

“You are bridge to Chhairo”

Says Lama to 93 year old Sugata

At the age of 93, Sugata has returned to his Buddhist homeland in Kathmandu, along with hundreds of his hitherto unseen photographs, and the story of his long life.

The story of his Sugata's life, 'Bird of Passage', released last week by Mandala Publications, Kantipath, Katmandu, recounts the story of Sugata along with the last centuries dark ages. Born in 1911 in Germany, Sugata's protest against his time and pace culminated in his war time betrayal of Nazi Germany, when he risked his life and effectively ensured his rootlessness. The search for roots and meaning as well as freedom took him to the East, first to India and then to Nepal, where he became a Buddhist monk at Swaybhunath with Amritananda. Returning to his adopted country, Norway, he lectured on Buddhism, and began the slow process of unravelling and dealing with the sufferings of his past life.

Now preparing for 'nirvana' Sugata is divesting himself of his material life and closing up old circles. He has returned to Nepal to give his black and white photographs, taken between 1954 and 60 and never been seen in Nepal before, to sell and raise funds for the Chhairo Gompa, in Lower Mustang, a place he first visited in 1960. Then he came at the invitation of a Thakali merchant, Shamshe Sherchan who, ahead of his time, imaginatively anticipated a potential tourist interest in the Devil Dances, Sha Na, up in Tukche, along the Kali Gandaki. But at that time the Lamas did not want to commercialise their rites, and the hundreds of photographs, like the masks, were put away in boxes. Until now.

Revisiting Chhairo in 2001, to celebrate his 90th birthday while retracing the story of his life, Sugata saw with dismay the 200 year old Buddhist centre ravaged by time, nature and human hands. Through meeting Sashi Dhoj Tulachan, the son of the Thangka artist he met in 1960, Sugata offered the photographs to Chhairo as the first step to raise funds for its restoration and rehabilitation.

The exhibition and sale at Patan Museum, Kathmandu, was a huge success. The Thakali community turned out in force, eager to see again their landscape of origin, and remember those vibrant days. Many had an unexpected boon: daughters and grandsons found photographs of their fathers, sisters, brothers and uncles. Sons and grandsons of the followers of the Shivapuri Baba were happy to meet Sugata and talk once more of the Shivapuri.

Other photographs revealed surprising stories: like that of the Aghori Baba, Ramnath, who Sugata photographed meeting the plane bringing King Tribhuvan's body back from Switzerland before its cremation at Pathupathinath in 1954. His hunger strike inspired the King to found Tribhuvan University, the first in Katmandu. 'All these stories and family names will be collected and added to the photographs', said Rachel Kellett, co-writer of 'Bird of Passage' and organiser of the exhibition.

Financially the exhibition raised Rs85,000. This foundation is the start of the 10% the Chhairo Gumpa Restoration Project must raise locally to secure more substantial funding from the CRTP, (Cultural Restoration Tourism Project), based in the US, who enterprisingly use tourists to provide a model for alternative funding for restoration projects.

Sashi Dhoj, who plans to live up in Chhairo and teach his Thangka art of was delighted. 'You are our bridge to Chhairo', he said to Sugata. 'Now many are walking over the bridge to help us. Now soon the Gumpa will come alive again with Devil Dance: the triumph of good over evil, the destruction of all obstacles on our path.'

The exhibition and sale of over 400 photographs continues for one year at the Godavari Alumini Association (GAA) in Thamel, (which has several generations of Thakali's as alumini), at the invitation of Father Greg. 'Bird of Passage', the story of Sugata's life, can be purchased from Mandala Book Point, Kantipath. More information can be found at www.sugata.info.

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