

## **Final Report**

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Namaste!

I came into this fellowship knowing almost nothing about Nepal or BASE. In these eight weeks I have been in Nepal, I have learnt a lot as a peace fellow and I know that I will carry these lessons throughout my personal and professional life. I have met the most amazing people and I would like to share their stories.

### **The Lion & the Rose**

The Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, was often depicted with roses adorning her head, feet and neck. The most common symbolism of this flower is beauty and love. But to me, the beauty of this flower expresses promise, hope and new beginnings that is contrasted by the thorns that symbolize defense, loss, and pain. When I met Sima and heard her story, I was reminded of the rose. She has had a ‘thorny’ life, but through it all, she has held her head high and persevered. She tells me her real-life story of struggle and triumph!



At age 17, Sima Chaudhary, a grade 10 student at Hindu Vidyapeeth Nepal School has been through what seems to be a journey of a thousand miles. Born in an informal settlement area of Ghorahi, Dang district in Nepal, she found herself in a home where her mother struggled to feed and educate her and her siblings. At the time, her mother worked as a casual laborer performing domestic chores at a landlord’s home which gave them a meager earning to survive on. Their situation was further worsened by the passing of her father when she was only 2 years old.

Young girls from the *Tharu* community are predisposed to child labor, a lack of education, and in some cases sexual abuse mainly due to widespread poverty that characterizes the *Tharu* community. Backward Society Education (BASE) has rescued many young girls from the bonded labor system and has contributed to improving the socio-economic status of young girls like Sima and reducing their vulnerability in the society. In 2009, BASE rescued Sima from a landlord's home in Nepal Gunj. She was 8 years old at the time and had worked for that landlord for 3 to 4 years where she would cook and wash clothes and dishes. Her mother had sent her to work for the landlord as a way of supplementing her family's income. She had also been promised that her daughter would attend school but that was not the case. Typically, the children rescued by BASE would spend a month at the BASE children's rehabilitation center before being returned to their parents. Unfortunately for Sima, her family was unable to take her back and provide her with an education. BASE pledged to her to the Children's Peace Home (CPH) so that she could attend school and have a safe place to live. Sima says that she is very happy that BASE rescued her and placed her at CPH. She is doing well at school, this past exam she emerged position 3, and enjoys playing with the other children when she returns home. Her favorite subjects at school are Social Studies and English. She is also an active member of the Eco and Peace Clubs. When I asked her what she wants to do in the future after school she said, "I want to help needy people like me."

As a mythical creature, the lion an auspicious symbol of valor, energy and wisdom. It also represents strength, goodness and the spirit of change. Bhola Nath Yogi, the principal of Hindu Vidyapeeth Nepal School and the founder of the Children's Peace Home, has indeed defied all odds and become a beacon of hope in his community. As incredible as his story was of all the work that he has done for his community, it would take an even more radical turn in 2005, when Bhola built a children's orphanage home on his family's land. The home has helped street children, orphans and other desperate children by providing everything from shelter and clothing to education and medical care. Bhola has become a father to the fatherless.



While he is deservedly proud of the sanctuary he has built over the past 13 years, Bhola is clearly most pleased when he talks about the accomplishments of the children who call him father: a child, like Sima Chaudhary, who came to him when she was 8 years old and is now preparing to sit for her Secondary Education Examination (SEE) national exams in the April 2019. “They are very determined,” says Bhola of all the children, adding his next dream is to build more facilities to support more children on the organization’s site. “I believe you can transform the world, one child a time,” he says with a peaceful smile. “As a child, I wanted to be important, but where I am now is more important to the people around me.” Bhola supports 29 children who live at the orphanage and 182 students at the school.

Extraordinary, indeed.

### **The Pointy End**

The economic status of the women of Nepal, in rural areas particularly, lags far behind that of their male counterparts. There is a strong bias in favor of male offspring in the country. This means that the girl child in Nepal is discriminated against from as early as birth and does not enjoy equal access to opportunities to enable her achieve development. This custom is the main reason why the situation for Nepalese women is characterized by low levels of access to education, economic, social and political opportunities as well as healthcare. Despite continued efforts by the government, non-governmental organizations and international development agencies to empower women in Nepal, significant improvement in their social and economic status is yet to be seen and felt at the grassroots level.



