday life in the open market places, in its festivals. The rivers speak a different language altogether as these are the mark of the origin of civilization as in most of places. The King has a towering presence in every aspect of Bhutanese life. It is by holding his progressive hands that Bhutan is trying to find her rightful place in the world arena. The so-long-isolated territory has been opened up for visitors from across the world.



I still remember how colourful and festive Thimpu looked when we had visited. Apart from the river festival in the city, the Thimpu Tsechu, the entire country was awaiting the marriage of the people's King. The synchronized mask-dances and the music of the festival, being performed at the administrative and monastic dzongs, seemed quite expressive of the elation at the moment. Indeed the marriage of the King with his lady love, a common girl of Bhutan, Jetsun Pema, seemed quite like a fairy tale. The palace, however, was not one from the fairy tales but a simple well guarded structure, revealing the grounded simplicity of the people's King. Colourful simplicity indeed seemed to be the essence of Bhutan.

But here was a man challenging us that the 'Tiger's nest' is the icon of Bhutan which if we didn't visit we missed all of Bhutan. Eagerly we showered him with queries to which he didn't answer at all, his professional tactics as a guide teaching him to attract tourists only by invoking curiosity through the name, in which got a double-plus grade. With the one-liner- 'You have to see to know!', he pushed off.

The night was spent with undecided anticipation as we had no clue to what we were heading for. Paro is two hours drive from Thimpu. With the Paro chu(river) flowing along the side of the

town, it is a beautiful settlement with mud houses, golden rice fields, small schools, an institution for higher learning, a small international airport(the only one in Bhutan) and royal impressions scattered here and there. Sherpa, our driver, informed us that Tiger's Nest is situated a little outside the town and would take around thirty minutes to reach. The hotel where we dumped our luggage was overlooking a golden paddy field. In a flash it reminded me of home, a perennial craving for a home-sick me!

Sherpa drove us through the road that was bordered by fields and some beautiful resorts. After some time he said, 'There is the nest' but what we could see in front of us was rice fields! He laughed and pointed up at the hills that surrounded the fields and stretched his emphasis, 'Thereee is the nest!' And we couldn't believe our eyes! Perching on the side of a cliff almost 900meters above from where we stood, the 'nest', the Taktsang monastery, looked like a white dot! The dense green around it made it impossible for us to believe that we could find a way up there at all!

Sherpa abandoned us inside the pine forest and showed us the trail we had to take to go up all by ourselves. Horses that are available to take one uphill must be booked early in the morning. But at 12 noon (the time we reached there) one has to rely on a packet of 50-50 (echoing our chances to reach up there!), a bottle of water and two dear legs! Uncertain of our adventurous trekker-spirits, we called on to our gods and set forth on our first pilgrimage ever, sans the religious feel! Only a few steps later we had to stop our confused trekking because there was only the forest ahead and numerous beaten tracks leading to it from different directions. We didn't know which one would take us quickly (our city-bred love for short-cuts!). An old man climbing downhill informed us that any track would lead us to the main road uphill and there was no cutting short of the track. Severely discouraged, we decided on one track and started moving again. Far within the forest localites sat spreading items ranging from relics, local jewellery to walking sticks, of course with exorbitant price tags (usual ordeal in Bhutan!). A little further the forest resounded with a haunting melody of the invisible gurgling stream and the chiming monastery bells, both being invisible added to the eeriness further!! With an aggravating fear of what lay ahead, we moved on.

After some time we found ourselves braving up very steep tracks cutting through dense forests. There was no road as such to take one up, it was rather a road taken by all, a way cleared by prolonged use. The otherwise silent trek was interrupted now and then by the invisible gurgling water and the heavy breathing of the fellow trekkers. At places there were treacherous stones that had to be climbed upon with care or else a slip would shuttle one down to a place of no return. Gasping for breath, with around three/four hours of climbing left to do, we realized that the steep gradient had taken both the base of these mountains, which was vertically down and the monastery, which was vertically up completely out of sight. While we were still unsure of what to do, our touristy spirits asking us to go on, we heard a man shouting, ‘Move to your left!’ Even before we could follow his instruction, a train of horses came down the hill. These horses take tourists uphill but one has to come downhill on foot. The horse-trainer asked us to stand on the left of the track as the horses would take their left and they had been trained to be disciplined, or maybe they are!

