

Voluntary Service in Nepal Report

(Shree Sherada Primary School, Phalate, Myagdi District, 18.8.-2.10.)

The sound of the loud TV that only plays Bollywood productions suddenly went quiet. The busy Lodge Owner laughed, looked for the dim LED-lamp, and admitted that such power outs were extremely common. The solar battery that illuminates the most important corner of the room had forgotten its responsibility, and so now it was time for bed when the sun went down in wait of nature's amazing performance when it would break again over the breathtaking Himalayas the next morning.



Chitre, the town in which I lived, was not so easy to define. Houses line the way of lonely lynchets and little streams. There is not center to the village. How many people live here? I don't know. There is certainly more animals living here than people. Water buffalos, oxen, cows, goats, dogs, donkeys, horses and mules move seemingly without any masters through the meadows and paths. Fences are unknown here. Geographically, we find ourselves in Western Nepal in the Annapurna Conservation Project at a height of 2350 meters.

The school teacher picks me up. Her shriveled face beams and her few teeth, the ones that she still has left, shine out with every laugh. I would hear her complain often about the painful toothaches throughout the course of our time together. She is happy and proud to have a Westerner teach there in her little school for the first time. She told me that she has been teaching there for 30 years. She does not have her own family. Her carrier probably stood in the way back when she was young, and so now she lives with her older brother in a tiny house where the floor is strewn with potatoes and other treasures. Their entire estate is made up of the two water buffalos and a tiny field. Running water is only to be found outside.



Balancing and jumping from stone to stone, I attempt to avoid the mud as I cross a riverbed and eventually arrive at the school. It takes 10 minutes to get the school. After looking in surprise at the dirty feet of the children where countless leeches have already been feeding, I both feel very lucky to have escaped the nasty bloodsuckers and at the same time feel sorry for the schoolchildren that have come from the remote villages with unpronounceable names like Ghoptekharka.

With both curiosity and a somewhat of a stomachache, I enter the schoolroom. Two other school workers are there with me; their name I still do not know to this day because the people only

address each other with “Sir” and “Miss.” They seemed to be in their 40s. One of them is wearing jogging trousers with a dress shirt on, and the other one inexplicably wears a hat and scarf as I am constantly wiping the sweat profusely dripping from my forehead. We all greet each other with “Namaste,” a word that gives tourists the illusion of knowing Nepalese. But the truth is that this greeting was made up simply for the tourists...after a few days I find out that the Nepali people have totally different ways of greeting each other.



The school day begins with fitness time performed to drum music. Lost in thought, I observe the children separated in different orderly groups. There are 30 children there. They all have school uniforms, pale blue shirts with dark blue trousers. Many of the shirts and trousers are dirty, torn, too big or too small, and a complete row of children is not wearing any uniform. I look at the different faces of the children going down the row and I see their eyes looking with curiosity in my direction.

Most of the children look happy, a few look frightened. One of the boys had a boil on his eye, another had a large pigment defect on his face. A third boy moved rhythmically to the music but could apparently not bend his knee. One of the little girls made a game of always singing faster than the other children. The teacher quickly stopped the song and the little speed-singing girl looked innocently at the ground...she would play this game often in the future, and I took joy in observing that these children were in many ways no different from children in other parts of the world.

Finally, with a few words of broken English and some shy gestures, the teacher signaled that I should go before the schoolchildren. A couple of the children then put beautiful flower necklaces around my neck. I was being welcomed by the school as I stood there clueless in front of the group. Eventually, I managed a very uncertain “Namaste.” As I stood there wondering whether a little speech was expected, suddenly all the children began funneling to their particular classes. I was allowed to choose the class where I wanted to teach and move to other classes as I desired ... a little irritated, I wondered if they had any kind of lesson plans at all. With puppets, clay, coloring crayons, notebooks and pictures in hand, I set out to the 4th graders. I was told that it

was difficult to use the Western interactive and child centered teaching methods there in Asia...but the children prove to me that this was not true. They love to talk with puppets! The blackboard is turned into a shopping paradise where the children can choose the toothpaste, potatoes and bread (as well as airplanes and dogs) that they want to buy. With devotion and persistence, they practice their role-playing games until they are good enough to



sell any tourist their merchandise in the best English. Any words in which the sounds “F” or “P” are found give the children great difficulty. They can hardly hear the difference. We work long on these kinds of words. They always look on with awe whenever I take out new things. Even the clay gave them entertainment that they could not get enough of. Every day I try to think up new assignments where they can use clay. They make plates, cups, fruit, vegetables and other wonderful objects that make our mouths water. Then we sit down together at the table and begin.

Dinner is served! Let the child-made clay dishes be set on the table, and we learn to eat almost as properly as they do in England. What one should do with a butter knife on their plate is for most children still an inexplicable riddle when we are finished. With the 1st graders, I am forced immediately to lower my expectations of what I will be able to teach. The little 4-year-old Risiram sleeps at his table at exactly 3:00, and in the darker corner of the classroom, Mohan uses a stone to hammer on a nut that just previously had fallen on his desk (the kind of nut that turn all the children’s hands black from peeling them). Santi steals his neighbor’s writing utensil and Bikas, who cannot remember if he is 10 or 11, attempts to bring his fellow classmates into order. I learn quickly that the only methods of learning for this class are songs, rhymes and learning vocabulary, and I teach them games to achieve this. The crayons that I had brought are laying untouched on the table, and I am perplexed why nobody has snatched them up to color and draw with. For a long time I hope for more coloring enthusiasm, until I finally realize that I need to first demonstrate how drawing and coloring is done!



The teacher suggests that I use the English book. But as I am flipping through the pages, I find countless English mistakes...I decide to use my own exercises. With the 5th graders, I finally come to teaching mathematics. We go through basic calculation and try a few word problems out.

To my delight, I found an old yellowed world map and a globe in the teaching room. The oldest students want to show me where Nepal is on the map. They look in Africa, in Europe, finally they find their country. Even the teachers have difficulty with the map, and I attempt to show them the path that I traveled to come to their little town.

The first part of the school day is from 10:00am to 1:00pm. After this, we are allowed to relax in



Taradevi’s kitchen. The water pot steams over an open fire. Everything is black because of the soot, the walls, the ceiling, the pot, the buffalo meat that is hung for smoking. There is tea with cookies for us. On special days we get homemade chips, noodle soup or momos. We are not the only ones in the kitchen; travel sellers, village elders, and nursing mothers meet us there. A letter from the regulatory authorities has come in and is being read. In Sikha there are poachers underway. One must stay away from hunting wild jungle

animals. Since nobody here speaks more than a couple words of English, I watch the interesting interaction as I sip my sugar-sweet tea. At my side, a few children gather by me and try to teach me a full Nepali vocabulary. I give up trying to understand them.

The school day is long, from 10:00am to 4:00pm. It seems as if I am the only one that stays in the classroom for the whole time. The other teachers use the time to get things done in the office, giving the children writing assignments and waiting for homework that needs to be corrected. In the classes they have the children repeat the correct answers. But they are good teachers. They love the children and really give themselves to the task of teaching them. These teachers are always peeking with curiosity on my classes, looking with interest at my blackboard and wanting to touch the clay themselves. Soon they also begin teaching such crafts, make vocabulary cards, draw large clocks for teaching time and trying other new techniques that they have seen. In this way, we support each other and learn from one another. They observe my new methods and I immerse myself in the Nepalese culture and am supported by them with disciplinary problems.

A Party Member has been sent to inspect the school. As he comes to our school, he does not have much time left. In an unfriendly manner, he bids the children to spell blackboard. They have no idea who it is that is standing before them, and do not react quickly enough. Without waiting for anyone to answer, the Maoist begins ranting how terrible the quality of the teaching is there and beseeches me to show the other teachers how they ought to instruct. I stand there feeling very uncomfortable and try to not to make any of the teachers lose face....

The 6 and a half weeks were over far too fast for me. The Hindu gods demand offerings and there is once again much to celebrate. This gives the school another two weeks of holiday and I took advantage my last days there by hiking through the mountains. And the people did not let me go without a beautiful and touching goodbye party. 30 children come to me and hang flower wreaths about my neck so that I can barely breathe because of the strong flower aromas around me. They



put the palms of their hands together and look me one last time in the eyes. Fathers come and thank me, we take pictures with the teachers and village elders, I am given a last omelet to eat, and I feel obliged to give a hesitant promise that I will come back someday.