

# Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

Taktse International School  
PO Box 90, Gangtok  
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[www.taktse.org](http://www.taktse.org)

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*Sagun Limbu is a member of Taktse's first graduating class (2014). Currently a senior at Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts, she is the first international student to become a certified peer tutor at Endicott College. She is currently gathering short stories for a publication to be called: [Belonging to Sikkim](#).*

Dear Respected Teachers,

As I near the end of my summer internship at The Community House in South

Hamilton, MA, I feel the urge to write to you. One of my many projects is to update my internship website, so I went to Taktse's website looking for ideas. As I read our school's mission statement and browsed past and current newsletters, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for each and every one of you.

I remember the first time I came to Taktse, I barely had the courage to speak in English, let alone write anything. Now, with the foundation that Taktse gave me and the support and encouragement that I received from you, I am not only able to write but impress my professors and the American students in my classes with my writing. They say they "don't want to read their pieces after me" and although our culture of not openly accepting compliments is still etched in me, I can't help but secretly feel proud.

Three years have gone by since I thanked you all in my graduation speech and apart from once-in-a-blue-moon updates, I realize I haven't really expressed enough about how thankful I am to you.

From providing a second home for me on the Taktse campus, to nudging me to play sports, reading my writings out loud, cultivating my love for reading, and teaching me to analyze and think critically, you have helped shape me into the 21-year-old that I have become. Your efforts and dedication prepared me for Professor Gordon's, Professor Alexander's and

Professor Watling's classes and score A's on my papers, despite English being my fourth language. It is because of your belief in me that I was able to become the first international student to work in the Writing Center at Endicott College as a certified peer tutor.

As I read about my juniors at Taktse getting accepted into programs in the US, help Mrs. Denjongpa with the Dharma lesson plans, and hear Tanish say "I miss school, I can't wait to go back," I am gently reminded of how much Taktse has given me and the enormous effort you put into the school and your students. I will never be able to adequately express how truly grateful I am to each one of you. As I approach another milestone (graduating from Endicott College), I sincerely thank you all for supporting me, pushing me and believing in me all these years.

I am also excited to share that I left on Aug 22nd to go study abroad at Myongji University in South Korea for one semester! Considering my choice of South Korea, I guess I am still the K-pop fanatic that I was as an 8th grader!

I wish you all a great year ahead, and I want you to know that your hard work, dedication, passion and effort is not lost on me or the students at Taktse.

Warmly, Sagun Limbu

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*Thank you Mr. Namgyal, and to all who contributed to this newsletter!*

## New Books for Taktse's Growing Library

by Maria Lauenstein

Ms. Dawa Dingsa is amazing! When she returned to Taktse following a professional development visit to the U.S., she took \$392 dollars worth of books back to Taktse, got them entered into the library system, and got the librarian to set up a display. She just sent this photo of two students reading Manga, the Japanese comic-form.

If you'd like to donate books to Taktse, please contact Lonnie Friedman at [lonnie.friedman@comcast.net](mailto:lonnie.friedman@comcast.net).



### Brilliant Biographers

After a month of rigorous biography-writing classes, the fifth graders hosted their first "Brilliant Biographers" on August 4, 2017. They invited those about whom they had written their biographies; fathers, mothers, siblings or teachers.

The process started by reading biographies from the school library about Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Nellie Bly, Michelle Kwan, and others. Then, in groups, they made knowledge webs of the biographies they read focusing on the person's lifespan, occupation, motivation, challenges, and accomplishments.

The students then chose a person about whom to write a biography. Students did research and interviewed their subjects, gathered information from relatives and acquaintances, and examined old photo albums.

The students shared their writing pieces in front of their loved ones, and it ended with lots of laughter. You can read two of them on the following pages. Also, check out the video of Taktse's young biographers at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_84XABA0Yj8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_84XABA0Yj8)





## Biography of Tashi Wangyal Bhutia

by Soyra Palmo Wangyal, Grade 5

At 6:30 a.m on October 13<sup>th</sup> 1974 – a warm, sunny Friday morning – Tashi Wangyal Bhutia was born in West Sikkim. It was the "Year of the Tiger" according to the Buddhist calendar.

He was the youngest of four children, so he was the most loved child of his parents Sonam Wangyal and Chyazay Palden Bhutia. They named him "Tashi", which means "good" or "positive." He was destined to become the world's best father.