Literally unaware when we would reach, we inquired the ones who were on their way downhill and found contradictory answers. Thus frustrated, we realized this climb exhausted all calculation and we needed to go on, without questions. Resting and resuming was our mode of climbing, although there was immense support of human enthusiasm. An old man, bent by age, but not by will, was climbing with the rest of us. Every now and then he would stop for breath. It was hard to believe that he would make it to the top but his courage and indomitable wish to reach the sacred place belittled his age and health. For every Buddhist the Taktsang Monastery is a place of pilgrimage that they must visit once in their life time. The Bhutanese visit all religious places in their traditional dress. A young Bhutanese lady in gho was climbing up the track with a six month old baby tied to her back. The weight of the baby made the climb difficult for her, but she climbed up with a smile. Following us was an old lady from Garia who was steadily climbing up in a saree(quite a feat I bet)! These and the many exhausted smiles around kept us moving. ‘Be prepared to be reborn!’ -an elderly gentleman threw these words at us while on his way down. Bemused we moved on!

But no enthusiasm could last for long especially for plain dwelling, non-trekkers like us. The desire to be reborn indeed demanded intolerable labour, we felt. We didn’t know how long we

had been climbing, we didn't know how long we would have to climb. Our friend, eager to test his photographic skills in this beautiful combination of red mud, green forests, blue sky, had left us long ago. We didn't know where he was! Thus with a lot of didn't-knows we took another sharp turn to find ourselves below what can be called a plateau-like place. Climbing up there we were speechless. A spectacular combination of green with dense forests, misty mountains towering up high to the blue sky overlooked the table-land. The air was chilled but the heat generated by the climb made it pleasant. But the monastery could not be seen from there. It was behind of the mountain that now lay before us. This meant we would now have to climb another mountain to reach the place!

Fatigued, hungry, baffled looking around we spotted a beautifully decorated cottage nearby. Coming closer we found that it was 'The Taktsang Cafeteria' maintained by the Royal Government of Bhutan. This cafeteria, besides providing exclusive Bhutanese refreshments, also provides the first glimpse of what one is heading for. And its unbelievably rejuvenating! A spectacular view of the white monastery silhouetted by the black cliff from where it hangs with the clouds moving in and out of the monastery, giving it a silent, inviting and eerie look!

After a quick Bhutanese lunch we were back on the track, ready to unfold the mystery of that which looked so mystifying. This last patch of climb is smaller than the previous one but its steeper. So here a step or two completely drained me of all my breath. But I was determined to climb up despite the caution from my husband and friends. Something inside told me that there would not be a next chance. So gasping, stopping, talking to passers-by we went on. It was almost 2.30pm when we started from the cafeteria. This is a safe time to begin climbing this stretch of trek as it takes an hour from here to reach the monastery. The lunch break, which is from 1-2pm, can be avoided as the monastery is closed at that time and also some time can be spent there before it closes down at 5pm. It was not long before we noticed that my slow pace had left my husband and me behind our friends. Now the lonely track, the dense forest around with its reportedly fearsome animals, the haunting sound of gurgling water and exhaustion brought in mixed feelings of nervousness, yet the eagerness to finish what had been started made me move on. Any movement in the trees or bushes around made me clasp my partner's hand

fiercely. I wanted to climb fast and put an end to this invisible terror but the steep gradient of the track hindered my wish.

But not for long! The nail-biting moments suddenly thinned out when we found ourselves overlooking a series of steps that would first take us uphill and then downhill- at the end of which stood the stupendous white structure. Traversing the stone steps carefully, we quickly covered the distance. And what lay before us filled our hearts with indescribable happiness. The monastery lay there with all its white purity! With the mountain on one side, it stood overlooking the ridge. Memory freezes in moments, and I have the memory of incomprehensible joy which I felt at that moment- joy as I had been able to fight the odds and do something I unsurely set out to do; joy at the mystery that lay behind this wondrous creation of man. Can this be a work of human potential or of something that transcends beyond? The arduousness of the climb melted away at the sight of the beautiful monastery.

