

Eight years old, I trekked the Druk Path trail in Bhutan, with my parents. Six days and five nights. Now, nearly a decade later, I reflect upon the lessons of that trip.

Druk Path taught me to rethink my concept of home. A city girl from the megapolis of Mumbai, home was an apartment, overlooking an overgrown banyan tree that always caught the rays of the sun at just the right angles.

Home was a fixture of mortar and stone.

During the summer holidays of 2014, trekking 13812 feet above sea level to reach the city of Thimphu, I found my habits, perspectives, and comfort overhauled and reconstructed. As the sun ascended, casting a soft, golden glow on our tents, we awoke, performing our tasks quietly – a serene start to an otherwise tiring day. As night fell, we made dinner, prepared our sleeping bags, and watched the stars under a wide dome of indigo until sleep came to call. Though homesickness gnawed at me the first three days, the easy rhythm of the mountains was enough to soothe my frayed nerves.

Now, reflecting on the experience through the lens of a young adult, I realize how home had never really been a linear concept. It could just as easily be open valleys and vast mountains. Home is the warmth of belonging. With the easy camaraderie of our Bhutanese friends and the dynamic backdrop of the changing trees, and moss-covered rocks, the Himalayas became my home.

We experienced spartan conditions; no running water or electricity and bathroom breaks involved a spade and shovel. No matter the severity of the circumstances, I learned a powerful lesson – the sweetness of the harvest was dependent on the toil of the sowing – each experience instilled lessons in adventure.

On day four; I adapted to the cultural demand of silence – a state of being that signified peace in the monasteries. Our daily trails of ten or more kilometers were underscored by this silence. Though I sometimes longed for the comfort of my cartoons and books, I found hidden talents, reciting fantastical stories for hours, encouraged by our guide Sonam Yeshey. I learned how to listen deeply, admiring the ease with which the Bhutanese flowed between languages – English, Hindi, and occasionally, songs hummed in Dzongkha. I returned to school eager to brush up on my Hindi and Marathi, and motivated to start a new venture in French.

Day five, like the two days preceding it, the skies wept at dusk. It was rain like I'd never known before. Raw and wild, it drummed on our taut tents and halted just before daybreak. The rich smell of petrichor beckoned us awake. I adapted readily to this evocative lullaby of nature.

In the mountains, you're never alone. We didn't spend a day without the comforting presence of a mountain hound keeping us company. They'd walk alongside us for a day or two before drifting away. They instilled in me – a creature of habit, the lesson of impermanence.

Ten years later, I found myself climbing new peaks—this time in Nepal. Located at an altitude of 4593 feet, I visited Ganesh Secondary School as part of a leadership camp focused on Socially Productive Useful Work (SUPW). I thought of my time in the mountains of Bhutan, grateful for the wealth of experiences that molded me into a capable leader. My adaptability has matured and evolved, allowing me to facilitate an environment of learning and mutual growth. My teachers entrusted me with logistical responsibilities, relying on my dependability. I took pride in creating efficient schedules and coordinating with my peers to ensure smooth sailing.

In Bhutan, my guides switched languages for my comfort. Here, I was the one making linguistic shifts. Similarly, games like spinning and rope jumping were second nature to the students of Ganesh Secondary. Though new, I caught on fast, going on to teach them complex mathematical concepts using games. Mess-style eating brought with it, another layer of cultural immersion – a far cry from my packed lunches in Bhutan or homecooked meals in Mumbai, the communal experience offered new warmth. Though living in low resources, the students of Ganesh Secondary were hopeful. It humbled me, forcing me to acknowledge my privilege and newly appreciate the role of education in shaping my linguistic and cultural adaptability.

In the span of a decade, the landlocked mountains had tamed my coastal heart, shaped my personality, and are sculpting the landscapes of my life, present and future.