

PHOTO: RONGRUNG CHAKMA

When we flock in droves to trek through their everyday routes, what kind of disturbances and invasion are we causing?

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I'd probably, even unintentionally, act like a shameless, gallant Bangali here to visit the mountains. But I want to avoid displaying any strong signs of Bangali pride while exotifying a people in their own homes in the CHT. I have no ambitions of acting like a white explorer set to "discover" natives of a strange land to colonise or rescue them.

My best chance at keeping myself in check is to have a local host, one who I can trust to call me out if I am from doing something disrespectful or insensitive.

For example, after much internal debate, I decided to visit Rangamati this year for Bizu, so I called my trusty friend Orchid Changma up. This was not my festival; I had no religious or cultural tie to this event and know nothing about it. I didn't even know what gives me the right to just barge in on someone's celebrations. Orchid, however, was an absolute sweetheart, who could not have been more welcoming. He let me and my friends join his gang to visit homes, eat meals, and sing songs. I visited homes of strangers who welcomed me with open arms as his friend. I cannot be any more grateful for a more wonderful experience.

But what if I don't have a local host?

Well, my best chance, then, is to be with a group of visitors who are sensitive, aware, and respectful.

I would want to go with friends who will stop me if I act like a drunken teenager left to destroy someone's home. I would want us to carry bags so that we keep our waste in them and not on the streets.

Paths that are used to trek are often routes that cut through the mountains to connect homes and villages of the locals. When we flock in droves to trek through their everyday routes, what kind of disturbances and invasion are we causing? Are we moving through routes that are used by

the community for their essential labours, such as bathing, washing, collecting water? Are they comfortable when outsiders—Bangali or any other foreigner—walks in on their privacy?

I will not throw chocolates on local children from moving cars for them to jump for and pick at; I'm not visiting a zoo and these children command respect. While I'm out here for my own leisure, I must be careful to not treat this as charity-work for the local indigenous community, unless prior communication with my hosts has established any kind of demand they may have.

I would not entertain a fellow visitor who feels the need to reduce this to a hip-trip to try exotic brews and foods. If I'm at the markets and I want to purchase foods, drinks, and produce from the jhum, I will allow the local sellers to guide me and learn from them. I will refrain from



PHOTO: ANTAR CHAKMA

making racist comments about the food and culture.

Of course, we want to take photographs for our memories, create art even, but I will not take photographs of the people without their consent, especially women and children. It is one thing to take photographs of the produce and handicrafts in the markets, but somehow, we need constant reminders to not exotify the local indigenous, and that too without their consent.

Can I find lodging that is owned and run by indigenous locals, and help their businesses? Most of the hotels and resorts are run by the military or are Bangali-owned. In fact, if one were to visit Sajek or Boga Lake, it would be near impossible to find lodging that is not under military supervision.

Of course, no matter where we go, we should be mindful of the local population, their customs, and their ecology. I imagine that locals of the CHT are kind and welcoming hosts to all guests. But there is power—and power imbalances—in relationships. There is a crude irony in visiting tourist spots that were built for my entertainment and for the profits of Bangali corporations that strengthen my power over my hosts even more.

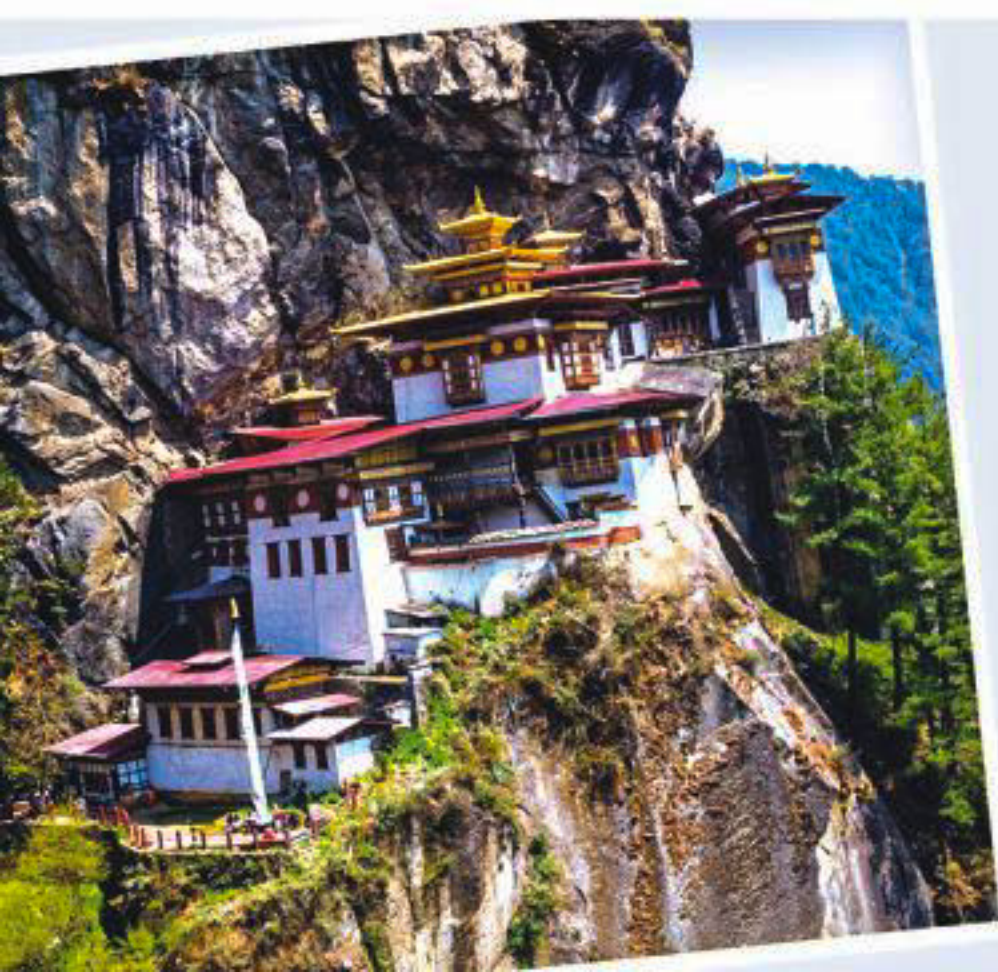
In Sajek alone, hundreds of homes and numerous villages were burned in multiple episodes to displace the locals; some were even killed for refusing to move. Their forests were harmed and big roads were built through mountains so that the smoke and foul air from our chander gari now occupy the very natural wonders we crave to experience. Dreams of 'development' follow us when we visit these tourist spots, because electricity and network coverages need to be set up, water channels need to be drawn up to unimaginable heights for our comforts in these luxury hotels. I cannot even entertain the false illusion that I am 'helping' the local folk, because these destinations were not built with their consultation or consent. How am I to even establish relationships with the locals when the security forces will not allow any kind of communication between us, as in Sajek? Who runs and profits from these leisure destinations while villagers nearby suffer from food shortages?

We like to imagine that the mountains are for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, creed, and politics. But in a world that feeds on mountains too, that is not true. The lands are for those who take care of them, for those who live with these lands.

We want to live in their huts on stilts for a few days, but we don't really want their lives or live like them. I do not know how indigeneity is lived. Therefore, I know nothing about a way of life that I'm encroaching upon with my ways of life. Their indigeneity is lost on us, and so we only falsely imagine that we are bringing them better lives with our savior complexes and feel-good vibes. The crises of indigenous people who are left to survive in the margins cannot be kept on hold for us while we make a leisurely trip. Here, men are 'disappeared', women are raped and murdered, and tourism is used as a tool to grab these lands, make profits, and remove any hint of dissent.

So, in truth, I would actually not visit the CHT for Eid. I don't have much at my disposal the ability to shed any of the power that the state places on my body when I visit these destinations. But my responsibilities as a citizen of this state do not end at making such individual choices. I must hold the state responsible for the grievances in the CHT: the disappearances, the rapes and murders, the burning villages, the increased policing, the systematic erasure of entire communities that we fail to include.

I thank my friend Orchid, and Muktasree Chakma for their valuable input for this article. And for anyone who thinks I should have touched upon other important issues regarding tourism in the CHT, you may reach me at maleeha94@gmail.com



Hiking to the Tiger's nest in Paro Valley, Bhutan

Nafisa Islam

"The land of the thunder dragon is as peaceful as opposed to its name, bringing nothing but love and kindness all around. Paro Taktsang, also known as Taktsang Palphug Monastery and Tiger's Nest, is a conspicuous Himalayan Buddhist sacred site, located in the cliffside of the upper Paro valley in Bhutan. One of the highlights of this journey - seeing my 100kg father with his bad knee hike all the way up till the Tiger's nest temple, 3000ft above Paro valley, and back again. Nothing can stop this man from exploring the unknown."

Scan the QR code to see this location on Google Maps:

