

# People, Place, Poetry

## Community Study by Sophie Thorpe

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### Introduction

Almost two years ago, I was agonising about penning the perfect start to my personal statement. I mused over 'Geography is the study of people and place'. Good one, I thought to myself. A succinct summary of all the books, articles and documentaries I'd been consuming, in an attempt to know all there was to know.

But here I am far away from the theoretical, sitting on a rice mat in our mud-walled room in Harpe with monsoon rain pounding outside and the shadow of Dhawalagiri in the distance. Only now do those words ring true, because I am immersed in this place and these people - I'm living it!

Almost a year ago, the horizon seemed very wide. I was full of a sense of expectation and possibility, both towards A-level results and the year ahead in Nepal. I wondered what I might find time for, without revision and exams as my sole focus - perhaps yoga, reading, music, running.

To my surprise, however, this year has been shaped by poetry. My mum has always been into poetry but, in all honesty, I'd written it off as only relevant during a mid-life crisis or a necessary evil to be endured during GCSE English. I've completely eaten my words! Reading and writing poems has been one of the unexpected gifts of this year.

Sticking with connecting people and place, here are the stories of four women, introduced by four poems that I have written. I don't just want to focus on the role of women in Nepal, but instead to explore what their stories unlock about food, education, globalisation, family - all squares in the rich patchwork that make up Harpe life.



*Figure 1. The view from just below Harpe down the valley towards Burtibang.*

# Part 1: Pulmoti

20.3.17

This place has infected me  
A figure walking in the long grass  
wind making whispering waves  
afternoon glow  
everything radiant, golden

From the moccai drying around the rooftops  
to the prayer flags and bunting reminiscent of  
celebrations

And I look up the valley  
and see blue melt into blue  
until there is nothing

I hear the distant roar of the river  
feel the heat and cool as the road weaves  
in and out, sun and shade

And these people  
Our school, stumbling and slow  
but fantastically loving, lynchpin of the community  
Our family, dislocated by drink but  
constantly there, utterly selfless  
whole in their brokenness

The sky is grey and moody  
but, somewhere near, light is breaking through  
bathing this place, this thin place



*Figure 2. Pulmoti and her infectious laughter outside our front door.*

Pulmoti is vivid, and I hope always remains so. She was our first proper encounter in Harpe and a defining figure. Our host mother's appearance is striking: deep set, dark eyes and a mouth always quivering with laughter which, when it comes, reveals lines etched into her face. Her lunghi wrap skirt and cholli waistcoat are always enveloped in a shawl, giving her the appearance of a much older woman - we could not believe that she was only 37! This feels like a common thread among Nepali women, who marry and have children much more quickly than the average woman globally - average age of female marriage in Nepal is 18, with 37% married even before that age, whereas the global average age for female marriage is 26.<sup>1</sup> It feels like Nepali women grew up much more quickly because of this.



Figure 3. Pulmoti preparing vegetables for dinner.



Figure 4. Pulmoti and Rosie dancing!

many men live and work abroad in search of higher salaries. A staggering 10% of Nepal's 28 million residents work abroad and send back more than \$6 billion a year, 30% of the country's revenues - only Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are more dependent than Nepal on foreign earnings.<sup>2</sup> Because so many of Nepal's young and economically active men are abroad, women do the lion's share of manual labour. However, it became clear in our first few weeks that Pulmoti was an exception to this, not involved in cutting grass to feed the buffalo, ploughing the fields or collecting wood for the fire, which were key tenants of life for almost every other woman we encountered.

ver, Pulmoti lives into her younger skin when Howeng, which we witnessed a lot of during our first danci in Harpe. For seven consecutive nights, she threw week parties in celebration of our arrival - a true dancem of fire! They involved her 14 year old son baptisadra blasting Nepali pop from his bedroom Maheers and lots of spectators with mobile phone speales videoing the proceedings, acting as both torchght and paparazzi! After the seventh night we felt spotlisted and mused about whether evening dancing exhaucontinue indefinitely. Pulmoti's vice-like grip and wouldtop cajoling were hard to refuse but, thankfully, non-sa week and a day, we were granted an early after s sleep. night'

Nepal is a country where gender roles and patriarchy are deeply embedded and this is compounded because



Figure 5. Women carrying maize.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013). World Fertility Report 2012. United Nations publication p. Table A.1

