

More than Money & Men: Conducting Elections Amongst Eastern Himalayan Glaciers

by Dorji Wangdi and Sangay Phuntsho
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Lunana is one of the most remote *Gewogs* in the country with tough geographical terrain and High Mountain passes. It is about 5200 meters above sea level. *Lunana Gewog* remains cut off from rest of the *Dzongkhag* for almost six months (starting from the month of December till May). It takes nine days to reach from the Gasa Dzong. When 2013 elections fell during this period of time, deployment of choppers became necessary.



Glimpse of Thangza village, Lunana Gewog

With the poll day for the National Council Elections 2013 scheduled in the month of April 2013, request for choppers was made to the Election Commission of Bhutan during the Coordination Meeting held by Gasa Election Team. As the mountain passes were inaccessible, the *Dzongkhag* Administration considered to airdrop the polling officials on 16th of April 2013, seven days ahead of the poll day.

“Please inform your people to be ready by 9:00 a.m. tomorrow at Gasa. If the weather permits, the chopper will land at 8:30 a.m. at Paro,” messaged the Secretary, ECB on 18th of April 2013.

As directed, the polling officials and a security official led by an election official reported at Playground at Gasa at 8:00 a.m.. All set to travel to various polling stations under *Lunana Gewog*.

After more than four hours of waiting, ECB informed that the choppers failed to penetrate thick cloud over the *Dochola* pass and had to return to Paro.

The weather remained the same for the next two days. The choppers remained put at Paro too.

Finally, on 18th of April, to our great relief, the weather condition seemed to improve. The choppers arrived and landed at 9:00 a.m. at Gasa. It almost seemed like a long foretold story for the people of Gasa who were eagerly waiting for them to arrive from the first day itself.

But the delight of the election official's at the arrival of the choppers almost turned to disappointment. The pilots refused to take in a single election material along-with rations and the designated security officials (the wireless operator) to Wachey Polling Station. After a long argument between the election officials and the pilots, they agreed to take only the essential election materials. But refused to take personal effects and security official.



Election officials along with the security officials arguing with the pilots with regard to carrying the election materials and a security official

The choppers finally took off at around 10:00 a.m.. The Asst. Chief Election Coordinator, *Lunana* was accordingly informed and was directed to prepare smoke signal to help choppers land.

After two hours of their take-off, the *Dzongkhag* Administration and the officials of *Lunana Gewog* panicked in earnest with no clue of the whereabouts of sign of the birds at both ends. With frantic phone calls from both sides not being of any help to their plight, officials both at the *Dzongkhag* and *Gewog* began to worry as to the safety of the polling officials.

The choppers had finally landed at Hashimara, India after failing in its attempt to penetrate towards Lunana and Thimphu due to bad weather conditions. Finally, after a long wait it was quite a relief for us when we received a call from ECB informing that the officials had safely landed at Hashimara in India.

“Safety did not stand as a concern for us since the pilots kept us well informed with regard to the weather condition along-with what they were trying to attempt to overcome it. But the only thing that bothered us was whether the Dzongkhag Administration was informed about our where-about or not”, recalls the Asst. Election Officer Sangay Phuntsho who was also the coordinator for the elections at *Lunana Gewog* and part of the Polling Team that was airborne.



Pilot pointing towards a better route with better weather condition

Sherab Chopel, Gewog Administrative Officer, *Lunana Gewog* had this to add “We prepared the ground for landing and waited for the choppers to arrive, but after one hour when the choppers showed no sign I made a phone call to the Dzongkhag Administration. After coming to know that the Dzongkhag Administration also did not have any idea of the whereabouts of the choppers, the people waiting at Lhedi started to panic. I also tried calling my friends at Punakha but they also did not have a clue about the choppers and had heard nothing. We were finally relieved when the Dzongkhag Administration informed us that the officials have safely landed in India.”

Once at Hashimara, the pilots decided to proceed towards Paro since it seemed almost impossible to make it to Lunana that day. The choppers then took off at 2:00 p.m. from Hashimara but had to return from Chhukha owing to the poor weather conditions.

The polling officials were then escorted to IMTRAT guesthouse at Phuentshogling as they were scheduled to take-off for Paro on the following day.



Choppers heading towards Hashimara, India

On 19th of April, 2013, the officials were driven to Hashimara. The choppers then took off for Paro where they were being refuelled.

The Chief Election Officer came from Thimphu to meet the officials. He informed them that arrangements for their provisions and bedding were already made for their stay at Lunana as these were not allowed on-board.

Having refuelled both men and machines, they took-off to attempt towards *Lunana* but was once again confronted with foggy conditions at the Dochola pass. The choppers had to abort the journey and once again return to Paro.

Though the Dzongkhag Election Office, Paro had made all the necessary arrangements for food and lodging for the polling officials and the pilots, having experienced hot weather at Hashimara and being dressed for the biting cold of Lunana, upon reaching Paro, the first thing the polling officials did was to look for some lighter clothes to change.

