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SUMMARY

My experience in Nepal was inspiring and productive and I was able to work with many interesting people — the former Minister of Health, a leading Buddhist lama, many social workers, political leaders and founders of NGOs, as well as individuals who are working hard to help transform Nepal into a democratic and prospering country. Most inspiring, however, was meeting the children with their undefeatable potential, open hearts and strength to face the hardships in their society.

Nepal's society is rapidly changing after 240 years of monarchy and years of political instability. Cultural and political transformation during the past 10 years was difficult and so some Nepalis began to doubt whether the move from monarchy was a positive change. The country still struggles to create unity due to split views, political corruption, lack of quality education and centralization of the country. After two months of work in Nepal, I understood more of the complexities of some of the issues affecting children and women.

Shanti Adhigari, founder of CWISH (Children and Women in Social Service), and her work, were originally my main focus, and it is she who introduced me to fundamental issues while I was filming *Working Young*, a short documentary about children and women in Nepal, and the first part of my fellowship project. Advocating for child and human rights, empowering women, and bridging this with her work in parliament, all in a traditionally patriarchal society, is her great success. Mrs. Adhigari says: "Awareness together with economic independence are necessary for women to become empowered and active in society as change makers."

Working Young is an introductory video about the issue of domestic child labor in Nepal, and the work of the CWISH organization founded by Mrs. Adhigari. The expansion into a full-length documentary was the first part of my fellowship work, which began in October 2010. Amongst those I interviewed for the project was the Nepalese former Minister of Health, Dr. Mishra, Mrs. Adhigari and her collaborators, Buddhist Lama Geshe Lharampa Tenzin Bhutia, Director of Organization Shakti Milan Samaj for HIV women and children, the founder of APC Nepal, an NGO that cares for street children in Katmandu, and many social workers, teachers and those who need their services the most.

Intention

Originally, the intention for this documentary film was to highlight the work of an exceptional educator, Mrs. Adhigari. As I learned more, my focus began to shift. Through my prior work on the film ***Sit Beside Me***, which we co-created with Norwegian filmmaker Audun Nedrelid, and Jenne Magno, I explored a system of education existent in India at the Loreto Sealdah school in Clacutta, which effectively transforms society at a grassroots level. I realized that there is great potential for application of this system in Nepal, and it could be used as a powerful transformative tool in the present-day context. After my experience in Nepal, I cannot imagine a greater tool for addressing simultaneously all of the current issues facing Nepali society today. I hope to utilize my newly gained friendships in Nepal and introduce this educational system through screenings of the film ***Sit Beside Me*** in the hope of further discussions about the practical application of this system.

Political Climate

Upon my arrival to Nepal, I visited Mrs. Adhigari and her organization CWISH located in Buddhanaga, Kathmandu. Adhigari, an economically independent woman in a patriarchal society, bridges social and political work. Mrs. Adhigari appointed two volunteer members from her organization to assist me. With their help, I was able to get by and communicate more easily. Throughout my two-month stay, I did several interviews with Mrs. Adhigari and filmed one of her political programs. Mrs.

Adhigari has a hectic schedule with her political work, with CWISH, and with her other activities. Some of her activities, such as her work in parliament, are confidential. My time with her was therefore limited. Soon, I realized that the political climate and cultural situation in Nepal are far more complicated than the interviews alone would be able to portray. I began to do more research on the issues affecting Nepal and on the situation of women and children in the country.

Nepal is currently in a fragile period of transition, where it seems virtually anything can happen. Foreigners like myself, coming to Nepal with limited experience, tend to simplify situations they encounter. All of the stories I became involved with later proved to be of a much more complicated fabric. Here are examples of factors that I believe play a role in Nepal's economy and societal behavior: Nepal's two giant neighbors, India and China, seem to play a double role in helping Nepal to establish its democracy after 240 years of monarchic rule. China is assisting Nepal in building roads because Nepal suffers from a lack of infrastructure. These roads will, however, connect China to the Northern part of Nepal, Mustang. They might also serve to import inexpensive Chinese goods. How would such a situation influence the survival of local modest production? Loss of income in already poor areas may cause even more poverty, and due to the centralized economy (centered in the Katmandu valley) more children (as young as 6 years of age) might be sent to cities to work, with the hope of finding better conditions or education in urban areas. This is, however, rarely the case. In better cases, children find jobs in shops, or as domestic servants, working for low wages or even just for food and shelter. In worse cases, children join street gangs, develop addictions to glue sniffing, are involved in criminal activities, or work in extremely hard conditions. A seemingly unrelated topic such as partnership with China could deeply influence individual families and their children.