At the gates of the monastery our passes were checked, our cameras deposited as we entered the sacred place. The cold stoned place smelled of white incense. The route inside the monastery is marked and one has to follow the numbering to reach every sacred cave or ‘nest’. The first cave is the most sacred as it was here that Guru Rinpoche alighted from the tigress, that flew him to the place, and meditated for years. It was from here that Buddhism is said to have spread all across Bhutan. Many Buddhist saints later meditated in this cave for years at a stretch. This cave is opened only once a year and we were lucky to have seen it, remarked the priest there. Later in around 1670 this monastery was built. Indeed Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava is a saint of magical prowess. The legend has it that he had infused a Tibetan princess with so much faith that she transformed herself into a tigress and flew the Guru to the mountain. Blasphemy as it might seem, my friend suggested if this could be given a modern turn then a helicopter-drop at the place would ease the journey. I might have agreed with her earlier. But now experiencing this mysterious comingling of history and myth that the place encased within its cold stone walls, which removed all exhaustion, I felt the journey was necessary. This place is said to have caught fire in 1998. The King took special initiative to restore the place to its former glory although many sacred scriptures were burnt. The cave of Guru Rinpoche however, was left unharmed. The gigantic statues of the various incarnations of the Buddha fill every corner of the heart with

repose. The calm serenity of the place overwhelmed me. I closed my moist eyes to think about all my loved ones, as if to invoke all of their spirits and leave them under the protection of the Guru. Nothing seemed more precious than the unfathomable silence in which we stood, holding hands, communicating the warmth which touched us.

The tour downhill was pretty uneventful and smooth interrupted by a look up at the monastery and finding it hard to believe that we had been up there. Night was creeping in and the forest was waking up. So we had to be fast but the steep path risked a fall if we hurried. A twig under my foot did make me roll down and (to my surprise and others amusement!) my nervousness resounded the silent forest in loud wails. A quick shower of consolation followed (there was no time to lose!) and we again started making our way downward. The forest was dark, the path could no longer be seen and when we thought that we had lost our way, we saw the headlights of a car blinking at us. Just in time we were there! Sherpa waited for the long six hours and received us with a smile. On the road I spotted the monastery high up there, now sparkling under flood-lights. It seemed impossible to imagine that I had been up there and also impossible to imagine that I could do it again. Maybe not, or maybe I would never do it again. I want that moment to live with me forever, neither repeated, nor tampered by a second climb. It made me realize there is always more in us than we can comprehend. Instead of directing ourselves in achieving greatness, becoming extraordinary, we need to focus on little things we can do to be happy. That happiness can become our power, our faith which can make us climb treacherous terrains of life. The monastery seemed like a belief which we often lack. We often fail to believe ourselves. Belief which can be power that can sober down a ferocious tiger and also create an artistic wonder like the Tiger's Nest hanging on one side of a cliff 900m uphill. I experienced that faith, felt a calm of mind and looked forward to a spring of new action.



The writer is the Assistant Professor of University of North Bengal

Requirement of an Ecological tracking software by taking the Shrinking Ecological Balance

Dipanjan Moitra & Dr. Subrata Ray

Climate change, pollution, habitat destruction and loss of biodiversity have serious impacts on mankind as well as on the Earth. To anticipate and prevent negative impacts of such ecological hazards we require ongoing long-term monitoring of all aspects of the environment. Individuals, governments and businesses are showing an unprecedented level of concern for environmental issues, and for good reason – humanity is facing some serious global environmental challenges. Solving these challenges requires new kind of scientific software model. To develop such models, we need to invent a variety of new concepts, algorithms, and methods – which then can be packaged into re-useable software tools. In this way, we can help ourselves to substantially improve environmental management. This paper aims to give the technical description of web enabled software that can help communities and individuals to monitor their own environment. Furthermore, the paper will enumerate the contemporary tools that can be clubbed to develop useful scientific ecological software.

Contemporary Initiatives

There are several dominant online environmental portals. Some of them are described below:

1. *CyberTracker*, which requires no programming skills, allows users to customize an Application for their own data collection needs. Users can use CyberTracker on a Smartphone or handheld computer to record any type of observation. This is a free software and easy to use by all people, regardless of their level of education. The ultimate vision is that smart phone users worldwide will use CyberTracker to capture observations on a daily basis. Data streaming into the Internet (the Cloud) will make it possible to

visualize changes in the global ecosystem in real time. This Tracker Evaluations facility also helps people to develop their practical observation skills.