Sustainable and continued development in Nepal will remain unattainable unless women achieve equal footing with men in the development process. There are significant gender-based inequalities in practically every sector. Disparities in access to education, ownership of assets, education, healthcare and social and economic mobility are still profound. The available empirical evidence from the 2011 census clearly suggests that the illiteracy levels among women

are significantly higher than those of men (ranging from 26% to 47% among males and 47% to 66% among women). The data on the literacy levels for the *Tharu* and other disadvantaged groups of people is not available from the 2011 census. Given the fact that the social and economic conditions of poor people like the *Tharu* has not changed much in the past few years, it could be assumed that their literacy level also may have hardly registered any significant change. It is important to note however, that surveys conducted by INSEC (Informal Sector Service Center) suggests that the literacy situation among the *Tharu* has been improving in recent years.

According to the Gender Development Index (GDI), Nepalese women face far worse socioeconomic conditions than women from any other South Asian country. Their maternal mortality rate associated with teenage pregnancies and low-quality healthcare services is alarming. It has been ranked among the highest in the world. In the professional arena, women remain far behind men as well. Participation in politics is yet another example. Only one-fifth of women hold political seats, and the same pattern is consistent in professional occupations and administrative jobs. There is a substantial proportion of women who are economically active but the majority of those are casual laborers and / or unpaid family workers who are involved in subsistence farming as their way of life. More women need to take charge of their individual agendas, raise their status and capacity, and push forward the country's economic development goals. This is why the government and many NGOs have focused their efforts on empowering women. This is a concept that has taken center stage in the eradication of global poverty agenda and in line with several sustainable development goals (SDGs). The initiative rests on capacity building, awareness-raising, increased decision-making power at the household, community and national levels and organizing women in order to overcome unequal and unfair disparities.



The concept of women empowerment places an emphasis on self-reliance but realizes a wider dimension for a much broader understanding and application. Allow me to quote UNICEF's broader women's empowerment framework that focusses on five levels of equality:

1. Welfare: addressing the basic needs of women considering the structural causes



2. Access: providing women access to resources such as schooling and micro-credit
  3. Conscientization: helping women to recognize the problems caused by existing socio-cultural arrangements, and their roles and rights to deal with inequalities
  4. Participation: encouraging women to take part in decision-making and working collectively to gain political representation
  5. Control: the final stage of empowerment where the balance of power between men and women is equal and the contributions of women are fully recognized.
- ((From UNICEF's website))



I particularly like this empowerment framework because it can help development agencies including the government to determine at what point they would want to intervene so as to champion for equality. It is my personal opinion that one of the most important strategies that the government, non-governmental organization and international agencies need to focus more on is emphasizing women's literacy and vocational training to spur local employment. There is a latent demand for education among these women who not only realize the value of education but want to attend schools and literacy classes in order to lead a better life. They acknowledge the empowering role of education. The ability to read and write is seen as a necessity to access information and employment opportunities. Some of the daughters of the women I met during my field visits to several villages already own a sewing machine. This could be an easy transition for them to learn the skill of the trade without breaking the bank.



There is a tendency these days to give up on poverty, to dismiss it as a sad but inevitable part of our lives, particularly when even the economic giants of our time face economic challenges of their own. However, it is worth to remember that sheer grit, and a helping hand, can sometime blaze a trail where none seems possible. I came to Nepal partly to identify and design a social, innovative project that could benefit *Kamlaris* and lift them out of poverty and the social injustice that they have faced for decades. I promptly met many amazing women who shared their stories with me and who reminded me of something that my mother and my grandmother have always jokingly told me:

“If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” ~ *African Proverb*

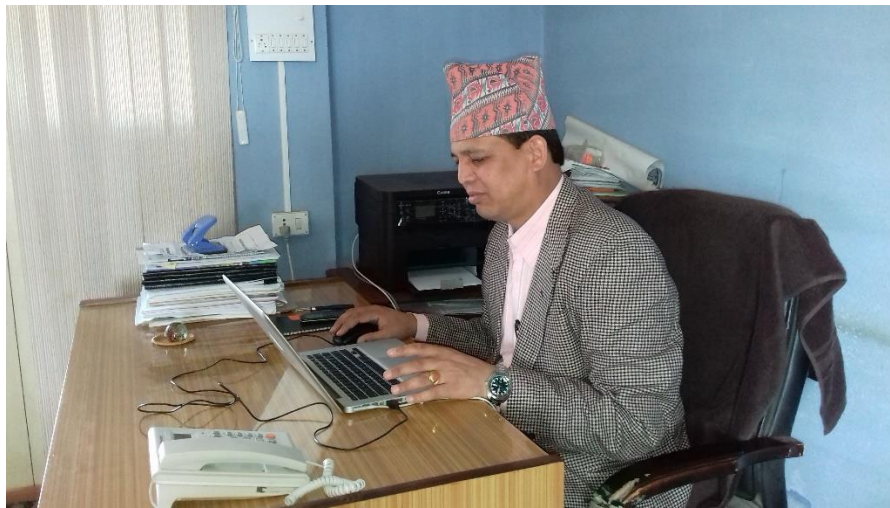
## **Two Swords**

Backward Society Education (BASE) is usually described by its members and supporters as a nongovernmental organization that implements development programs. After my stay in Tulsipur working closely with BASE, I realized that BASE is much more than that. It is a powerful social movement that is transforming the *Tharu* society and the socio-political relation between the *Tharu* and high caste Hindus in five districts (Dang, Bardiya, Banke, Kailali and Kanchanpur) of west Nepal.

With more than 300,000 active members, and a staff of 262, BASE is, by far, one of the largest NGOs in Nepal. It is also the most successful. No other NGO in Nepal has been able to mobilize as many people as BASE to actively and effectively implement development programs. BASE, especially in its early stages, also encountered intense opposition from certain members of the landed ruling class in all five targeted districts. BASE'S leadership has since used various strategies that have largely neutralized this opposition.

BASE'S success contains important lessons for both Nepali NGO staff members and expatriate development workers; especially those who are working with oppressed, impoverished ethnic minority groups. My primary reason for writing this blog is to pass these lessons on through a short account of BASE's institutional development. A secondary reason is to continue to raise awareness about some serious human rights problems (bonded labor primary among them) that exist in BASE'S five target district. Another reason is to generate interest about grassroots leadership in other parts of Nepal. This is a very important aspect of Nepal's development, and yet surprisingly little has been written about it. There is much that development professionals can learn from BASE's very effective leadership.

Meet Dilli Chaudhary (BASE's Founder), below, in the top picture, and Churna Chaudhary (BASE's Executive Director), in the bottom picture.



In the directed leadership of these two, BASE has been able to achieve the following;

- 300,000 members in five districts of western Nepal
- Established a new decentralized administrative/organization structure
- Designed and implemented over 50 projects since its inception

There are several reasons for the tremendous support that BASE has received from the *Tharu* in western Nepal. Because of severe poverty and repression there was a tremendous pent-up need for the programs offered by BASE. Literacy, economic self-sufficiency, organizational strength

and a capacity for rational, well-executed political activism are empowering. Dilli was able to communicate this to the *Tharu*. With the generous help of many donors, BASE has been able to implement programs that have given the *Tharu* these resources. Decentralization has given BASE members the authority to design and implement program that address the specific needs of their community (at the village, area and district level,) this policy fosters a sense of responsibility for, and pride in, BASE program among the organization's members. Participation in BASE programs is a real source of status for the *Tharu* as it makes them appear progressive to the Nepali society at large.

As BASE's membership has grown (to the point that the majority of the *Tharu* in hundreds of villages are BASE members) the peer pressure to join BASE activities has increased accordingly.