India, Nepal's southern neighbor, has always been a strong influence for Nepal, culturally and economically. It is also an intricate partner according to stories I have collected through interviews. As I understood, corruption and money making must be the reason why Nepal sells electricity to India and buys it back for double the

price. Third grade rice is sold back to Nepal for the price originally paid by Indians for a mixture of grades. Rivers flowing from Nepal have been “bought” by India and have become another means of controlling Nepal, especially in the rainy seasons when massive floodgates built in India create disastrous floods in Nepal. These are some stories I have collected during my work.

These and other issues, such as gas price hikes, create a lot of tension in the southern part of Nepal, Terrai. The country suffers from lack of electricity and, therefore, the government cuts the electricity supply for two hours every day. This benefits the few companies producing generators, which must be purchased by everybody who wants to keep their homes or businesses running. Although Nepal is the second richest country in water supply on Earth, its population of over 28 million people does not have enough water to cover its basic needs.

Such problems seem to be caused in large part by political instability, corruption, and many years of Maoist insurgency. The cultural transformation and huge political instability has created an environment where Nepalis have radically different motives and intentions. Extreme levels of corruption and political mafias exist alongside initiatives of enormous goodwill and hard work to improve the situation. The capacity of the Nepali people, especially women and children with their instinct for survival and their easygoing manner to handle problems, is enormous. Unfortunately a lack of political unity holds the country back from developing peacefully and responsibly. The situation remains unstable despite the fact that the natural resources and diversity of Nepal exceeds those of many developed countries, such as Switzerland. One fact however is clear — no foreigner can develop Nepal, though many aid organizations have tried to do so. Nepalis themselves must stand up to the task of saving Nepal weakened by years of Maoists’ interventions and endless political hassles.

Cultural Transition

Nepal has undergone massive cultural transformation in the past 10 years. A long period of monarchic rule protected the country not only from development in rural

areas, but also from Western perspectives on life and consumer desires. This is rapidly changing. It is hard to generalize about the pros and cons of development. On the one side, the slow progress is painful, but on the other, it can protect the country from destructive or careless industries hurting the land. Many tourist activities without infrastructure, garbage management, or ecological protection plans have already caused great damage to some of the most beautiful and frequently visited areas. This problem will intensify with the upcoming plan for a Year of Tourism (2011). Small entrepreneurs with ecological and social concerns and management capabilities seem to be golden treasures, conscious of the issues and taking concrete steps to mediate them. Though today there is a growing number of people, often from underdeveloped areas, who have received an education and are working to upgrade the country, their numbers are still too limited to manifest results at a national level. Over the past 10 years, the potential for a functional network of diverse Nepalese NGOs working together at a national level has greatly grown. This is a hope for the future.

By default, Westerners are still fabulously wealthy and successful in the eyes of Nepalis. The fact that even in Europe and the US there are homeless children and widespread poverty was surprising to everyone with whom I spoke. The general feeling of the Nepalese is that Nepal is extremely underdeveloped and poor. But, in actuality there is a strong rich-poor polarity stemming from the monarchic history and the loose laws that allow corruption today. The fact that a great number of young Nepalis go abroad to study in countries such as the USA, Australia, India and Sri Lanka proves that the living standard of some Nepalis is not at all poor. Also, many capable young people are leaving the country, either to look for better job opportunities or simply to receive a high quality western-style education.

In spite of a lot of finger pointing and discussions, it seems from some interviews that many Nepalis are surprisingly nostalgic for the old monarchy. Despite the great effort, the transition to democracy is long and painful. The lack of quality education available to the populace is a significant factor.

The Maoist Movement

The Maoist movement, without any doubt, activated and mobilized the nation on many different levels. The Maoists are responsible for 13,000 deaths and migration of people to urban areas due to security reasons in the past years and, today, the Maoist party holds almost half of the 601 parliamentary seats. The party intentionally disrupts democratic process in order to gain more power, and it appears currently impossible to achieve political unity. A 17th unsuccessful attempt to elect a Prime Minister shows how difficult it is to achieve progress in Nepali politics.

Most of the stories I collected about the Maoists highlighted the raidings and the destruction they caused. Maoists came into power, as they were able to catch the momentum of an impoverished and upset population longing to become an active citizenry and not just servants with no citizenship or voice. The Maoists, on the other hand, are also credited with positive actions such as rescuing women trafficked to work abroad.

Nothing is simple in Nepal. There are many political scandals and negotiations with the Maoist leaders and these take the focus off the crucial issues of education, empowerment of the economy, human rights, child protection, health, etc. From the perspective of many people I interviewed, most foreign help dissolves in the pool of army expenses and politics before it reaches those who are truly in need and those for whom the help was intended.

