

# The Saturday Paper

## LIFE

The rigours of editing Wikipedia brought rewards for the both the teacher and her class of Bhutanese nuns, as they work to bring the country's culture and traditions to local as well as global readers. By *Bunty Avieson*.

## The Bhutanese nuns editing Wikipedia to share their culture

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Bunty Avieson with women from the Tenchen Choeling Buddhist College for Nuns in Bhutan.

CREDIT: BUNTY AVIESON

Sitting amid the gently decaying walls of a 14th-century monastery, perched high on the roof of the world, I am privy to a rare sight – a monk bending low to pour tea for a nun. The learned principal of this Bhutanese monastery is in his 50s and senior in the monastic hierarchy. Yangden is just 21, with three more years of philosophical study ahead of her. These look like the genteel manners of any Bhutanese host – who will offer tea, food, a bed or the shirt off their back if you need it. But this solicitude for the nun, and indeed for her nine “sisters” who have just dropped in on their monastic neighbours, points to something else.

Feminism has found its way to the furthest reaches of this remote Buddhist kingdom. Change isn't being driven by the nuns, who for centuries have served the monks and been treated poorly right across the Himalayas. It is coming from the very top, the office of His Eminence, the Je Khenpo, head of the monastic body. This portly, middle-aged man may not look particularly radical – presiding over ancient ceremonies from his ornate golden throne – but he is leading this feminist shift. These nuns, sipping tea and helping themselves to biscuits on a Friday afternoon, are part of it.

Four years ago, 15 monks were moved out of their retreat overlooking Paro Valley, to make way for them. The site, 3500 metres above sea level, contained a temple, some housing and a couple of ramshackle outhouses. For 18 months the nuns worked hard to turn it into a *shedra*, a Buddhist college. They hauled stone on their backs from a nearby quarry, chopped down trees and cleared brush to make a football field, built a greenhouse, planted marigolds, chillies and vegetables, and painted and outfitted new dormitories. When it was ready, 65 nuns, aged 11 to 49, moved in. A *Khenpo* (principal) was appointed, along with a couple of senior monks to teach Buddhist philosophy. And the newly renamed Tenchen Choeling Buddhist College for Nuns got down to business.

The nuns follow a traditional monastic schedule starting at 5.30am, with a rigorous program of classes, study, prayers, ritual practice, philosophy debates and chores, before bed at 9pm.

Except for today. As a rare treat, 10 have permission to take me for a hike to the sacred temple in the neighbouring monastery. It is intended as a thank you. Over the past week I've been teaching them how to edit English Wikipedia. For four-and-a-half hours each day, we have worked together in the nunnery's new computer lab, learning the rules of referencing, plagiarism and copyright.

For the nuns, joining the global pool of volunteers who edit the free online encyclopaedia is a means to an end. Contributing to pages about Bhutanese history and culture helps them understand the logistics of the platform. The real prize is then to develop the Dzongkha Wikipedia, in the national language of Bhutan.

There are more than 330 different language editions of Wikipedia. The English version is by far the largest, with more than 6.7 million articles on every conceivable topic. In September 2023 alone the website was visited more than 11 billion times, making it one of the top five on the internet and the only one in the top 50 that is a non-profit.

*In just one week they improve 28 articles about their country, create two new ones and add 26 references across both English and Dzongkha Wikipedias.*

Dzongkha Wikipedia is one of the smallest, with just 237 articles – slightly more than Canadian Cree (158) but fewer than West Greenlandic Kalaallisut (243). Founder Jimmy Wales launched the platform in 2001 and explained his vision as: “Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge.”

The monastic body sees the platform’s potential. While schools teach both English and Dzongkha, English brings cultural dilution with Western ways of thought. The education division of the monastic body, the *Tshuglag*, wants Bhutan’s 789,000 people to be able to read about their own country in their own language, rather than the Lonely Planet version.

