

# White khari on black slate

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Radhika, 57, first came to Bandipur, Tanahun, as Krishna Pradhan's young bride. Her brothers-in-law carried her in a *tamdani* (palanquin) for 12 hours from Khoplang Bazaar, Gorkha, after the wedding. 'So many people came to see me! It was a sunny day and the town was bustling but it was nothing compared to Khoplang Bazaar,' she says. Bandipur is her home now but Khoplang still holds the joy of her girlhood days.

When we first meet Radhika in Bandipur, it has only been 15 days since her father passed away. She sits by the window, light streaming in, weaving threads for worship, hands busy, brow furrowed, pausing between memory-triggered laughter and grief-filled sentences. Though her days are filled with mundane activities like tending her garden and watching television, life has suddenly picked up momentum. In another few days, she and her husband are flying to London to visit their daughter and newborn grandchild.

Taking such life-changing moments in one's stride is a challenge and Radhika finds solace in small things sprinkled around the day. She still wakes up at six a.m. and drinks a cup of black tea, a ritual perpetuated from her childhood in Khoplang where her father sold sweet-smelling tea. 'Even now, I can still smell it in my heart,' she says.

Bandipur and Khoplang Bazaar were points on the old route between Kathmandu and Pokhara before the construction of the Prithivi Highway. The first was the district headquarters of Tanahun before Damauli. The second was a glorious town before its inhabitants drifted away and people began to refer to it as Khoplang Bhanjyang for lack of a bazaar.

'Khoplang was a town, modern for its day,' recalls Radhika. The houses there had many storeys and the shops were always busy. **People said that a Bandipurey's hat fell off his head when he saw the tall houses in Khoplang.** Today, there isn't much left of the bazaar and the tall houses are empty frames, leftovers of a fire that destroyed 15 houses. Radhika was 16 years old then, old enough to help carry water to put out the fire, her feet bleeding. Old enough to remember the fear and panic that gripped the townspeople.

'It was during a wedding. Somebody was cooking *roti*, and the wooden kitchen caught fire. The cook picked up a pitcher of what she thought was water and threw it on the fire, but it was alcohol, which made it worse,' says Radhika.

Dust and smoke engulfed the area for many days. By the time the fire was brought under control, half the bazaar was charred ruins. Many cattle and people died in the fire. Some valuables were salvaged but they didn't amount to much. Many inhabitants left to make a fresh start and Khoplang was never the same again.

Radhika's childhood home in Khoplang was a rest stop for many travellers. People were always knocking on their door, asking for food or shelter. 'There would be people in our front yard and sleeping on our porch. Some spoke our language, some were bizarre, they cooked and ate frogs. Most of them looked dirty and weary,' she remembers.









Among those who stayed at her house was the Crown Prince Birendra and his brothers. His entourage was travelling to Gorkha's Kalika Temple and needed a place to stay. So it was that two dozen people stayed over at Radhika's house. 'I remember them talking and laughing and singing in the evening,' she says, 'My mother gave them some *raksi* to drink and the next day they took their leave. They gave my father a letter and told him to go to Kathmandu.' The letter would have granted Radhika's father a piece of land in Kathmandu but he never claimed it.

Radhika's father was a religious man who sang hymns and read the Hindu holy texts regularly. He was also a merchant and travelled often to Kathmandu to buy coconuts, candies and tea. Money wasn't as convenient to transport then. Radhika remembers watching her father lay out mats on which to count the huge coins which he had porters carry.

'My father was a progressive man,' says Radhika. 'In an era when education wasn't encouraged, especially for girls, he sent all of his children to school. I learned to read, write and do sums.' Radhika went to school for two years before dropping out. Among her classmates was future Maoist leader and finance minister, Baburam Bhattarai.

**'Baburam was smart. He wore red earrings and studied really well. When we dropped out, he went to Luitel School,'** she says.

She liked to learn and she liked to write. At age nine, she walked barefoot for two days with her father to get white *khari* stones from Narayanghat. There were no shoes back then. As she walked with her father through the jungles, she spotted deer, and even tigers. She remembers growing weary and her father stopping to exclaim, 'Look *maiya*, a motor car!' The pick-up truck was the first vehicle Radhika saw and rode on. They hitched a ride to Hetauda then walked the rest of the way on the old byroad to Kathmandu.

'You could see Dharahara clearly from Thankot then. Father pointed it out and told me it was the tallest tower. We walked into the city and stayed near Dharahara, in a *paati* where one could rest, with a stone tap, and ate *kheer* for dinner,' says Radhika. A few days later, they stayed in the premises of the Shobha Bhagawati temple. Radhika remembers the clear waters of the Bishnumati, watching the smoke rise from the funeral pyres along the river's banks, the fires reflected in the river's calm surface. She returned home with vivid memories and a bag full of *khari*.

Radhika's education came to an end when she entered her teens. The townsfolk feared that if girls were given too much education, they would write love letters and elope. She began herding goats and buffaloes full time and hanging out with children who did the same. They went swimming and sunbathing on the rocks before returning home to cook and look after siblings. One day, she got home to find a young man sitting by the fire talking to her uncles. One of the uncles later approached her father with a marriage proposal for Radhika. She herself was not told anything until the morning of her wedding, when her mother asked her not to go out because the wedding procession was coming for her. Radhika was given

new clothes and her first pair of shoes. There were no ornaments and no dowry.

'I did not know what to think so I didn't think very much. I sat in the balcony watching people while mother combed my hair. Everything felt very sudden,' says Radhika. The next thing she knew, her brothers-in-law were carrying her to Bandipur and following tradition, she and her husband walked back to her home in Khoplang for her first visit as a married woman. An introvert by nature, she kept quiet while her husband did most of the talking. Upon their return to Bandipur, she kept to herself, trying to adjust to living in her husband's joint family.

Krishna took her on walks to see the place but even though Radhika was from the hills, she wasn't used to Bandipur's steep cliffs. 'I'd be literally on all fours and scared for my life. He'd laugh but help me get back home,' she says. They travelled to many places together. She went to Kathmandu where he worked as a thangka painter and marvelled at the changes that had taken place since she'd visited with her father. There were many more houses, though not as many as there are now. She remembers the old *madal* shop in Chhetrapati, the emptiness of Sat Ghumti, and walking through the fields of Thamel, picking *aiselu* berries along the way.

Marriage brought many changes to Radhika's life. She woke up at four a.m., drank black tea, cooked, cleaned, fed others and did everything that needed to be done. Three years later, she had her first child. 'A daughter and everybody loved her. It was a big deal for me but my husband was happier! He made things for her himself and bought stuff all the time,' she laughs. They had two more daughters and a son. Even though her husband was a teacher, Radhika herself taught her children what little she knew. She would sit in the yard and give them white *khari* to write with on black slate, like she had once done.

**Their children have all left home now. One daughter is in America, one in England, and one in Nepal. Their son is in Australia. Their grandchildren are all over the globe.** Krishna still teaches at Notre Dame, a local school, and Radhika helps him run a hostel on the side. The couple keep up with their children through phone calls and the Internet, and have plans to visit all of them when they can.

The day before the Pradhans leave for Kathmandu en route to London, Radhika is sitting by the window again, her face brighter and her voice warmer. She has finished weaving hundreds of threads that will serve as lamp offerings and is packing them in neat bundles before placing them in a plastic bag.

'Time goes by so swiftly, things change before your eyes without you even knowing. This once-bustling town emptied and is trying to get back on its feet,' she says, referring to Bandipur's latest incarnation as a tourist destination. She holds up a handful of threads she's twisted into a bundle and says, 'They say you can't get these in London so I'm taking them with me. You never know what you might not find.' ©



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