<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera, Nepal correspondent Niranjana Shrestha, 21/12/16

Initially I assumed that this was because of her elevated status or wealth, as both her husband and eldest son were abroad, and sending back money which she walked to Burtibang each week to withdraw. The family have two large houses - enough space to spare us a bedroom and kitchen for the year - as well as possessions that marked them out as wealthier than their neighbours, including a television and smartphones. Surprisingly, despite their apparent wealth, they still maintained two buffaloes for meat and milk rather than purchasing the products, still relied on subsistence farming of their land rather than buying wheat, maize and vegetables and still cooked over a fire rather than a gas stove.

Making these changes would undoubtedly have been possible, and other families had already taken similar steps. One of our Class 7 students, Asmita Bhandari, had a father working in Qatar and his salary meant that they bought milk and meat, had sold their agricultural land and cooked over gas. The effect was transformative - Asmita, her



Figure 6. Asmita's family's shop.

elder sister and mother were no longer tied to physical labour to maintain a traditional subsistence

lifestyle, and had even begun to generate their own income, opening a shop in the centre of the village. The two girls could spend time on school work and were both excelling, as well as getting stuck into creative projects like painting a world map with us, which many students did not have time for because of work at home. That family were challenging gender spheres.



Figure 7. World map in Class 7 painting team (L-R) Xanthe, Muna, Asmita, Kismat, me.

Pulmoti, we discovered, was also challenging gender spheres. There were two key reasons behind her lack of work and failure to transition to more modern methods of living. Firstly, her daughter in law, 21 year old Anita, was capable of keeping their household going singlehandedly and secondly, Pulmoti was an alcoholic. It was

clear from the outset that she was eccentric and unpredictable and, as we became more tuned in to the culture, the reactions of other Nepalis to her were revealing, rolling their eyes or disregarding her entirely. This, combined with the growing pile of 'DX' and 'Tuborg' bottles behind our toilet, confirmed what we had suspected.

As our grasp of the Nepali language improved, local friends began to ask about living with Pulmoti and we stuck to the line 'dherai ramailo, dherai natzney, dherai rhaksi cani' (lots of fun, lots of dancing, lots of alcohol), which tended to produce the universal response 'huncha, Pulmoti dherai rhaksi cani' (yes, Pulmoti drinks lots of alcohol). Our headmaster, Tara Sir, whose English was the best in the village, made an interesting comment after an exchange about Pulmoti: 'The traditional

view is that, for men, drinking lots of alcohol is acceptable, but for women it is bad because it affects everything: the children, the food, the house.' Tara Sir had pinpointed the disparity in traditional expectations of each gender's role, namely that men were completely self-determined, whereas women had children to bring up, meals to prepare and a home to maintain - in short, they had enough else on their plate.

My assumption, therefore, was that significantly more men drunk alcohol than women in Harpe, because of the social stigma attached. All of our local friends thought that this pattern held good in Harpe and, in the country as a whole, this is also true, with 51.7% of men abstaining from alcohol compared to 72.3% of women. Pulmoti, however, is the exception because of the money from her husband in Saudi Arabia, which is channelled into her drinking habit as opposed to making changes like Asmita's family have. The World Health Organisation identifies factors which make alcoholism among women in Nepal more likely, including being in the 35-65 year-old age bracket, living in a mountainous and rural area, having had no formal education and being married.<sup>3</sup> Pulmoti fits the bill on all of these factors.

The only time that Pulmoti's drinking is legitimised is at festivals or celebrations. Then, rather than being on the edge of community life, she is front and centre because dancing and drinking are socially acceptable. Festivals tend to be the place where young people are initiated into drinking and the average age that young people in Nepal first try alcohol is 13. Gender disparity is still visible here, however, given that the prevalence of drinking among boys (21.8%) is double that of girls (11.2%).<sup>4</sup> This was clear in Harpe, too, as Pulmoti's 14 year old son Mahendra was allowed to drink at Teej, Diwali and Holi (festivals of women, light and colour) whereas her 21 year old



*Figure 8. Pulmoti getting us ready for Teej, the festival of women.*



*Figure 9. Dancing at Teej festival and Figure 10. Holi, festival of colour.*

<sup>3</sup> WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol, 2004

<sup>4</sup> IAS paper 'Alcohol and young people in Nepal' by Rupa Dhital, 2001

daughter in law Anita did not drink at all because her husband thought that women ought not to, despite drinking himself whilst in Saudi Arabia.