NGOs

Without the work of NGOs, not much would have changed in Nepal for women and children. There are 17,000 registered NGOs and INGOs (international non-profit organizations), and though only a few are doing substantive work, it is these organizations that are at the forefront of change. Topics — such as HIV awareness, discrimination of HIV infected women (usually infected by husbands working abroad), orphans and street children, underprivileged families with no access to

education, or single mothers, who are traditionally marginalized in Nepalese society, are serious topics that are sometimes misused to collect money from sponsors. These are tragic cases, but not at all rare. Many people come to Nepal to “take a picture” and never come back. Perhaps many of these photographers and filmmakers simply leave projects unfinished, but there are also those who misuse materials to collect money, and Nepalis are rightly sensitive about this issue. Sometimes, I also faced a bit of suspicion and so taking out my camera wasn’t always as easy.

On the other hand, making money via NGOs became a normal business activity to some Nepalis, which proves that Pravaha’s hopes to connect sponsors directly to project initiators, thus creating close partnerships (rather than donating through a third party) is valid. Even in the case of these partnerships, however, finding the right leadership and dedicated individuals who are willing to spend years developing a project is not easy. The work of NGOs is neither short term nor easy.

The Nepali government does not run any social aid organizations as far as I learned, not even an orphanage, and does not dedicate any budget to supporting the work of NGOs. In fact, such organizations are better run by the private sector due to the government’s lack of motivation to truly focus on acute social issues.

The malfunction of the government in comparison with the private sector is most visible in education. There are great differences between private and public education. The standard of public education is very low, and the work of teachers is usually not supervised and, hence, there is more space for student abuse and discrimination. One of CWISH’s activities is to educate teachers on definitions of abuse. Lack of consciousness about human and child rights in traditional Nepalese society has in the past ignored these sad cases where children from impoverished families or child laborers do not receive any support in schools or are even discriminated in the governmental schools.

Child Labor

CWISH has been an advocate for child domestic workers for the past 10 years and now has a voice in government, along with other partnering organizations.

Networking with other NGOs and INGOs is the only way to pressure the government to recognize a number of international conventions that were signed, but are often not integrated into practice. The recent case of a governmental minister misusing a child laborer, which was brought to court by CWISH, was successfully resolved in favor of the child and the minister publicly apologized and was punished with a fine. Such cases are a great success and demonstrate the hard work of NGOs and their gain in power and credibility. Publicizing and debating these cases is essential to changing the perspective of people on what is and is not a public matter.

Traditionally, domestic events are private matters, and so human/child rights are then truly invisible. But shedding light on these issues can be risky for the organizations as well. Life threats, anonymous messages and even armed threats towards CWISH are not unusual.

The situation of child labor is, however, still alarming. In the case of domestic child labor, thousands of children are locked in houses and work endless hours out of public sight and completely vulnerable to their employers. The employers may be business families, teachers, social workers, or governmental ministers. Employers use children and argue that they provide food and shelter for them and, therefore, the children benefit. In fact, child laborers work 7 days a week, sometimes 10 hours a day. Some interviewees admitted that although there is much more awareness about the illegality of employing children under 14 years of age, not much has changed in the past years. General lack of solidarity (aside from many exceptional people who feel the responsibility to help society) is the main reason why child slavery continues to be condoned. While having a child worker in the past was a sign of high status and today this is no longer the case, it is still a socially accepted pattern. It is not unusual that teachers, governmental employees or even social workers would have a domestic child labor. Though I have personally been researching this topic in depth, I came to a whole new level of understanding during

a recent visit to the home of a teacher's family where child labor was employed. During this visit, I finally fully began to understand the horrible injustice these children face.

Street Children

There is a great lack of empathy towards the street children in Nepal, again with the exception of many individual who try to help. I spent several days with children from APC's (Association for Protection of Children) drop-in center to learn their stories, which I was sure would reflect aspects of Nepali society and bring more insights into the film. The huge potential of these children and their capabilities is not to be overlooked. I believe they are misunderstood by many, foreigners and tourists included.

In most cases, it is the parents or guardians whose issues are the main problem and reason for the children's homelessness. Sometimes stepparents chase children out of the house or put them to work to have more income. These stories are fundamentally about alcohol, torture, and unloving relationships. The complex work of APC and other organizations involves reintegrating children with their families.

Hundreds of these street children can be seen in the streets of Katmandu and elsewhere. They are generally viewed as an annoyance, as thieves, disrespectful and defiant. Although there are local people who try to help, they are often quickly discouraged when first attempts to correct the children's behavior fail. The general view is that these children need to be treated strictly and with tough discipline. The popular approach of well-intentioned tourists when approached by street children is to give money or material support.

