

The first thing I remember about my life is I was an infant and was an object of affection of women of Kothia who wanted to take me in their laps in the front yard of our village home. I gather from one of my rare baby photos that I was a beautiful child adored by the village women.

There are no road signs or markers leading to Kothia in that forgotten and forlorn part of rural India near the Indo-Nepal border. On a silent night, one can hear the droning sound of incessant melody reciting the life of Sita. If you do, you have unmistakably arrived in Kothia. That is the distinctive trait of my village – the women of Kothia singing songs in praise of Sita in eloquent Maithili (a regional Indian language).

Sita suffered and led a miserable life despite her piousness and good deeds. Sita was an angel. Her legacy still lives among the women of Kothia who continue to suffer until this day despite their virtues and sacrifices.

Those women gave me a wonderful and a happy childhood.

My mother died when I was six months old. My responsibility was given to my aunt who still lives in that remote village. She took care of me until I was seven. She would never let me out of her sight and had an inseparable attachment towards me. I never knew that she was not my real mother until the day my father wanted to take me with him to a more sophisticated environment for my education and overall development. At that point, my aunt did not resist. She made this sacrifice for my betterment. Today at the age of eighty, she lives alone in the same remote village of India without any expectations from me.

While living in the village, I was the darling of all the women of Kothia. They all loved me and cared for me despite their own horrific and pathetic life. They brought joy and security to my life by adoring me. I owe my life, success and well-being to my aunt and all those women of the village who came into my life like angels.

Growing up with my aunt and uncle was the happiest time of my life. I lived in a village about 100 miles from Mount Everest. On a clear day, one could see the cap of Everest from there.

Ours was a crowded place. We had lots of visitors as both my uncle and aunt were extremely gregarious people. They used to accommodate and feed everyone.

I was a happy child. Everyone in the village loved and protected me. Whenever I needed shoes, I just ran to the village cobbler and got a pair made for myself. My uncle and aunt used to give them grain in return. Watching the jugglers come to the village or listening to the movie songs on the deafening amplifiers of a passing procession was the only entertainment. My friends and I would sneak out of home and jump streams and climb trees. We ran for miles or went to the graveyard in the hope of catching ghosts and then return home to a warm meal. The grains and vegetables came from our farm and the fresh catch from our own pond.

After leaving my village, I always felt like a caged bird that had lost its freedom. The next ten years were terrible. I was removed from the loving home of my uncle and aunt. Although I was provided a better material comfort in my father's home, emotional comfort was lacking.

In my father's home, I saw many modern amenities for the first time and was often compared to more sophisticated relatives and children of the friends of the family. I had to prove my worth. That was 1957. Sherpa Tenzing Norgay climbed Mt. Everest around that time. He was the first man ever to reach the highest peak in the world. Although that glory goes to Edmond Hillary, it was Tenzing who let him step there first.

Norgay Tenzing was my first hero. Unlike today's poster boys greatness was not imposed upon him. He didn't make statements by wearing ribbons nor was he promoted by any special interest group. He was a mortal figure of supreme significance to me. There were a lot of similarities between Tenzing's and my childhood.

Tenzing came from a large family in a village in Nepal. He was considered a lucky baby as the family crossed many hurdles after his birth. His childhood house was small and crowded. They ate the simplest food, but there was always enough. His family made clothing from yak wool and hides to keep warm during the winter. He had a very happy childhood until he came to know that his parents wanted him to become a lama (a Buddhist priest). He believed in Chomolungma (a Tibetan expression meaning to climb Everest or a mountain so high that no bird could fly over it) and that's what he did his whole life. Tenzing knew the dangers of climbing Everest. Thousands of Sherpas had perished in helping the mountaineers climb Everest. Tenzing later took Indian citizenship. When asked about his nationality, he said, "I was born in the womb of Nepal and brought up in the lap of India. I am both a Nepali and an Indian.

I never met Tenzing in person, but I remember his confident smile and his rugged but kind face. His personality had a unique combination of western squint and eastern immaculateness. After leaving my village, I always felt like a caged bird that had lost its freedom. I thought of Tenzing when yearning for freedom. We had a similar childhood, happy and full of innocence.