Dilli's extraordinary personal qualities and leadership skills have motivated many *Tharu* to join BASE. He has unshakable strength and commitment that has withstood beatings, imprisonment, destitution and extended periods of isolation. Dilli also has tremendous confidence and a certain regal bearing which along with his intelligence, political acumen and communication skills have won him the utter devotion of the *Tharu* in western Nepal.

Dilli also has excellent interpersonal skills. He is always in complete control of his emotions and brings a remarkable combination of humility and assertiveness to his interactions with people. Dilli is strong enough to state what he believes in no matter how powerful the other person might be, and how much they might disagree with him, and he always treats people with courtesy and respect. I have never heard Dilli speak in a condescending manner to anyone. Dilli's brilliance for communication has been a major factor in maintaining the solidarity and spirit of political activism that has made the *Tharus'* grassroots movement so popular, powerful and dynamic. For, example, under Dilli's direction plays were performed several times a year in *Tharu* villages. These plays depicted oppressive landlords, bonded laborers, theft of *Tharu* land and the subsequent mass migration of *Tharu* out of the Dang valley. These are powerful symbols which, through effective public portrayal, are recharged with meaning, reminding the *Tharu* of what they are fighting for, and against, and thus maintaining the dynamism of their movement.

Dilli also brings his gifts of communication to one-on-one interaction with people. Dilli's network of supporters includes people from many different countries. And even his Nepali backers include people from a variety of ethnic and caste/class backgrounds. And yet Dilli is usually able to communicate with all of them with an equal degree of effectiveness. One thing Dilli does is not tell people a lot about what he has done but emphasizes the showing of his achievements. Dilli does not verbally describe the literacy classes, income generating and health program activities, motivation of BASE members, or other aspects of his organization. He requests that all his visitors are taken out to the villages, shown BASE's programs in action and lets them decide for themselves what BASE has achieved. And when Dilli does describe his organization to people, he usually does so clearly and particularly. I have never heard Dilli put his foot in his mouth or misrepresent himself or BASE in any way. When he decided to pursue a political career, he brought in Churna, who shadows him in every sense of the way.



Churna is very dedicated and has remarkable moral fortitude. He has remained uncorrupted by power despite implementing several projects that have received donations of large amounts. They both still lead a very traditional life-style and are in constant contact with the *Tharu* villagers who support BASE. They have shared all of the risks and rewards of working for BASE and this is a major reason why the *Tharu* in western Nepal remain so devoted to both BASE and Dilli. As Dilli himself says, "I must continue to live and work with the people we support. If I was to abandon their way of life or stay out of contact with them for an extended period I would lose their trust and never regain it."

Dilli also has tremendous political acumen, which has manifested itself in a variety of ways. For example, Dilli has done a masterful job of building up a strong network of supporters (from several different countries and Nepal). These include officials (both expatriate and Nepali) from various development agencies, Nepali civil servants, (including policemen, agricultural technicians and engineers), scholars, lawyers, diplomats (including Bangladesh's ambassador to Nepal), social workers and tribal rights groups. This diverse array of supporters provides Dilli with different kind of resources, including financial support, training, advice and legal-political clout and protection. Dilli also has an uncanny ability to accurately judge people's character and professional potential very soon after meeting them. This has enabled Dilli to consistently make good decisions about who to cultivate a professional relationship with, and who to avoid. As a result, BASE has benefitted tremendously from those individuals who Dilli has recruited to provide the organization with technical, political and/or financial support.

Dilli and Churna are both amazingly gifted leaders. However, it is important to note that Dilli's father was also a very successful leader who served as Padhan Panch (equivalent of Mayor) of Tulsipur, and later as a member of the Jilla Panchayat Samiti (District Governing Council). Dilli's father's reputation as a leader was so good that many people, including important government officials, used to come to him for advice. Dilli's whole childhood can be seen as a "political apprenticeship" where he learned the Art of Leadership under the tutelage of his father and now has passed down his skills to his longtime friend and companion, Churna.