The next day, the 20th of April 2013, the heavens poured for the entire day. It grounded the choppers and did not allow them even to contemplate taking-off.

The weather condition on 21st April 2013 was the same as of the previous day. It was decided that the election for *Lunana Gewog* would be postponed and the polling officials would be reached to Gasa by road so that the officials could attend to other duties back at their station.

For the people of Gasu, it was set in their minds that the election for *Lunana Gewog* was not feasible and might be postponed.

The Chief Election Coordinator, *Dasho Dzongdag* was not prepared to give it up but fully was fully determined. He came up with the idea of hiring the private Nepalese chopper, a bigger machine with substantial experience in flying to *Lunana*. It was one that was being *deployed* recently for ferrying of telecom equipments there. It was at the time in-country and at *Dagana Dzongkhag* transporting the equipments and working for electricity transmission line project. As an alternative worth exploring, the suggestion was put up to the ECB,

ECB took the advice to hire the services of the heli-copter of the M/S. Dharma Air Travel Agency.

The departure of the polling officials including a security official (this time), was then re-scheduled to be on 23rd of April, 2013. The first attempt failed once again. The chopper could not fly through Dochola Pass due to bad weather conditions.

It was then decided that a final attempt for the polling officials to be dropped at the respective polling stations at *Lunana Gewog* would be made in the early hours of the poll day. People of Lunana were accordingly informed assuring them that the Poll would be held on the same day.

The Chief Election Coordinator, not to take any chances that could be cause for failure decided to drop the polling officials at Tencholing the very evening at Wangdue Phodrang given the information that the weather conditions at Lunana were better than that of Gasu.

“I gave up hope when I woke up at 5:00 a.m. to see another cloudy day. At one point I felt myself useless since I would be left with nothing to do on such an important day if the weather condition remained the same” reminisces Sangay Phuntsho, Asst. Election Officer.

Time passed and the polls started in the entire country with the polling officials for Lunana still waiting with the hope to make it to their designated Polling Station in *Lunana*. The polling officials waited eagerly for the sky to clear up so that the choppers could take off.

The Gasu Rabdey made oblations to the guardian deities and sought their divine intervention and blessings while a desperate DzEO was on his four prostrating for miracle!

At around 9:45 a.m. the chopper finally arrived at the Tencholing helipad. It was then decided that two polling official with the security official along-with the voting equipments would be dropped to Wachey Polling Station first and then the choppers would return to pick up the remaining polling officials and the voting equipment.

After dropping four polling officials at Wachey, the chopper then dropped the election materials at Lhedhi Polling Station, and made on its way to Thangza Polling Station.



Polling officials & voters waiting for the election materials to arrive on the poll day, Lhedi, *Lunana Gewog*

The election materials along with polling officials finally reached Thangza Polling Station at 10:40 a.m. and poll procedures were carried out immediately. Thus the Poll was conducted successfully on the same day for Lunana Gewog.

The poll in *Lunana Gewog* finally started at 11:00 a.m. and was carried out smoothly although some concern remained, since two polling stations did not have a single security official.

Voters expressed concern on the closing time of poll which was immediately reported to ECB through the Returning Officer. The ECB as permissible, under the Electoral Laws, facilitated extension of the poll timing till 6:00 p.m. instead of 5.00 p.m..

The Polls in *Lunana Gewog* was a success both for Gasa *Dzongkhag* as well as for ECB as it could be held against all odds. It was a testimony of the skills of the pilots, courage of the polling officials, good fortune of the Voters and the commitment to election and democracy by the election officials of the Gasa *Dzongkhag* and the Election Commission of Bhutan.

On the following day, the polling officials along with the election materials moved towards Lhedi (*Lunana Gewog* centre), from where they were picked up by the Indian Army small choppers on 25th of April, 2013.



Polling officials on their way back to Lhedi from Thangza after the poll day

However, owing to the weather condition once again, rather than dropping the officials directly at Gasa, they were instead dropped at Lungtenphug helipad, Thimphu from where the officials were collected by a *Dzongkhag* pool vehicle on the same day.

“Preparing for the choppers to land here meant that time and again we had to draw the “H” for the choppers to land. Every time we waited, to our dismay bad weather condition prevailed and for every attempt by the choppers we had to draw the fresh sign ‘H’ as it was washed away by rain every time. We wasted more than eight kilogrammes of *Maida* (wheat flour) drawing the ‘H’ ”, adds Dorji Wangdi, Officiating Dzongkhag Election Officer, with humour, now that it had all worked out fine.

N.B.: The Lunana Polling Team Member are:

1. Khandu Wangchuk, Teacher Lunana;
2. Jigme Rinzin, Livestock Extension Supervisor;
3. Gopa, Lingzhi Wireless Operator; and
4. Sangay Phuntsho, Assistant Election Officer.

Commented [KW1]: