

# Skepseis

The Political Science and Sociology Programme Newsletter

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*"We are yesterday's children, today we are tomorrow's parents' responsible for our nation and for laying the foundation for the next generation. Remember, the future will reflect what we do today."*  
 - His Majesty the king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk

## Editorial

Of the many things the pandemic has taught, one is the importance of science – the need for robust investment both in science, and science education. Reporting about Bhutan's success in battling COVID-19, a piece in *The Diplomat* rightly noted: 'The country's subsequent rapid mobilization was strongly informed by science,' alongside other factors.

Taking this to another level, Australia government, on June 18, overhauled university fees. *ABC News* thus reported: 'The cost of studying humanities at [Australian] university is set to double, but "job-relevant" course fees will be slashed under an overhaul of tertiary education.' The "job-relevant" course here referred to, largely excludes humanities and social sciences.

Science, without doubt, helps explain and understand how the natural world works. It solves and alleviates the society's problem. In the context of the current pandemic, innovation in science would help people live longer and healthier lives. But, is staying alive the whole purpose of human?

We witness this recurring downplay of the purpose and importance of humanities and social sciences by many states and societies. Studies suggest, this viewpoint, enforced by higher pays for persons with STEM education, has led to fewer people studying humanities and social sciences. In the most basic sense, this would mean our society would run itself 'technically' without regard to just why we are a society, and for what purpose.

While science allows us to help people live longer and more comfortably, social science and humanities help people worth living their lives. One doesn't, and cannot, make sense without the other. Humans cannot have meaning if they are dead, but society by itself, without meaning is insufficient and pointless. Even so, why is that people with STEM education are paid more? The answer lies in the power of the market. There already is a disparity on how the subjects are perceived. That also tells us, humans today, largely are ready to pay more to stay alive than to make sense of their lives. People are more terrified of being sick and dying than being ignorant and wasting their lives. This drives the market value in a monetized world.

One cannot hope for human society to thrive while on one hand, we eviscerate humanities and social sciences. Without asking questions about the nature of what is true and good, how to work for what is just and what is beautiful, we make ourselves not only banal but vulnerable to our own and others' worst tendencies. If we want a flourishing human community, we need to cultivate an interest and invest in both hard science and soft science, we need to rethink this massive imbalance.

— Roderick Wijunamai, Editor

## From the Desk of the Programme Leader

This was an unusual semester, to say the least. The campus looked empty and rather depressing without students, while faceless teaching and online learning came with a large range of challenges. As the semester progressed, most students were largely able to settle into this new mode of learning, even as they often had to juggle their lessons, readings and assignments amid family and other responsibilities at home. For our final year students in particular, to have to complete their graduation away from the college was a bitter pill to swallow. Many spoke of themselves as unlucky. However, it is too early to say whether they were in fact unlucky. They, after all, have had five semesters of in-class teaching, which is something their juniors cannot be altogether certain about. What seems certain, instead, that the current scenario is more than a passing moment, but will have a lasting impact on how teaching and learning is conceived.

Together with faculty and students, Skepseis also transitioned online. This semester witnessed the third Skepseis distinguished guest-lecture, organised online. The speaker was Professor Bengt Karlsson, from Stockholm University, who in a lively and engaging lecture spoke on: 'Planting Hope: Food Sovereignty and Indigenous Crops in the Eastern Himalaya.' While the Skepseis team could not meet in person, and the usual movie nights and other interactive gatherings could not be organised, its members nevertheless kept the spirit of Skepseis alive through online events, as well as the crafting of this fourth Skepseis newsletter, which features a series of contributions by students as well as has input from some members of the faculty. I would like to thank the editorial team for their perseverance and ingenuity in putting this together against many odds. I wish you all a happy reading.