The experience of Mr. Lafoux, who heads APC Nepal, is that unconditional love, freedom to decide about their own lives, and forgiveness for repeatedly making the same mistakes — are the only effective means of help adults can offer these children. This is the general strategy of this organization, which succeeds in

reintegrating some of these children back into their original families. Substance abuse complicates the work; many of these children are addicted to sniffing glue. This activity arises out of the need to belong to a group. The addiction is especially hard to break with older children. Ninety-five percent of street children are boys, who earn money from recycling garbage, and get food from NGOs that are there to help them. Generally, they feel they have greater freedom living in the streets in groups than living with abusive parents or in institutions. This, I think, is fully understandable.

I was fortunate to witness the results of the work that is done by APC, and be able to film a successful reintegration story of a 9-year-old boy who was rescued by APC and returned home after being lost from home for two years. Three sisters working as beggars and living in a slum area with their failing parents was another story I focused on and tried to develop into a larger theme in the documentary. This was yet another story about alcoholic, dysfunctional parents burdening their children with their own survival. Due to their family situation, these children spend their days scavenging through mountains of garbage and begging. This income is then used to fund the father's alcohol habits and basic family expenses. Living in one small room without windows, sheets of plastic covering the floor, the mother of the six-member migrant family claimed that their life in Nepal is still much more lucrative than their prior livelihood in India, their home country.

Conclusion

Mrs. Adhigari is a model advocate for the protection of children and women in this film. As an independent woman stepping into politics with issues that were long ignored and non-existent to the public eye, her work is irreplaceable and fits with the idea of the Pravaha project to highlight exceptional educators. However, greater change happens through a network of many organizations working together, advocating door-to-door, educating the public, and pressuring the government to abide by the conventions and agreements they have signed. With the lack of governmental unity and support in the social sector, the NGOs and INGOs that

supplement the missing budget and efforts of the government are irreplaceable. However, it is hard to be effective on a national level without governmental assistance.

Fellowship year part 2

In the second half of my fellowship year I began to design the Pravaha website, which was created in support of exceptional educators and change-makers and to become a platform for informational exchange amongst those who would like to learn from them. I also prepared an outreach plan for working with the film ***Sit Beside Me***, and began to work on its screenings with educational professionals and others to discuss its possibilities.

With the co-creators of *Sit **Beside Me***, we were able to finish the final post-production of the film, which portrays Sister Cyril and her work. Sister Cyril achieved outstanding results in transforming education through her community based, peer-to-peer, inclusive methodologies of schooling in her school in Calcutta, India. Her methodologies are truly revolutionary. The film was made to help sensitize students to their own environment, allow them to discuss what they do or do not like about their world, and take responsibility and action for the world that surrounds them. I had begun to work on the film in 2007, thanks to Audun Nedrelid and Jenne Magno, who invited me to the work. Thanks to my fellowship year, I am excited to see it could be finished, opening new ways of thinking for those who see it.

This year, the pilot screenings of the film became my focus. I meet with educators, and professors of pedagogy to screen the film and discuss the applications of the system in their own community (so far in the Czech republic, Nepal and the U.S.). The goal of the pilot screenings is to collect enough feedback from teachers and students so that methodologies for further work with the film (discussions, activities etc.) can be designed. These will be available as a download for teachers interested in screening the film in their classrooms, or for any informal interested groups.

Screenings in countries internationally would be valuable for those who are interested in transformations in their systems of schooling and are ready to question what education really means. Film is suitable for high schools and university students, as well as elementary schools whose students are English speakers. Based on the feedback, Sister Cyril has agreed to create methodologies for working with the film itself. As more information and materials will be available online, principals and teachers will have the opportunity to learn directly from the life-long experience of this visionary educator, and to share experience and emerging methods/projects with a peer group of participating educators. Sister Cyril has offered to consult and answer questions from those who would be interested in adopting or learning about her work in depth. This generous offer from such an experienced and transformative educator, who trained hundreds of teachers in and outside of India and influenced thousands of lives, is truly a gift. Further, Sister Cyril said she is happy to use the film in her own network of schools internationally as a tool to introduce her work. All who contributed to the film are excited about that, and I invite anyone who would be open to hosting a screening of *Sit Beside Me*, would like to view the film, or to learn more about the outreach or the system itself to contact me at mail@pravaha.org.

Conclusion

Although I wasn't able to achieve all parts of the project I planned for my fellowship year, and those I had to postpone for the next year, I gained invaluable experience, thanks to the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, for which I feel deep gratitude. As a filmmaker, in organizing the project, and meeting exceptional people with great professional experience, my fellowship year was extremely enriching and satisfying. I hope that with my work I can contribute to the societies that supported me in life. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart for the opportunities I have been given.