### Education

At the early age of three, he had to go to a boarding school in Gangtok, for there were no good schools in West Sikkim. Though he found it hard to be away from his mother, he enjoyed school. He was an all rounder, for he was sporty as well as a brilliant student. He represented his school in many football matches and gained victory in most of them.

For his college education he joined the Scottish Church College, a part of Calcutta University in Kolkata, and studied Political Science.

### Career

On his return to Sikkim, his parents wanted him to work for the government, but he was not interested. He wanted to open his own hotel and a petrol pump and be his own boss, for he abhors the idea of working for someone else. After a lot of hard work and sleepless nights, he achieved his dream with a 30 bedroom hotel in Pelling, West Sikkim, and recently a petrol pump too. It was a spectacular unfolding of his dream.

### Tragedy

In his personal life, he was extremely close to his brother-in-law and treated him like his own brother. They did everything together but unfortunately, his brother-in-law died due to an illness. It was a great loss. After that, Tashi Wangyal was unhappy for a long time, couldn't sleep for days and became

depressed. He took time to recover. But time is a great healer and it worked its magic on Tashi Wangyal as well. He recovered and now remembers happily the good times they spent together.

### Hobbies

In his free time he enjoys watching sports and singing while playing his guitar. He is part of a biking club and they all ride bikes to different places. He also takes an annual trek in the mountains of Sikkim and always returns with beautiful photographs.

### Personal life

Tashi Wangyal married Norzing Tsering in the winter of 2000 in a traditional ceremony in West Sikkim followed by a reception in Gangtok. Their first child, a boy named Sogyal Phintso Wangyal, was born the following year. Their second child, a long awaited and much longed-for daughter, was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2007 and named Soyra Palmo Wangyal.



Since the birth of his two children, much has changed in his life. He has gained a better understanding of the ways of the world, but professionally he still feels that his best is yet to come.

He believes that people should try and try until they succeed and that there is always room for improvement. He counts his blessings and is content to spend time with his family. He enjoys the Sikkimese way of life.

### A note to my father

*Dear Abala, you are the one who has always been on my side, my guide and the one who has always treated me as "your Princess." In your eyes I can do no wrong. For all these and more, I just want to say, I love you a lot and hope to make you proud of me some day.*





## Biography of Nitesh Agarwal

By Yuvin Agarwal, Grade 5

Commissioned in 2004, Lieutenant Colonel Nitesh Agarwal is presently serving as an officer in the Indian army.

He was born on 18 July in Deolali, Maharashtra. His father was an army doctor and his mother was a teacher. His elder sister, Ruchika

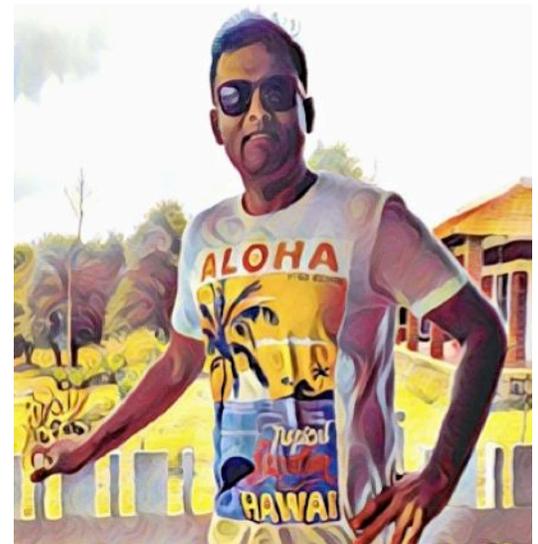
Agarwal, was caring, calm and composed. The family had to move far and wide due to his father's service in the army, so young Nitesh had to change schools often. His initial schooling took place in Meerut, UP followed by Jalandhar, Bhopal and many other places. Wherever he went, he made new friends. In the process, he learned many cultures and languages. Those experiences taught him how to deal with new situations and polished his abilities.



As a child Nitesh was very naughty and curious. He played pranks on his sister. In Meerut, he used to irritate his mother by not showing her his homework.

After finishing school, he joined the Indian Military Academy so as to join the Indian Army. He played many games during his training days like football and hockey, his favorite. He trained hard and earned a B Tech Degree.

He was commissioned in 2004. His happiness knew no bounds. His first posting was in Batalik near Leh-Ladakh. He injured his knee there. His second posting was in Delhi. There, Nitesh married my beautiful mother, Neha Kapur. Soon after their marriage, they were blessed with a baby boy, Yuvin Agarwal in 2007. He was known for his chubby cheeks.



All went well in his life except for his deteriorating knee. He got his first major surgery done in 2008. However, he has not let this pain affect his personal or professional life.

Nitesh has pledged to serve the nation in flood and fury. Nothing has been able to stop his endeavor so far. He is hard working and as zealous regarding his duty as he was 13 years ago. Lieutenant Colonel Nitesh Agarwal takes pleasure and pride as a man whom Mother India chose for herself.



*Note: Daddy, you have molded and shaped me all these years. I know you have great expectations for me, and I will forever try to live up to them. I am sure I will make you proud of me one day. Thank you for everything. You are one of a kind father. I love you my hero. Jai Hind*

# Kindergarten Graduation 2017





*"I came to the USA in mid-August to attend St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. I have attached the essay I wrote for my application. I'm nervous and scared about all the inevitable challenges, but I'm really excited about learning. I have started reading the Iliad, which is fascinating. When he heard this Mr. Lauenstein said, "finally, one of my students!" When he heard that I am even starting to learn some ancient Greek, he fainted!"*



*As I head out on this new odyssey, I thought I would reach out to friends to ask if you have any recommendations or words of wisdom or warnings. If you have family or friends in the Annapolis area, I'd love to have a coffee with them. Please email me at: [shweta.agarwal@taktse.org](mailto:shweta.agarwal@taktse.org).*

*Over my last few weeks in Sikkim, I thought of every possible thing that could go wrong. The thought of being a stranger in a strange land made me extremely anxious. But I am also looking forward to studying astrophysics and literature, and maybe even working in a planetarium! I am very grateful for this opportunity. I am really looking forward to exploring a new community, and taking a part of Sikkim with me on my journey."*

## **I am Shweta**

*by Shweta Agarwal, Taktse '17*

As a child in Sikkim, I loved the million-faced gods of my Hindu family, the gentle flicker of diyas (little earthen lamps) and the promises of safety that the pantheon offered. I spent hours in the glowing shrine room with Vishnu, Shiva, and Ganesh, seeking protection, offering delicacies and prayers. My days often began with my Nani (maternal grandmother), filling copper bowls with holy water and offering them to the rising sun under her gentle guidance.

Devout Nani, illiterate, and completely dependent on her husband, made sure that her daughters got the best education at St. Joseph's Convent and also ensured they learned to pray to the inclusive gods who seemed to be making an English-Christian education possible. Marriage was inevitable of course, but her daughters would not be tied to their homes as she had been. They would speak English. They would be free.

After college, my mother wanted to earn her Master's degree. She was a teacher, passionate about writing poetry. She had escaped the fierce gravitational pull of our Marwari culture long enough, however and had to content herself with having a job against the wishes of the family she married into. Every day, I saw my mother half awake at four in the morning, allaying family concern by preparing meals for us, and getting the house in order before she went to work herself. Mocked by the extended family we lived with, she insisted my sister and I go to the best schools possible, that I learn English and that I choose to marry or not, pursue a master's or not.

As I grew older, watching the battlefield of my family, praying with my grandmother became harder. Questions began to plague me as I lit the diyas, which now seemed to flicker with rage. Why did my mother always prepare and serve all the meals? Why did the rest of the family deride her choice to work? Why did she starve herself for my father on certain holy days? Why did my sister have to

take a bath after the woman who cleaned the toilet touched her? These questions deeply perturbed my family and I quickly learned to keep silent, masking the internal disruption I felt during family rituals to avoid my father's anger, fueled with the knowledge that the next day would bring another day at Taktse, my school.



Taktse International School has been my second home since 4th grade. Taktse is where I learned to speak through slam poetry, felt the earth through my toes as I learned to plant rice in a village, saw Queen Elizabeth's mind through her poetry, and spent hours lost in the underworld with Hades, and white walkers with crystal eyes. At home I was asked to behave like an obedient child. At school I taught math to younger students and attended dinner-discussions with students from Harvard and Swarthmore. At home my family planned their lives around the lunar calendar, while at school I was studying orbital movement and gravitons. At home, I was asked to keep my questions to myself. At school I was asked to imagine myself a queen, to contemplate a stretching universe and the potential of merging galaxies, and to watch my own mind.

My journey at Taktse has taught me to appreciate Nani's devotion without being consumed by it. I have begun to understand that her religious obedience is a source of hope, joy and power. I can see now that I am the result of a quiet, incremental activism, an accumulation of decades, perhaps centuries, of nudges, prayers, and painful compromises by my maternal lineage, to get me to this sentence:

I am Shweta, a budding astrophysicist, a gravity defying poet, a questioning, agnostic granddaughter of the million faced gods, and the creator of a new Sikkim.

This is my nudge. This is my prayer.

## Seeking Resource People for Academic Session 2018!

Our Resource People Program helps fulfill Taktse's [mission](#) by merging the Best of the East with the Best of the West, enriching the lives of resource people, students and Taktse faculty members alike.

### Upper School (Grade 9 to Grade 12)

Poetry, classroom management, creative writing, economics, accounting, history, physics, math, chemistry, computer science and biology

### Lower and Middle School (KG to Grade 8)

Project-based learning, sports, math, student counselors, reading, Guided Reading, Leveled Literacy Intervention, Literature Circles, Great Books discussions, Responsive Classroom, and classroom management

Taktse is in session from February to December. Food and lodging are provided. Resource people stay at Taktse for a few weeks to a few months. We have found that it is really effective when resource people come for at least 6 weeks.

For more info, see: [www.taktsefellowship.org](http://www.taktsefellowship.org), or email Ms. Meenakshi at [meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org](mailto:meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org).



### Seeking Skype Tutors

Are you a high school teacher? Do you want to make a difference in the world?

We urgently need teachers to teach/tutor our 10, 11 and 12th graders over Skype. Following are the subjects in which we need help: chemistry, physics, biology, math, business studies, history, geography, literature, and computer science.

Class times can be flexible, according to the time difference. The number of classes (minimum of one per week) is flexible too.

If you are interested in volunteering or know a teacher, retiree or grad student who might be, please contact: Meenakshi Pradhan at: [meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org](mailto:meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org) or Malisha Chhetri at: [malisha.chhetri@taktse.org](mailto:malisha.chhetri@taktse.org).



### Seeking College Mentors

Are you interested in mentoring a Taktse student through the college application process? It involves bi-weekly Skype calls to help a student identify appropriate schools, negotiate the Common Application and financial aid process, and revise essays.

If so, please contact:

Professor Lisa Smulyan  
Swarthmore College  
610-328-8343

[lsmulya1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:lsmulya1@swarthmore.edu)

or Mr. Rinchen Pakhrin  
Taktse International School  
[rinchen.pakhrin@taktse.org](mailto:rinchen.pakhrin@taktse.org)



## The Kahani Tree

by Ms. Mamta Rai

"Laaaaa! It fell!" Loud shouts came from the upper courtyard. When I ran out to see what had happened, our favorite "kahani tree" (story tree) had fallen. It snapped right above the root and fell straight down, covering the stairs with its lush green branches. Fortunately, nobody was in harm's way when it came down.



I remember the tree since it was just a small tilted shrub. Over the years it had grown into a beautiful tilted tree. Entering the school each morning, we were greeted by this tree. This was the tree we had transformed into a kahani tree over the past two years during the annual book festival. We would decorate it with ballons, huge paper flowers and long colorful ribbons and, in its cool shade, we would read to students and parents.



The day the tree fell, it was drizzling and foggy. It seemed like the day was mourning for our loss.

I remember some teachers taking pictures beside the fallen tree. Maybe they wanted to capture the moment. Ms. Manisha (admin staff) was saddened by the loss of the tree. She felt that the teachers were having too much fun taking pictures and said, "I feel devastated and people are taking pictures." She wanted some kind of funeral for the tree. I asked if the tree could be planted somewhere else, but of course that was impossible. Some teachers thought it was a bad omen. They thought something terrible might happen, as Taktse is going through many changes this year following Mr. Lauenstein's departure. One of the students, Kenzo, ran up to me the next day and asked, "Why did the tree fall?" I told him it fell because of the rain. I hope it fell simply because of the rain and not because of a bad omen.