— Dr. Jelle JP Wouters, PL

## Social Experience of Education

The pandemic has led to widespread experimentation around education. The transition to online teaching-learning birthed a range of views, while some believe online learning will result in poor user experience, others believe in a hybrid model of education, many tout its benefits relating to efficiency and effective communications. The most striking challenge, however, to this transition is the digital divide – the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access. How to bridge this gap will be the preoccupation of tech companies and government institutions. There is a more pressing question that demands critical engagement and that is, ‘What kind of society or educated adult population will e-learning create/produce in the long run?’

In the current situation, e-learning is critical and immediate. However, education is not just about reading textbooks/books and remotely learning theories/concepts. Education is about unlearning as much as it is about learning. What a live classroom or university environment provides is a channel for social interaction, social experience, and unlearning varied knowledge that stems from uniformed and bias bases.

Many of the lessons from the text and books are challenged or affirmed when students are exposed to diverse experiences when they are put together in an environment with their fellow students. We need to ponder whether e-learning can replicate this rich source of face-to-face learning with the same intensity and meaningfulness. Education without the social experience of it can amplify the preexisting inequalities and *parti pris*, resulting in an absence of empathy and humility.

— Adazia Ophrii, Associate Lecturer

## [Online] Learning in the Time of COVID

For the first two weeks of e-learning, I took things easy and felt I had the liberty to learn whenever I wanted to. This liberty, however, quickly turned to laziness and procrastination. I began to not learn effectively regularly. While I never failed to participate in the online discussion forums the teachers hosted, I could feel that I was unable to really address or understand the discussions brought up in entirety. This wasn't a problem for me, during the normal classes.

The material provided to us was not really heavy or difficult as I retrospect. Our teachers had put in a lot of work to make sure whatever was put up online was easy to understand. There was a clear effort to make sure that the materials provided was almost what would have been otherwise taught our classroom. What makes e-learning challenging, I realised, over the course of three month online learning, is a lack of discipline. Many of us do not spend the same amount of time we do in our classrooms, after learning went online. In our homes, we get carried away with our lives and tend to forget that we are still college students, unless an assignment was around the corner. When deadlines come by, and we have no option but to work extra hard, it makes us feel that we're swamped with work, and that we have too much to do.

In a time that calls for the highest discipline with washing hands, maintaining safe distances and generally following the directives of health officials, as students, we need to maintain a similar discipline in learning every day. It surely is difficult, but it will undoubtedly benefit us, if do our fair share of learning on a regularly, especially as we move into an increasingly competitive and tech-savvy environment.

— Kuenzang Norbu, Year III

## Lessons from Pandemic

COVID crisis has disrupted the whole of my life plan. I now have to delete, edit, reschedule some of the milestones I wanted to accomplish in the process. It is an anxious moment to think about, but the positive side of this adversity is on the other hand heart-warming. As I look back, I am grateful, I have learnt a great deal, in last few months, which otherwise would not have been the case in normal days. This pandemic has given me a great learning opportunity in disguise. Such a time as this has given me an opportunity for sharing, for caring, and a time for us all to change for better.

This time of crisis, as we say, not only caused a health crisis but also affected many aspects of our lives. While we are mostly absorbed in talking about COVID-19, we should not lose sight of our social aspects. It, of course, is important to stay safe, but equally important to stay aware and pay attention to the new development of social issues affecting our freedom, human rights and well-being. Besides my regular college studies, I have been working with about 20 volunteers online, campaigning for the elimination violence against children at home. I feel blest that I have able to be a part of *Project Chikhar*, a youth-led initiative carrying out series of activities to help children continue their learning and socialization process through online activities. With this, I would like to convey to my fellow friends, learning to build our resilience is one thing, contributing and being part of the change we want to see in society is another. As a member of a society, we need to do both.

— Tshedrup Dorji, Year I





### Pandemic during Exchange



It has been quite a ride, from the day I got selected for a yearlong exchange program, at one of the top ranked liberal arts colleges listed by Forbes in America, to this day, having experienced what I looked forward to. Everything has felt like a dream. Nothing seem mundane in the Centre College campus. As my exchange programme draws to its end, my heart is filled with deep gratitude, to both RTC and Centre, for the amazing opportunity. I can't help but feel sad. The programme has taught me so much, gave me a great deal of experience, and imprinted in my heart so many memories. Centre as an institution has simply elevated everything I learned.