## The Climb

Meet Honorable Dhamkali Chaudhary



She is a Member of Provincial Assembly, State No. 5, a representative from Dang District and serves on the National Agricultural Committee. This is her story.

Born in 1968 in Babai Gaun village in Dang district, Nepal, provincial assembly member Dhamkali Chaudhary grew up in a small village but in a large extended family of about 50-60 family members. Her entire family worked for a landlord who provided them with land and grain in exchange for their work. Her parents had 8 children in total (6 girls and 2 boys) and she was the eldest of them. Her parents supported the family working as tenant farmers. At this time, bonded labor was legal in Nepal. She says that her father told her that his grandfather owned 2 acres of land previously, but it was taken from him through trickery as he was too naïve and illiterate. This is how her entire extended family came to work for a landlord.

Dhamkali always wanted to attend school like the children of the landlord she says. Every morning when they left for school, she would feel sad and wonder how it felt to attend school. She would write on flat rocks using a piece of stone while she would look after the cattle. She began performing domestic chores at the age of 8. Her entire childhood was spent on the farm and the cowshed. Dhamkali got married at the age of 15 and was freed from the bonded labor system. Her husband's family owned land on which they practiced subsistence farming. She would also sell vegetables and firewood at a nearby local market. She is blessed with 4 children, 2 girls and 2 boys.

Dhamkali began getting involved with BASE in 1999. I would attend trainings organized by BASE and I eventually signed up for a Women Adult Education Program that was being implemented by BASE. BASE assisted her, along with 2 other women, to register at school and facilitated them with the required registration fees. Unfortunately, she could attend school for only 2 days out of the week and her son who was very young at the time would her accompany her to school. The rest of the week she would perform household chores and run her small business to supplement her husband's income.

Dhamkali and her daughter attended the same class from grade 5 – 9. Her daughter was very uncomfortable sharing a class with her mother but after some time she got accustomed to it. Young boys at school would make fun of her and tease her while at school. Her peers also did not welcome the idea of Dhamkali attending school. They would often ask her what she would gain by attending school at such a ‘late’ age. Through it all, Dhamkali stayed focused and committed to completing her studies. She sat for her national exam (School Leaving Certificate, SLC) in 2005 but did not perform well. She re-sat the exam in 2009 and passed her exams. She hoped to attend college for further studies but was unable to because she wanted to use the available funds to send her children to college and give them the opportunity to further their studies.

After passing her SLC exams, Dhamkali began working with WOREC Nepal. WOREC is a movement-based organization that focuses on the premise of women rights and social justice as a prerequisite for peace, social justice and sustainable development. She initially served as a social mobilizer and would advocate for women empowerment through mainstreaming. She then joined the Communist Party Nepal and became an active member of it. All this time, she maintained presence at the grassroot level with her local community. For instance, she is an active Executive Committee Member of a local Community Forest Users’ Group. Through WOREC, she was able to organize a number of sessions that dealt with women issues such as healthcare and domestic violence and through this she developed a lot of relationships with members of the public which would be vital for her political career. While working for WOREC, she also realized that the good work that was being done by NGOs could not be sustainable unless it received support from policy makers. She was nominated by her party to vie for the Member of Provincial Assembly position. She won the election and has been serving since December 2017.

Dhamkali says that she deeply believes in the slogan “Women for Women.” Nepal needs more women political leaders she said. More than half of the Nepali population is female, but we certainly cannot say the same for its leaders. Though the percentage of women in politics has more than doubled over the last 20 years, it still stands at 23%, [according to the World Economic Forum’s 2017 Global Gender Gap report](#), meaning we will see gender equality in political representation in about 82 years. But women’s voices are needed in the political arena now more than ever as women’s rights and access to healthcare are repeatedly at the center of debate, she said. Her advice to other young girls is to speak up for their rights and to read. She notes with concern that the dropout rate of girls in Nepal is on the rise and is urging them to remain in school and to complete their studies. Education is the key to success, she reminds me.