The tree was chopped up branch by branch. Greens were gathered and sacked to burn as incense, and the rest was cut into small logs – probably to be burned as firewood. I asked Mr. Sonam, one of the Taktse Trustees, if we could plant a new sapling. He responded by saying, "We should not plant something that will spread large roots. Maybe something light like a bush or a flowering plant."

Yesterday, to my surprise, I looked out the window and saw H. H. Gonjang Rinpoche with Mr. Sonam and other monks planting a new rhododendron sapling in place of our fallen kahani tree. I was super excited! I ran out and asked Sonam Sir how big it will grow. With a smile he said, "Not as big as the old tree, but it will bear flowers." I will certainly miss the kahani tree but I can't wait to see beautiful flowers blossom on our new rhododendron.

I named it "The Hope Tree."





*Ms. Jyotsna Brar (in red sari beside Taktse Principal Ms. Reshma Thapa) and the Leadership Team and Advisory Council in the new building. Ms. Brar was headmistress of the [Welham Girls' School](#) in Dehradun, India from 2000 to 2016, visited Taktse in August. The Welham Girls' School is among the most highly respected boarding schools in India.*



**Former Principal of Welham Girls School visits Taktse**  
*by Aman Singh, Taktse Governance Consultant*

Taktse Trustees and school leaders had the wonderful opportunity to host Ms. Jyotsna Brar in August. As the fifth principal of Welham Girls' School in Dehradun, Ms. Brar led its stellar growth and development from 2000 to 2016.

As part of their research, consultants working on governance at Taktse met with experienced leaders of schools like Taktse, including Ms. Brar, to learn about best practices at leading schools in India. The consultants told us about Ms. Brar's reputation as an institution builder and her deep understanding of residential school environments like ours.

We invited Ms. Brar to Taktse to learn from her and create opportunities for future engagement. Ms. Brar graciously accepted our invitation, arriving in Gangtok on August 27 and staying with us for four days.

Ms. Brar spent a full day with the Trustees, who shared their visions for Taktse and requested her perspectives on challenges that they foresaw for the school. They discussed a wide range of issues including budgeting, tuition, compensation structures, and organization of the Trust and its relation with school leadership. They also discussed the challenges of scaling up, adding a new Board of examination, and legal and contractual issues.

This was followed by a visit to the school campus and meeting with school leaders. As co-creators of the school, Ms. Brar acknowledged the school leaders as pioneers. She said they should be prepared to face numerous changes and challenges that will come as the school grows and attracts more senior students. The school leaders sought her advice on a wide range of concerns spanning academic management, administration and residential life. To motivate students, she urged school leaders to create a culture of high expectations for academic excellence.

When dealing with behavioral issues, she said we should try to relate to a student who has erred in judgement or conduct as one person to another. She asked the leaders to appreciate that every instance of misconduct indicates pain or frustration in the mind and heart of the student, so we must engage compassionately with such students.

As Ms. Brar was visiting Gangtok after many years, Ms. Yangchen Dolma Bhutia took her on a sight-seeing tour. Ms. Brar has a keen interest in Buddhism so she was delighted to start the day with a special meeting with Gonjang Rinpoche. She then visited the Rumtek Monastery and the Institute of Tibetology at Chorten Monastery. She attended the evening chant session at the Palace Monastery and then finished the day with a dinner hosted by the Trustees.

For all of us who met with Ms. Brar, it was a great learning experience. She has offered her full support to Taktse on all school matters. We hope she will continue to associate with us and guide us with her great experience in the years to come.



## Planting Rice in Sajong

For the past nine years, Taktse teachers and students have been taking a trip up the winding roads of Rumtek to plant rice seedlings on the flooded terraces of Sajong.

40 teachers and 35 students took that pilgrimage again this year, on a beautiful Sunday morning, to plant, plough, level the field, run around and end the day's work with mud fights.

A big thank you to our Trustee Lokbabu Sir, and his family for their generosity and graciousness, and for welcoming the Taktse family into their hearts and home, year after year.

We can't wait to go back and harvest the seeds of our strenuous efforts. See you soon, Sajong!