Towards the end, the pandemic came as a shock to everyone. The campus started to look deserted, and next thing, we're on Zoom attending classes. From classroom to just my laptop screen, for sure, it did not feel normal, neither to the students nor to the professors. Every single class I sat through, I wished things returned to normal. But as the days passed by, normalcy switched and the new way of life started to feel natural.

Meanwhile, as things went on, I was on the brink of losing my mind, but with the support and care Centre provided, I can say thankfully say, I retained my sanity! Even as we move along in this uncertainty, I am reminded of what Lincoln once said, "We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses."

— Vebaka Bhandari, Year II

### Story of Pandemic in Japan

When I first left home for my exchange programme to Osaka University of Economics and Law, in Japan, I was filled with excitement. In no time, before the beginning of our second semester in Japan, COVID-19 started to spread like wildfire. It quite daunting to think there is a virus outbreak with no cure, while in a foreign country, with no family members to rely on. What's worse? I was in a country where people hardly spoke English. I was beginning to imagine things: going to a hospital to get checked, and no one understanding you and vice-versa. Quite comedic too (in a way).

Shortly after every social media platform was filled with news of the virus. I was reading about the measures taken by different countries around the world to tackle the pandemic. Much to my surprise, Japan had not taken any action at all. So the atmosphere here was 'chill.' People went about their daily activities like the pandemic never happened. I then started to feel more anxious. Japan had only banned public festivals at most, and that was it. Japan enforced a month long lock-down beginning April (which got went on until end of May, Thank god!). This lockdown, however, was not like the ones carried out in Europe, Australia or America. People were still going to work, public transport still available, and everyone out on the street. Back in RTC I lived on campus so I had no problem going to classes, but here in Japan, I take classes in two different campuses which is about 20 mins bus ride from each other. It's not much of a hassle really, I



just don't like commuting. So I am quite when classes went online classes. I can just get out of my bed, put on my laptop and Voila! I'm in class! Exquisite, don't you think?!

— Tashi Peldon, Year II

### Erasmus+ [Faculty] trip to Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (January 2020)

The Erasmus+ trip to the Netherlands was also my first trip outside South Asia. Accompanied by my senior colleagues Dr. Dolma, Mr. Roderick and Ms. Jaja, it was a memorable one. Four of us, as a team, made the trip both educational and fun. Classroom observations, lunch seminars, library tour, faculty and student interactions... our host university had planned them all. What particularly impressed me was that, everybody had clear and specific goals set, and they worked towards it.

We would have missed out experiencing an equally (or perhaps more) exhilarating experience, had it not been for our PL, Dr. Jelle, who arranged for us, a stay in his village for a few days prior to our formal exchange programme. Rijsbergen, that's his village name, located in the border of Belgium. Mr. and Mrs. Wouters were very kind, and their house very warm with their hospitality and their European Bukhari. On any fine evening, one can easily walk or cycle across to a nearby village in Belgium from Rijsbergen without even noticing the borders. After our exchange programme, I and Mr. Roderick headed further east, and made a visit to our old colleague, Mrs. Marieke, in Berlin. The trip, in all, comprised of a tour across seven counties. Just in one month, I came back refreshed, inspired, and loaded with stories to tell.

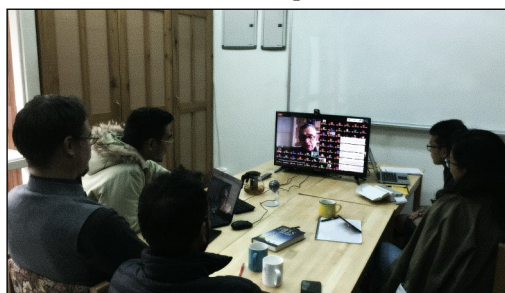
— Tshering Wangchuk, Associate Lecturer

### Planting Hope: Skepseis' Third Distinguished Lecture

Speaking on *Food Sovereignty and Indigenous Crops in Eastern Himalayas*, Professor Bengt G. Karlsson from Stockholm University delivered online the third Skepseis Distinguished Lecture. The talk began with how the current pandemic has reminded us of the vulnerability of our global society. He then went on to outline the lecture in three sections; multi-species studies, food sovereignty and heritage plants.

Humans have had a significant impact on nature and the environment causing the extinction of multiple animals and releasing invasive alien species into nature. Humans must thus understand that they are not the only living being in the world, and that they are a part of an ecological system. However, it is not only animals and humans that we need to understand, we must understand our relation to plant life as well. Our history is a multispecies story with interdependence with plant life. For that, we need to understand seeds, to learn more about our own histories and roots, in terms of how we are connected through what we plant in where we live.

According to Prof Karlsson, the term food sovereignty emerged in context of Latin America in small farms of the peasants who were struggling against Neo-liberalization of food and agriculture. In short, food sovereignty is understood as sustainable agriculture. Prof Karlsson also mentioned a question raised by an indigenous scholar: 'How can we be sovereign if we does not produce food?' This was in relation to the traditional ethnic movement



in Northeast India over territorial sovereignty. He says that the drive for sovereignty over territory will go on but we have to think about our sovereignty and capacity of growing our own food. Agriculture, he says, is more than just business. It concerns the way of life, and here the question concerns control over land, about plant materials, seed sovereignty, access to credit and knowledge, among others. All in all, he proposes, production should be local and it should avoid long distance transport.

— Dechen Sonam Choden, Year III

### Women Entrepreneurs in Textile Industry: A Case Study of Craft Bazaar (Research Snippet)

Until recently, Bhutanese women could hardly be seen doing business. Like in many other counties, business was a domain for men. The stereotyped notion of women as 'home-makers,' or that a woman's activity should be within the walls of home are now rebutted. Women are now seen as, capable of venturing into independent businesses. Yet, I wondered, what are the motivations of women undertaking entrepreneurship in textile industry? Further, what might be some of the challenges they face in their endeavour? Or, why many women are conglomerated in the textile industry? These wonders became my research questions.

Many of these women, I found, come to textile industry mainly out of economic necessity, the need for economic independence, or because their marital relationship breakdown. These women believe undertaking business will improve their situation and that in turn would help ameliorate their children's and family members'. Very few women who are also younger and more ambitious are self-taught designers and undertake entrepreneurship as their own interest in a somewhat larger scale.

On the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, the most common were the lack of financial capital, intense competition and a lack of training opportunities. To overcome financial capital, many of these women borrow money from informal money lenders, at a rate much higher than formal sector landings. Another challenge is the steady rise in competition among themselves. Other challenges include, lack of training opportunities, work-family conflict, government regulations and business uncertainty. Many studies I reviewed suggest that training is necessary to impart and raise entrepreneurial knowledge and skill, and consequently the success. In Bhutan, very few NGOs and government agencies provide training to these women in the textile industry.

Finally, why do these women entrepreneurs conglomerate in the textile industry? Wide known is the production of textile commodities generating income. The textile industry has served many women to become economically



and socially independent with income generation. Lesser known: textile industry, in the case of Bhutan, helps in the preservation of their culture, and these women entrepreneurs pride in it. Few upcoming, and more educated female entrepreneurs in textile industry are taking and turning Bhutanese textile fabrics to new heights, and into something unique. These women who identify themselves as designers own cottage-based design boutiques, while also developing innovative apparels, accessories and décor items.

— Tshering Wangmo, Year - III

**Interview with PL, Dr. Jelle JP Wouters (~ Samphelma Rigsel Yargay and Kuenzang Norbu)**

**SRY & KN:** Hi Sir, thank you for agreeing to interview you. We hear you have published quite a lot of books. Can you please give us the titles of the ones you have published? And, maybe briefly tell us what they were about?

**JW:** For the past years, I have carried out ethnographic and historical research in highland Northeast India, particularly among the Naga, which is a cross-border community in the Indo-Burma borderland. In terms of focus, my writings have concentrated on identity, territoriality, violent conflict, politics and social history. My latest book is a collection of essays titled *Nagas as a Society against Voting and Other Essays*. My earlier books were *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency* and two volumes I co-edited titled *Nagas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and *Democracy in Nagaland: Tribes, Traditions, Tensions*.

**SRY & KN:** That's quite a lot. So, what are the books that you are currently working on?

**JW:** I am currently working on a couple of smaller and bigger projects, amongst which is *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Highland Asia*, which I am putting together with a colleague based at the Arctic University of Norway. I am also working on another book with my former PhD supervisor, Professor TB Subba.

**SRY & KN:** What according to you is the most important part of writing or doing research?

**JW:** Doing research and writing are different things. Research needs to be inspired, in the sense of it addressing an original topic, or by approaching an already well-researched topic from a different angle. It also needs to be methodologically sound, in that sense that the data collected may be adjudged as authentic. The next step is to translate and transmit one's data into writing, and so in a way that is understandable and convincing. While doing this, it is also important to link and engage one's findings to wider theoretical frames and debates in the discipline.

**Contd. (next page)**

**Review of MADNESS (by Roald Dahl)**

MADNESS is a collection of ten short stories, which are domestically familiar, yet highlights a much darker side of human nature. The most 'maddening' tale for me was *Edward The Conqueror* and *William and Mary*. In *Edward The Conqueror*, Edward, the husband kills a cat because of its curious behaviour towards music, and his wife's affection towards the cat. One could say, he felt the cat was a threat to his relationship with his wife, or perhaps he thought that his wife was going to go mad if she kept insisting that the cat had a musical ear. Irrespective, the man killed a cat and believed his wife was the one going mad.

*William and Mary* is a tale of revenge. Mary, the wife, was always dominated by her husband, William. When the husband dies, she learns through a letter left by her husband that he had signed up for a medical experiment, where his brain was to be kept alive even after his death. She goes to visit her husband who is now a slimy grey blob of a brain floating in a basin, with a pair of eye in another bowl of water (through which he could see). The sight makes Mary pleasantly happy considering William could no longer control her life and tell her what not to do. So there she stood, taking a puff of her cigarette, which was not allowed before his eye; she could see the rage and fury of being disobeyed. What's more? Mary, having been wronged by her husband until the time of his death, decides to take revenge on him, by taking him back home and doing everything she was never allowed to.

There are other stories, which tells even darker side of human nature. Other stories include, a story of landlady who never let her guests leave, a man who unintentionally takes his own life out of greed, a boy whose love for pork gets him astray, and a few more. In short, Dahl understood human nature's darkest secrets, fear, and desires, which every person would be guilty of carrying.

— Tenzin Om, Year II

**Gabriel Abend's The Meaning of 'Theory'**

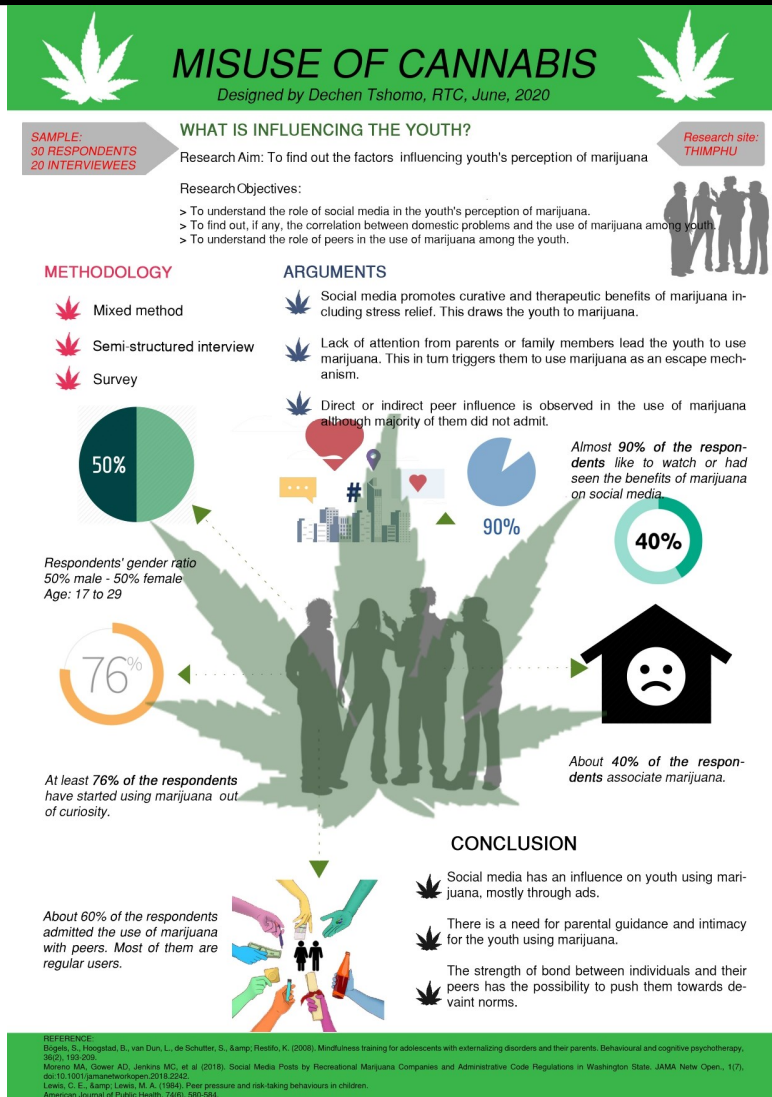
Abend's paper starts off by him stating how words such as 'theory', 'theoretical' and 'theorize' have long been part of the lexicon of sociologists yet his paper illustrates an existing discord of their meanings in the field of sociology. An example he cites is of social journals rejecting sociological research papers by labeling them 'atheoretical' and 'undertheorized' because they are 'not driven or informed by theory'.

Abend claims, sociologists need to get rid of the erroneous belief that 'there is only ONE definition theory can correspond to and anything other than that is an error.' This mistake, Abend says, is a 'Socratic Error' (Socrates is said to only set out to answer questions of the form, asking only the 'what is?' leaving no room for social interpretations such as 'what could this 'mean' to people?'). He further outlines a seven-tier definition of theory, as he tries to make clear that "theory" in the sociological language has several senses – each of which tries to pick out a different thing.'

Now, how do we now know what a good theory is? Abend points out that there are scientific theorists who reject 'ontological and epistemological pluralism' and reflect 'a bias in favor of quantitative sociology,' and also there are theorists who reject notions of scientific sociology as well. Who then is right in their definition? I would think this question goes back to 'What is theory?' further 'What are the qualifications for becoming a sociological judge/critic?' What does 'good' exactly mean? Cut short, the answer: a theory is good so long as the theory help give people perspective. It need not necessarily be agreed upon everyone; so long as it helps one make sense of any part of the social world, it is a good theory.

— Karma Pem Dema, Year II





# ART AND WOMEN

*Exemplifying life through art*



Samphelma Rigsel Yargay (103979)

## Research Themes:

1. Women, Art and Society
2. Revisiting Gender through Art
3. Women Artists in Contemporary Bhutanese Society

## Methods of data collection:

1. Semi-structured Interview
2. Survey Questionnaire

Sample Size: 24

Sampling Technique:  
Snowball sampling

## Research Aim:

To understand women's perception, opinions, and stand in contemporary art.

## Research Objectives:

1. To explore women's perception and opinion towards contemporary art
2. To understand how women is represented in art
3. To interpret gender and its influence in and through art
4. To find out the status women artists in contemporary Bhutanese society

# FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ART

Women are seen as an emotional being, or a cherry on a cake thus they claimed that their work are not taken seriously.