2. *Miradi* - a Swahili word meaning "project" or "goal" - is a user-friendly program that allows nature conservation practitioners to design, manage, monitor, and learn from their projects to more effectively meet their conservation goals. The program guides users through a series of step-by-step interview wizards, based on the Open Standards. As practitioners go through these steps, Miradi helps them to define their project scope, and design conceptual models and spatial maps of their project site. The software helps teams to prioritize threats, develop objectives and actions, and select monitoring indicators to assess the effectiveness of their strategies. Miradi also supports the development of work-plans, budgets, and other tools to help practitioners implement and manage their project.

3. HAZMIN® is an integrated set of five environmental software modules providing comprehensive MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheet) and environmental management, a database of regulated chemicals, and a material review system. HAZMIN® is built around the MSDS Management Module to provide Right-To-Know MSDS Access and comprehensive MSDS data management. The Regulated Substance Database Module is used for the highest quality regulated chemical database, comprehensive list of lists, and MSDS component cross-referencing is used for risk analyses. The Environmental Reporting Module is used for sophisticated environmental reporting calculations, third party inventory integration, and maintenance of reporting history. The Material Process Control Module is used for a material usage review system, MSDS augmentation with Safe Operating Procedures (SOP's) and maintenance of a history of where, when, who, and how chemicals were used. The Task Management Module can be used to officially track and document regulatory-related tasks, corrective actions and permit tracking.

Behind the scene, various valuable research and development works are going on in the field of ecology. A few of them are as follows:

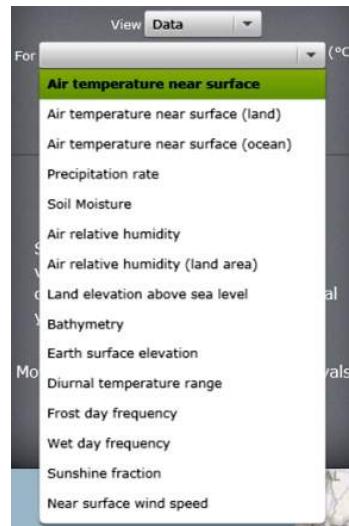
1. Computational Ecology and Environmental Science Group (CEES) along with Microsoft Corporation are currently working especially hard to assemble a set of predictive models, predicting the response of key aspects of the biosphere to human pressures. These models include CCF1.0, a model of the terrestrial carbon cycle; and the Madingley model, a new model of global biodiversity and ecosystem function. Hopefully, CCF1.0 will enable more accurate, transparent and defensible predictions of terrestrial carbon down to regional scales and to begin to understand how different biotic processes fit together to make the biosphere.
2. Ecological Metadata Language (EML) is a metadata specification developed by the ecology discipline. It is based on prior work done by the Ecological Society of America and associated efforts (Michener et al., 1997, Ecological Applications). EML is implemented as a series of XML document types that can be used in a modular and extensible manner to document ecological data. Each EML module is designed to describe one logical part of the total metadata that should be included with any ecological dataset. Developers can access the EML specification online by reading it in HTML format, or can download the entire specification, including both the HTML documentation and the XML Schema files.

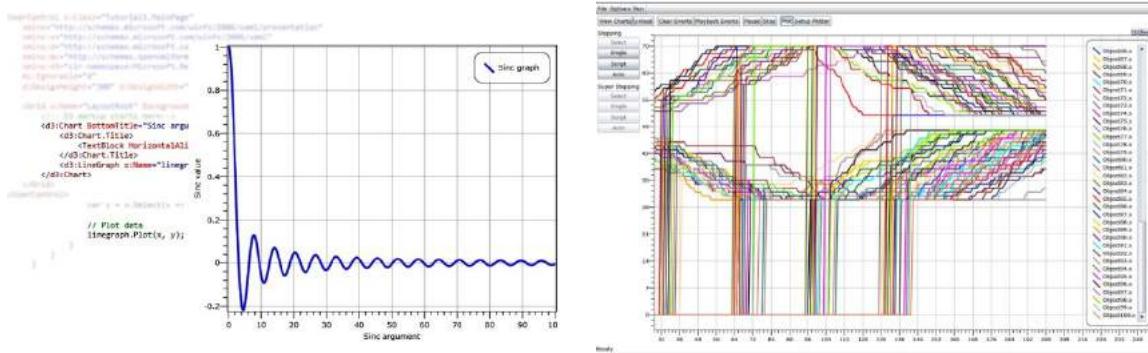
Prototypes from the end of Microsoft Research Group