I left my childhood home and lived in many places because my father had a transferable job. Now I live in the U.S. Although I am an Indian by birth, I am also an American.

Climbing Everest those days was much more dangerous than space travel. Unlike space travel, the climbers were on their own without any guidance. They had to face deadly avalanches and blinding blizzards. They spent nights on sheets of ice in sub-zero temperatures. Every step taken could mean death. If they slipped on the sharp-pointed icy slopes, they could slide hundreds of feet before regaining a foothold. At times they would be in a free fall, flying headfirst down the mountain. But Tenzing didn't care. He only dreamed of Chomolungma. Tenzing had three lives. The first was as a child in Nepal in the village of Solo Khumbu. The second, lasting twenty years, was as a porter and mountain man. The third began on the day he came back from the top of Everest.

Like Tenzing, I also have lived three lives. My childhood was as described above. The next twenty years were terrible. I was removed from the loving home of my uncle and aunt. Although I was provided a better material comfort in my father's home, emotional comfort was lacking.

Tenzing had to lead a tough life in Darjeeling, India as he had to compete against many famous Sherpas, who had already made their names in the world of mountaineering. Tenzing saw trains and automobiles for the first time in his life.

I too was like a new Sherpa in my father's home. I saw many modern amenities for the first time and was often compared to more sophisticated relatives and children of the friends of the family. I had to prove my worth. Tenzing's life and struggle inspired me and gave me the needed jolt.

As for the third phase of my life, I still have to climb my brand of Everest. My Chomolungma is to be a good writer.

Tenzing had no formal training in mountaineering. I am an engineer by profession. English is my second language. I have to face the avalanche in the form of rejections, a blizzard in the form of competition, and falling rocks in the form of meager resources. But my first hero taught me that I should pursue my passion for the love of Chomolungma. I had to keep climbing without worrying about coming down to mortal glory.

Neema was our maid. She was very pretty, but belonged to a lower caste and was very poor. Her mother used to lament, "Beauty is a reward for the rich but it is a curse for the poor." Several male members of the village made passes at her and flirted with her. Her brother-in-law was a dipsomaniac who tried to rape her several times. Despite all that, Neema always met me with a smile and took care of me with utmost love and care.

Neema is still alive. She lives in the same mud house in my old village. She cannot see anymore. The last time I saw her, she could tell me by the sound of my footsteps.

Sonali, a widow and a social worker used to play peek-a-boo with me. She was regarded as inauspicious because she was a widow. People in the village used to hate her because her mission in life was the upliftment of other widows. She was raped by one of the upper caste males. Sonali later committed suicide when she found out that she was pregnant. I remember witnessing her dead body which lay untouched for days. No one would cremate her because she was considered to be an evil spirit.

Everyone thought that Ganga's wife was too beautiful to belong to her husband's family, but she got what her parents' dowry could afford. Ganga's wife was tortured by her mother-in-law while her husband lived in a far-away city to earn money for the family. Ganga died of cholera and his mother blamed it all on Ganga's wife who, according to the mother-in-law, had brought bad luck to the family. The mother-in-law tried to burn her alive and asked her to leave home. Ganga's wife, disfigured, ended up as a beggar in a nearby town. How can I forget her smile? I was the reason for that.

I always hated Kamla until I became old enough to understand her circumstances. She was the wife of Krishna, a poor laborer and mistress of Mohan Singh, the landlord. Mohan Singh kept her as collateral for a loan of money to her husband. Kamla always considered me as a role model for other children in the village and took pride in my academic achievements.

Upon the death of Mohan Singh, she ran a school in Mohan Singh's old house. I regret that I always misunderstood her and never paid attention to her. The school doesn't exist anymore.

Not much has changed in Kothia. Women there still live in a perpetual cycle of misery and abuse. The women of Kothia will always stay in my heart and mind.

Soaring in an instant over rolling fields of my childhood places, my imagination flies then lands beneath my favorite banyan tree where I find the women of Kothia still playing hide and seek with me and chanting hymns in praise of Sita. Women are angels.