## INTERPRETING GENDER INFLUENCE IN ART

Although it is not the same scenario as before, most of the respondents believed that gender has a huge impact in art.

## WOMEN, ART AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY BHUTAN

Agreed that there was a existence of societal pressure not just as an artist but as a woman.

'ART CREATES A VISUAL EXPRESSION, WHERE PEOPLE PRESENT THEIR IDEAS. IT GIVES PEOPLE A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW SO THAT THEY CAN SEE THINGS FROM SOMEBODY ELSE'S PERSPECTIVE'

## CONCLUSION

It is concluded that gender was the issue why women artists were not as famous as male artists.

It is indeed true that there were societal pressure for women not just as an artist but women were either restricted or marginalized from many things, which man could do freely without being questioned. People are now taking interest in promoting women's talent through exhibition, galleries and studios. The encouragement are creating a slow yet effective balance in the roles of gender.

**Reference:** Bhutan Broadcasting Service (2016, March 30). In conversation with Bhutanese contemporary artist Zimbiri [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/1G8-xuChDo>  
Photo Credit: Imago: Retrieved from <http://www.zimbiri.com/>

## Interview with PL (contd. from Pg. 6)

**Best thing about research?** You never know on beforehand to where it will lead you. Findings always tend to surprise and lead to insights previously perhaps not thought about.

**Least favourite part?** That's easy. Transcribing!

**What do you remember about your first research project?**

My first substantial research project was probably in pursuit of my PhD degree. For this I carried out participant observation, a method we have variously discussed in your modules. I carried out two years of participant observation in two different Naga villages. I remember this period as a very instructive, interesting, but also as a thoroughly enjoyable time during which I gained many new friends and learned a great deal.

**How has that affected you on how you go about doing research now? How did you become increasingly interested in research?** What I have realized over the years is that ethnography can be very powerful in bringing to the fore perspectives and lived experiences, as it tells the stories of ordinary men and women. While ethnography comes with certain challenges, is certainly not perfect, and ideally should be complemented with other research methods, I have become quite convinced about its unique value and place in the social sciences.

**Last one. Which is your favourite piece among the ones you have published?** This is a little hard to say. But perhaps I should go for my book *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency*.





Dr. Jelle JP Wouters

*I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the graduating students. It was a pleasure getting to know each of you and to see you grow through the programme. Now that you have graduated it is up to you to take that knowledge and skills and do something worthwhile with it. In so doing, I hope you will prosper, but also stay humble and compassionate. My best wishes to each and all of you.*



Mr. Rabi Dhakal

*Despite this semester being different and difficult for you, you managed to cope up with it and completed the semester well. I wish every one of you have a healthy, happy and successful journey hereafter and smooth transition to all endeavours that you take up. All the best.*



Mr. Tshering Wangchuk

*Congratulations to all. I wish you all the success in your life. I am happy to see you made the first step towards independence and growth.*



Mr. Roderick Wijunamai

*Congratulations! Well done!*

*It's been a great pleasure walking the journey of knowledge with you. Even as you graduate and set your foot on a new journey, may you always overcome fear, make bold decisions, and live for the society. Wherever you are, be a human of character.*



Ms. Jaja Kipgen

*Carpe Diem! Congratulations to the 'Class of 2020' for being resilient and perseverant throughout this rather uncertain and turbulent semester. Despite all the odds and challenges, you have come a long way. My wish for each one of you is that you put your heart and soul in whatever you do. May your life be a journey of abundant learning, good health and triumphant achievements.*



Ms. Adazia Ophrii

*Congratulations on faithfully completing your three years of commitment to education. Education as you already know enables one to think and open up the mind to possibilities; hence, it is a gift rather than a mere advantage over others. May you use this gift well!*



Ms. Nipunika O Lecawasam

*Congratulations on your graduation and best wishes for your future! Take the time to celebrate three years of hard work and move on to the next exciting chapter of your lives!*