Although Pulmoti's drinking makes life difficult for her family, it is clear how much she cares about her children, Mahendra and 5 year old son Milan. Life has not been easy for her. She is not only bringing up her own two children, but is a mother to two step-children from her husband's first marriage. Also, amazingly, she only sees her husband once every four years



*Figure 12. (L-R) Pulmoti's daughter in law Anita, Anita's son Archan, me, Pulmoti.*



*Figure 11. Pulmoti's 5 year old son Milan.*

when he returns from Saudi Arabia. I guess that she initially felt abandoned with lots of responsibility by her husband, but now feels as though she has no role because Anita is so competent. That, combined with a steady stream of income which she controls, almost makes the outcome feel inevitable. Her generosity to us was vast, and she was one of the first Nepalis to stop staring at us and start interacting with us! When we returned to Harpe after the month-long Dashain holiday in October, she gave us huge hugs and cried uncontrollably and, whether drink induced or not, we knew that we belonged!

## Part 2: Anita

10.6.17

The clouds are waves  
cascading, tumbling  
bright white  
licking the sides  
of the humming, lush valley

The sun is rising painting the  
grey clouds gold letting the  
blue sky sing  
and now there is purple and gold  
over my head; heaven is here

Yesterday the tiered fields were  
drenched in afternoon sun while  
women worked  
bare feet on crumbling soil  
hands full with tools and children

Yesterday was heart-stretch  
as fiery anger exploded  
our very foundations were shaking

Yet I know  
that this sun will rise tomorrow  
that this earth will be fruitful for harvest  
that its people will hold on  
to their incredible capacity to love that  
these mountains do not move Small  
wonder that the gods were said  
to make their home here: they do, among us



*Figure 12. Anita harvesting wheat.*

We left Harpe for the final time in June, and my last view of the village was through the back window of a jeep - I saw the strongest woman I know shaking with tears and her young son looking on, bewildered.

Anita has a gentle reserve, and dark, wise eyes that seem to have lived and seen far beyond her 21 years. Her waist-length black hair is usually tied back into a bun or hidden under a scarf as she works. She has a slight, athletic figure and moves with ballerina-like poise. Her eyes brighten and come alive when she is with her 3 year old son Archan.

Her days are long, waking at 5am for several hours of grass-cutting to feed the buffaloes and goats. She then returns home to gather wood and cook dal bhat tocari (lentils, rice and vegetables) over a smoky fire. Hand-washing clothes, washing up from breakfast or grinding grain down to flour might be her midday tasks, while Archan sleeps in his hanging basket. The afternoon is focussed on agriculture and farming, perhaps ploughing one of the family's fields, sowing seeds, weeding or harvesting crops. Then, under a flickering light bulb or by candle light, Anita once again prepares dal bhat for the family before putting Archan to bed at 9pm.



Figures 13 and 14. Anita and Archan.

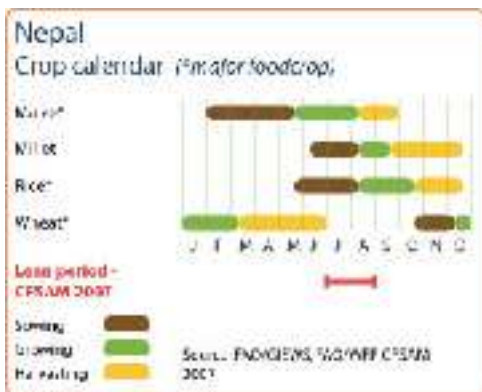


Figure 15. Nepal crop calendar from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Anita's main tasks, day by day, revolve around food production, reflecting the subsistence lifestyle of many in the village. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, providing a livelihood for almost two-thirds of the country's population.<sup>5</sup> Maize and wheat are the staple crops grown by most families. Their sowing, growing and harvesting periods frame the year: when we arrived, in late August, maize was growing and being harvested; wheat was sown in October and harvested in April and then, in May, the maize was sown again. For each crop, after harvesting, they were laid out to dry in the sun, then bashed (with Mahendra's cricket bats!) to remove the kernels and finally sieved before being used as food - either fried as a snack, ground down to a flour or fed to the chickens. Without modern farm machinery, it is a time consuming process to grow the family's maize and wheat -

and Anita's workload feels bottomless because there is always an incentive to grow and sell excess produce.



Figures 16 to 19. Maize production - (L to R) growing, drying, removing kernels, sieving.

<sup>5</sup> CIA World Fact book, Nepal's economy





*Figures 20 to 22. Wheat production - (L to R) harvesting, tying up bundles, drying the bundles.*

There is a real sense of community spirit when labour and tools are shared among the villagers. Our host family's house is one of the few to have a flour mill, so neighbours use the mill in return for a half bag of the flour produced. Likewise, other neighbours own two oxen which plough all of the local fields in return for a bag of whatever is harvested.

Female camaraderie is strong in Harpe, with groups of women planting or ploughing together. Women play a significant part in Nepal's agriculture: only 62% of Nepali men are employed in agriculture compared to 84% of women.<sup>6</sup> A working party of neighbours move together from one family's land to another, and this was Anita's core social group. One wet April afternoon, rice was being sown a few fields below our house by a group of about ten women, including Anita. Just as they had finished the final paddy field, rain clouds began to gather. Rather than dashing inside, the women spontaneously turned to playfulness, picking up fistfuls of mud and pelting one another with them! In a country where women have to bear so much responsibility from a young age, it was fantastic to see Anita and her friends sharing abandoned fun together.



*Figure 23. Planting rice and Figure 24. Anita and our neighbour planting maize with the ox.*

Sharing produce, tools and labour has always been a part of village life, using barter to share resources without exchanging money. However, this is now changing, as the sharing takes place on a national scale. Two key developments have opened up these wider markets: smartphone connectivity and improvements in transportation. Nepal now has 27.85 million mobile users - more than the total population of 26.49 million<sup>7</sup>, because of individuals having both a smartphone and a 'brick' or feature phone. Change happens before our eyes in Harpe - a bridge crossing the Nisi River was built two years ago to allow buses along the valley and, while we were in the village, a road opened allowing jeeps to the village.

For Anita, any excess wheat produced was bagged up and sold at the local shop, ending up in the low-lying Terai region. Wheat makes up 85% of the total harvested area in upland regions such as ours, compared to 15% in the Terai. By contrast, many in Harpe used to grow rice for

<sup>6</sup> 2008 World Bank data

<sup>7</sup> The Kathmandu Post article 'Mobile subscriptions outnumber population', 14/6/16

their family, but now most of Harpe's rice is imported: rice makes up 80% of the total harvested area of the low-lying Terai region, compared to 20% of upland regions.<sup>8</sup>

As well as being physically strong, Anita has incredible emotional stability, holding the core of the family together. She does the parenting for three children - her own 3 year old son Archan and Pulmoti's two children, 5 year old Milan and 14 year old Mahendra. It is clear that she has been the defining mother figure for Milan because he calls her 'ama' (mother) rather than 'bauju' (brother's wife). Everyone in Nepal is defined by their family role, and people refer to one another using their relationship rather than their name. Anita, having married into her husband's family aged 16, is responsible for his brothers, Milan and Mahendra, as well as keeping Pulmoti out of trouble. Despite Anita's central role, she is at the bottom of the family hierarchy - her husband Nabindra is working in Saudi Arabia, leaving her unable to challenge Pulmoti. Holding together this tension, Anita's patience would sometimes run out, resulting in blazing rows with Pulmoti.

Anita's husband Nabindra returns home briefly every four years, and lives a very different life to Anita, showing a vast inequality of opportunity between men and women. Globalisation opens up the international labour market to Nepali workers, who seek higher salaries in the Gulf states, often working in dangerous factory jobs that natives choose not to do. Nabindra sends a proportion of his income home each week but, because the basic cost of living is much higher in Saudi Arabia, the majority of his earnings go towards maintaining his life there. Another effect of globalisation is massive growth in smartphone usage, which makes contrasting lifestyles much more visible. Anita often receives photographs of Nabindra in his flat with items that would be considered a luxury in rural Nepal, such as televisions and computers, and is left with the impossible task of integrating the dual worlds. Even with Nabindra so far away, some of the minutiae of Anita's life are controlled. The most stark example of this is that she is not allowed to use Facebook but Mahendra, aged 14, has a Facebook account.

Our relationship with Anita developed slowly because of her subservient role family role, although she was, in reality, the lynchpin. It seems incredible that, given our closeness in age, there is such divergence in the opportunities and choices that have been open to us. While my first impression of our host family was the larger-than-life character of Pulmoti, my lasting impression is of the profound strength of Anita, holding the family together and making the most enduring connection with us.



*Figure 25. Archan and Mahendra, Figure 26. Archan and me babysitting with board marker play, Figure 27. Milan.*

<sup>8</sup> UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, National Crop Reports 2014

## Part 3: Tham Kumari

15.5.17

I thought that I was connected here  
after all this time  
but I have never felt further away  
from this place and these people  
that I love so deeply  
because they have let this happen

And I am watching from above

My student, my friend  
brightest spark, kindred spirit  
who had shared her hopes  
as we picked blood-red laligrass  
the world our oyster children,  
both

And now she is gone without a word  
married off to a stranger  
to bear his children, share his home  
and hopes are forgotten dreams let  
go of  
helpless, both

Today I look differently at the girls  
lined up in their uniform  
I wanted to freeze this moment  
where all were equal, all were children



Figure 28. Tham Kumari (centre) with sister Goma and brother Harilal.



Figure 29. *Tham Kumari and me.*

Tham Kumari is always easy to spot in Class 7, usually wearing a colourful kurta soral (traditional Nepali tunic and trousers) under her blue school shirt and wrapped in a patterned scarf. At 16 she is one of the oldest students, with most of her classmates aged 13. Her dark eyes, like Anita's, feel like they have seen far beyond her age. That sense is reinforced in her relationship with younger students at school because, just like a mother, to both reprimand and laugh whenever our lessons are disturbed by Class 1s making faces at the window.

It was clear from our first week of teaching that Tham was a bright spark. In those early days, when we were still finding our feet, we relied pretty heavily on a few quick students who could decipher our mixture of slow English, hand gestures and acting out activities - then, they could translate this into Nepali and bring the whole class along with us. She would encourage everyone to step out of their comfort zone in lessons, singing along to Beatles songs, acting out their morning routine or getting involved in high-octane dictionary races. Tham not only understands our instructions, but can respond in English and joke around: she often mimics us in response to the question 'Have you finished?', saying loudly 'One second Sophie Miss, I have not finished'!



Figure 30. *Class 7 - the extension group.*

At our school, students only move up a class when they successfully pass all of their terminal subject exams. This means that classes are a huge mixture of ages and abilities and Tham, along with a few other bright students, needed more challenging tasks than most of the class. We tried to set work for different abilities, and sometimes left an

extension group outside with an independent task.



Figure 31. *'English choir' at the school birthday*

At school Tham was an all-rounder, involved in volleyball, dancing and singing. She even helped us rally some students together to form an 'English choir' for our school's birthday celebrations, where we sung 'Deck the Halls' and 'I saw three ships'. It seemed surprising, however, when she was not one of the Class 7 students to volunteering to help paint the world map with us. We were also confused that she had not moved on to Class 8 and secondary school at an earlier stage, given how intelligent she was.



Figure 32. *laligrass cani* (eating rhododendron) and Figure 33. *grasscut jani* (going grasscutting)

This all became clear as we got to know her better. One Saturday in March, I walked to the plateau well above the village and bumped into Tham, her sister Goma and her brother Harilal who were off wood collecting and grass cutting. We spent the day together and I asked Tham if she liked school, to which she responded that she did, and so I asked why she had not moved up to Class 8 before now, given that she was clever. She explained that she had been absent from school because she was needed to work at home. In conversation it became clear that both Goma and Harilal were intelligent, but I had not realised this before because I rarely saw them in school - their attendance was about 20%. Tham also explained that she had wanted to help with the world map project, but could not be around before and after school because she needed to work at home. The issue is countrywide, with the labour force including 11% of boys and 15% of girls aged 5-9 already in the labour force, and 47% of boys and 58% of girls aged 10-14.<sup>9</sup>

Some students had even lower attendance rates than Goma and Harilal, only turning up to school for the week before the terminal exam, and these students also live on the plateau. The group of families living there are all members of the Dalit caste and endure a very basic lifestyle, for example having to carry water from streams rather than having access to taps. These families can not afford to send the men abroad, so live off the small income generated from local work. This combination of a demanding lifestyle and minimal income means that Tham and her siblings cannot afford to make school a priority because they need to help at home in order to survive. A UNICEF report investigating the impact of caste in Nepal found that 'Most of the Dalit children dropped out or didn't attend [school] due to family economic problems and the family's need for the children to contribute to household and farm work'.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the higher caste families live in the centre of the village, further down the hill and can afford to make education a priority because the children are not needed constantly at home. The students with the best attendance rates tend to be from higher caste groups such as Thakuri and Chhetri. However, not everyone fits this pattern, as several Dalit families live in the centre of the village, for example the other English teacher at school, Himala. Despite being from the same caste as Tham, education can be given a high priority for their family because children are not needed to work at home. This is because they are a wealthy Dalit family revealing that, like here in the UK, money is a caste of its own.



Figure 34. *Chhetri and Thakuri Class 7 girls*

<sup>9</sup> Nepal Labour Market Update, published by the International Labour Organisation, January 2017

<sup>10</sup> 'Social Inclusion in South Asia' by Sushan Acharya for UNICEF, 2016

Another point of conversation during that Saturday with Tham and her siblings was marriage, and I remember asking her if she had a boyfriend - she didn't - and when she wanted to get married - she said it would be good after she had finished school, marrying for love perhaps when she was 25. I remember feeling a wave of relief, because if she could communicate her hopes so clearly in English, then she should be able to undoubtedly communicate them to her parents in Nepali: she would be safe. Only a month before, our 14 year old student Nirmala, who lived on the plateau near Tham, had an arranged marriage to a 20 year old living in Burtibang. The legal age for marriage in Nepal is 20, but child marriage is still a huge problem, with UNICEF data revealing that 10% of Nepali girls are married before the age of 15 and 37% before the age of 18.<sup>11</sup> Poverty is the leading cause of child marriage, and girls from the wealthiest families marry two years later than those from the poorest<sup>12</sup>, who are more likely to be seen as an economic burden.

Tham passed her final Class 7 exams with flying colours in April and began attending Class 8 in Devasthan Secondary School - I saw this as another positive indicator that she was safe from young marriage. Just three weeks into starting secondary school, however, one of her classmates was passing our room on the way home and told us that Tham's wedding had been at the weekend, she had dropped out of school and was now married to a 20 year old in Ullidi, a village further up the valley. This felt like one of the toughest days during our year there - she was completely helpless, and so were we. It was a devastating, disorientating day for me: I had learned over the months that my hopes to change the (whole!) world for the better during my gap year were idealistic, but I had genuinely thought that I could influence the future for those I was closest to, like Tham. I had to recognise my own powerlessness as well as hers. And I had to acknowledge that although I understood much about the village and about Nepal through living here for the year, there was also much in the culture that I did not fully understand. Conversations with other villages did not help: when I said to the Headmaster, "I am sad today because I have learned that Tham has been married - she was such a bright spark and yet this happened", he simply replied "She cannot be bright since she allowed this to happen". There was also a sense of the information about the marriage being kept from us, "knowing we would disapprove", as Westerners. I had to live with the unresolved turmoil.

I wondered whether we would see Tham again. The day before we left Harpe for the final time, Tham and Harilal arrived unannounced with a bag of potatoes and hugs for us! She had been visiting her family and had come to say goodbye to us on the way to Ullidi. It was a relief to see Tham - I was keen not to probe the details of her arranged marriage, but overall she seemed positive about the marriage. We gave her the world map poster which had been on the wall of our room during the year, and marked Nepal and the UK, hoping that a sense of connection would endure for her as it would for us. Tham has taught me much - and her story stays in my heart. I hope that she will carry forwards in her heart, too, something of the energy for life that we shared, encouraging her to remain her own person in her new life.