The lessons have been challenging. I know just one Dzongkha word, *kuzuzangpo* (hello), and the nuns’ English is limited. They don’t watch television, listen to radio or read newspapers, let alone follow social media – they are only allowed access to their phones from after lunch on Saturday to bedtime on Sunday. Yangden, who has the best English, is appointed my personal assistant/translator. She left school and her farming family at 14 when she chose to become a nun. She looks forward to getting her mobile phone on weekends. Once she has done her chores, she likes to watch *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, because they make her laugh.

When the nuns turn on their computers each morning, the opening pages are a sea of headlines and images covering the Israel– Hamas war, revelations from Britney Spears’s memoir and polls about dating. I flinch at the intrusion into our other-worldly haven, but they don’t seem to notice. They are equally uninterested in what is happening 90 minutes’ drive away in the capital city of Thimphu. Bhutanese media is reporting a visit by Richard Branson, who arrived by private jet to meet local entrepreneurs. Also making news is the opening night of *The Monk and the Gun*, by a Bhutanese director whose last film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*, made it to the Oscars. The glitterati of Thimphu, including the Queen of Bhutan, turned out to pay homage to this son of Bhutan. For the nuns, though, Thimphu is as far from their world of prayer, study and contemplation as Sydney.

Progress in the lab is initially slow. To register as an editor on Wikipedia requires creating a user name, then a password, typing it twice, and providing an email address. Half the nuns are locked out of the site on the first day. I have brought resources in English that meet Wikipedia’s rigorous referencing criteria. Facebook and blogs are not accepted, but books by Bhutanese scholars, respected local newspapers and online academic sources are. I explain that everything they add to a page must have a credible, published source. Wikipedia is not written by topic experts; its reliability comes from its referencing. I try to explain plagiarism and copyright. Not everything is taken on board, partly because of language challenges and partly because notions of copyright are meaningless to the nuns. One adds a long paragraph about a famous Thimphu temple, copied straight from a book; another inserts a personal tribute to a monk in Thimphu who helps youths with drug problems.

Before I have a chance to fix these editing transgressions, however, the Wikipedia community steps up. Within minutes editors have undone the additions, leaving comments on the nuns’ new user pages to explain why and offer advice.

Wikipedia editors have been criticised for being hostile to newcomers, and I have been walloped a few times. Research shows the cohort has come to be dominated by white, Western men in the global north, who are likely to be technically skilled, white-collar. Bias against women, the global south, ethnic minorities and the LGBTQIA+ community has been demonstrated in their decisions. However, none of that is on show this week. The nuns are delighted to instantly be part of this virtual global community.



The rigour of the nuns' monastic education, with its emphasis on memorisation, becomes clear when we start editing Dzongkha Wikipedia. We download the Dzongkha font, which has 30 consonants and four vowels and, with the click of a mouse, can be matched to the keys on a roman keyboard. Within minutes of looking at a Dzongkha keyboard online, they are expertly typing away on the roman keyboard.

The nuns are bright, industrious and very funny – they love to tease each other and the computer lab often erupts with laughter. In just one week they improve 28 articles about their country, create two new ones and add 26 references across both English and Dzongkha Wikipedias.

After we finish tea, we thank the monks for their hospitality and start the hour-long hike back to the nunnery. The women toss and swirl their red robes over their shoulders, laughing and calling to each other. Yangden makes the most of having her mobile phone, first calling an aunty on FaceTime to tell her she has learnt to edit Wikipedia, and then her friend, a Vietnamese nun she met in India. We all shout *kuzuzangpo* to them both.

The track between the monastery and the nunnery is new. The nuns built it to connect the two sacred temples and already it is being used by a group of scouts and their leaders. Yangden says it took three weeks to chop down the trees, move boulders and clear a path through the dense, thorny bushes. I am grateful that in our increasingly troubled world, they are here, dedicating themselves to a spiritual life, gaining respect and opening new paths to enlightenment.

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