Biochart: Biochart is a tool supporting a visual language to model complex dynamics, in an intuitive and more accessible way for the wider scientific community. Biological assumptions and experimental results can be encoded within a common framework, using *scenarios* and *states*. Models can be interactively explored by the user to ensure they capture the intended behaviour, visualizing model execution using the same language the model is developed in. Biocharts can specify intra-cellular and inter-cellular behavior using scenarios and states. It uses a visual language to build the model and interactively simulate dynamics. It represents hypotheses and experimental results within the same framework.

DataSet Viewer: DataSet Viewer is a simple standalone menu-driven tool for quickly exploring and comparing time series, geographic distributions and other patterns within scientific data. DataSet Viewer combines selection, filtering and slicing tools, with various chart types (scatter plots, line graphs, heat maps, as well as tables), and geographic mapping (using Bing Maps). The resulting views can be exported as images or movies, or bundled into an interactive package that can be shared with colleagues.

Skomer: Skomer is an open, reconfigurable, flexible, wirelessly-enabled, and low-cost tracking technology, and set of software tools that address almost all of these problems. These technologies are designed to enable researchers, to undertake previously impossible scientific studies collecting novel types of data and employing new kinds of analyses. These are initially focused on the migratory and foraging behavior of pelagic seabirds, but the platform is an open design with open software, so researchers can choose to modify the existing designs as their projects require, with a number of solutions provided for most common tracking problems.





Skomer

GEC: The Genetic Engineering of Cells language (GEC) is a programming language for designing and simulating genetic circuits to reprogram cell behaviour. The language can be used to write a program describing the desired behaviour of the cell, and automatically generates the DNA code that is needed to achieve this behaviour. The language allows logical interactions between potentially undetermined proteins and genes to be expressed in a modular manner, and generates sequences of biological parts using logic programming techniques and prototype databases containing known biological parts and protein interactions. GEC is a first step towards the automatic translation of high-level behavioural designs to low-level DNA code.

SPiM: The Stochastic Pi Machine language (SPiM) is a programming language for modelling and simulating complex biological processes in a modular way. The language is based on a computational formalism known as the pi-calculus, and the simulation algorithm is based on standard kinetic theory of physical chemistry. The language features a simple graphical notation for modelling interactions between biological processes, and can be used to model large systems incrementally, by directly composing simpler models of subsystems.

Network 3D: Network3D is a software package for highly interactive and flexible three-dimensional visualizations of ecological networks and other complex networks, and for network analysis and modeling. The visualizations generated by Network3D facilitate data exploration and communication of concepts fundamental to the study of food webs, other ecological

networks such as pollination networks and more broadly other complex networks such as protein interaction networks, citation networks and organizational networks. Network3D can also be used to analyse the structure of complex networks, test a number of stochastic models of network structure and test the robustness of networks to the targeted removal of species (nodes).

Filzbach: Filzbach is a flexible, fast, robust, parameter estimation engine that allows developers to parameterize arbitrary, non-linear models, of the kind that are necessary in biological sciences, against multiple, heterogeneous data sets. Filzbach allows for Bayesian parameter estimation, maximum likelihood analysis, priors, latent, hierarchies, error propagation and model selection, from just a few lines of code.

FetchClimate: FetchClimate is a fast, free, intelligent climate information service that operates over the cloud to return exactly the information users need. FetchClimate can be accessed either through a simple web interface, or via a few lines of code inside any .NET program. FetchClimate is intended to make it easy for users to retrieve information for any geographical region, at any grid resolution: from global, through continental, to a few kilometers, and for any range of years (1900 – 2010), days within the year, and / or hours within the day. FetchClimate can also report the uncertainty associated with the values it returns and list data sources used to fulfill the request. When multiple sources could potentially provide information on the same environmental variable, FetchClimate automatically selects the most appropriate data source. Finally, the entire query you ran can be shared as a single URL, enabling others to retrieve the identical information.

Dynamic Data Display: Dynamic Data Display facilitates the interactive visualization of dynamic data within your Silverlight application. It contains a set of Silverlight controls for creating line graphs, bubble charts, heat maps and other complex 2D plots. Dynamic Data Display also integrates with the Bing Maps control to show data on a geographic map in latitude/longitude coordinates. The controls are compatible with most popular development tools like Expression Blend and Visual Studio. They can also be operated programmatically.

DSD: The DNA Strand Displacement language (DSD) is a programming language for designing and simulating computational circuits made of DNA, in which strand displacement is the main computational mechanism. The language includes basic elements of sequence domains, branch migration and strand displacement, and assumes that strands do not possess any secondary structure. The language allows a given model to be simulated and analyzed at varying levels of abstraction, without changing the model code. DSD is a first step towards the design of modeling and simulation tools for DNA strand displacement, which complements the emergence of novel implementation strategies for DNA computing.

Dmitrov: Dmitrov is a set of compiled code libraries and utilities to facilitate the use of multidimensional datasets in diverse formats and sizes from within code. Dmitrov does away with the traditional distinctions between files of different formats, and between input, creation, manipulation and output of datasets held in different locations. You use the same interface to read data from a file (whatever the format), augment and transform that data, create new data sets in memory, and output data (to whatever format). Dmitrov can work with local files and local memory, or can work over the cloud, scales well from small data sets / few variables, to huge data sets / large numbers of variables. Dmitrov also allows for the addition of metadata to files, in order to create self-describing data packages.



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Litti – Chokha: A Veggie Preparation for You this Summer

Dola Som Ray



One of the famous and talked about the early morning snacks in the neighboring state of Bihar is known to be Litti chokha. It is said to be one of the oldest traditional recipes of Bihar. Not only in the household. Today Litti Chokha is one of the palatable street foods of Bihar and also our own city Siliguri. Basically, Litti is a baked wheat dough ball stuffed with the traditional sattu (In Bengali we call it Chatu). It comes in both plain and desi ghee coated version. However, the plain Litti is highly adorned by most of the commoners. On the other hand, Chokha is roasted stuff made with blended boiled potatoes, tomatoes, brinjal. In one sense we can call it roasted mix vegetable. Overall, the Litti Chokha is pure version of non cooked, non fried stuff yet delicious and healthy. I had tried to describe the preparing of Litti Chokha here.

The Ingredients required here are:

1 cup Whole Wheat Flour
1/4 cup Roasted Gram Flour (Sattu or Chatu)
1 tbsp Pickle spices
1 tsp Celery Seeds (Ajwain)
1 tsp Kalonji or Mangrail, Black Caraway, Nigella,
1 tbsp Chopped Onion
1 tbsp Chopped Green Chili
1 tbsp Chopped Garlic
1 tsp Salt or as per taste
3 tbsp Water
1 tbsp Lemon Juice
1 tbsp Chopped Coriander leaves
1 Cup Clarified Butter (Ghee)

4 Medium Size Boiled and pilled-off Potatoes
1 tbsp Chopped Onion
1 tsp Chopped Green chili
1 tbsp Chopped Coriander leaves
1 tsp Salt
1 tsp Mustard Oil

Firstly wheat flour has to be taken for preparing the dough just like the process of making normal chapattis. Next is the turn of preparing the filling of Litti. For that Sattu (i.e. Chaatu) is to be taken in a pan. Simultaneously, onion, garlic, coriander leaves, pickle masala, ajwain (Jowan),

Nigella Sativa (Kalo Jeera), Salt, Green Chilli and water has to be battered and made to powdery or semi dough state. This semi dough of all the filling has to be turned to a ball.



Next the ball has to be covered with the previously prepared Litti wheat flour dough and made into balls again. The non roasted Litti is complete. Then the entire stuff of all the Littis are to be kept in the Microwave oven under the convection at 180° for about 35 minutes. Next the Chokha is to be prepared by mashing the boiled potatoes, green chilli, chopped onion, chopped coriander leaves salt and Chakki fresh mustard oil (Ghanir Tel). One can heat up the batter with a little oil also over the oven also. Now the chokha is prepared. The Litti - Chokha is now ready to be served. One can also make chutney along with the Chokha and enjoy the same.



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