Figure 35. (L to R) Harilal, me, Xanthe, Tham saying goodbye

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nepal/>

<sup>12</sup> 'Our time to sing and play', Human Rights Watch report

## Part 4: Himala

13.2.17

Relentless, beating, pounding, powerful  
cutting through this vast valley  
the river roared  
I could not ignore its call

Bliss

And the cold stretch of January  
is passing, thawing  
as I lie on a rock and bathe in midday sun

Slowly, tentatively  
I am forging a new pattern  
at the potter's wheel on muddy runs  
in the undulating kiln of these hills  
around the red hot furnace of smoky fires

Slowly, organically  
friendships are growing  
from teaching us to cook to cooking together  
from bewilderment at school to working together  
from teaching us Nepali to conversation

And what once seemed so alien, impenetrable  
is beginning to feel rooted, right



*Figure 36. Himala cooking by candlelight after a power cut.*



*Figure 37. Me, Himala and Xanthe at school farewell.*

Himala instantly stood out as stylish. The youngest member of the staff at our school, she was 21 and had been teaching for two years, having finished secondary school aged 19. She either wore a traditional kurta soral to school or more Western clothing, which was unusual in the village. Our headteacher Tara gently teased her that they looked like twins, both in pinstripe shirts and black trousers!

During our first week in Harpe, Himala was hands-on practical help. She taught us to make a dal-bhat, to hand wash our clothes at the tap and to mud wash our floors. Each morning and evening she stopped to check our kitchen supplies and re-stock whatever was running low. She is one of seven children. Her two elder sisters are

unmarried and working in India, her two teenage sisters are studying in Devasthan and her two younger brothers are her pupils at school! Himala's parents are both in their sixties, and she does a significant amount to keep her parents supported as well as to parent her younger siblings. Their house was always one in which we felt welcome.



*Figure 38. Our final meal at Himala's house.*

The impact of our presence in school was most significant for Himala, as we began taking her classes. As the only other English teacher, we started off by sharing lessons. Himala's approach was to speak mostly Nepali during class and use us to read any English passages or questions, which the students would then chant back to us. Both Himala and the students used a 'course guide' which was essentially a book of the answers to the textbook, and the year would be spent copying out the questions and filling in the correct answers. The

textbook itself included passages such as 'The Origins of the Ostrich' - even though there are no ostriches in Nepal and the students had not yet learned the basics in English, such as the colours!

It seemed pretty shocking to us, and we decided to take a few lessons ourselves, trying to use creative ideas and encourage students to think for themselves. The other drastic change was that we did everything in English. Initially, this was our only option, not knowing Nepali but, as our Nepali improved, we made a conscious effort to keep lessons in Nepali.



*Figure 39. Our school staff.*



'English-only' zones, so that our classes were immersed in the language. Himala began by observing our classes and translating where necessary, but soon decided that doubling up on teachers was not an effective use of time, so shifted to covering younger classes whose teachers had not turned up. This was a fairly regular problem - two of the staff were still breastfeeding babies so did not attend all of their classes, and others would sit and chat in the staffroom for a good chunk of the school day, even when they had a timetabled class to take.



Figure 40. Using coloured pencils in class.

Initially, I felt critical of the way that lessons were taught and the fact that they were often not taught at all. As we began to settle into Harpe life, we began to see why our school functioned as it did. Teachers were working from a very different baseline, with many students' parents illiterate. National literacy rates have improved greatly in recent years, from 23% in 1981 to 57% in 2012<sup>13</sup>. All of the teachers are part of wider families, and they had to contribute

to provide for them. This involves grass cutting, wood collecting, cooking, clothes washing, farming and all the other elements of maintaining your household. The government only provided salaries for three teachers although there were eight at the school, and the other teachers were given salaries made up from community contributions. The salary for their work was insufficient to cover the costs of buying a gas cooker or buying food instead of growing it, so teachers had to juggle the hours of a job around the demands of a traditional rural lifestyle. No wonder they had no time for lesson planning!



Figure 41. Himala's tuition group.

In fact, Himala was going above and beyond. Not only did she do her share of the work at home, but six mornings a week she woke at 4am and ran to and from Burtibang for a two hour computer class! On top of this, she attended all of her lessons during the school day and even ran extra tutoring for children living locally. It was clear how counter-cultural this was. As we got to know Himala better, we realised that she was globally minded - coming from a progressive and wealthy family meant that her horizons were wide, and she hoped to follow her sisters to India for work before



Figure 42. Creative writing wall.

<sup>13</sup> The Borgen Project, Nepali education, 2014



Figure 43. Class 6's well loved star chart.

having a love marriage. We also realised that the only reason her lessons were focussed on learning by rote was because that was all she had known - she had learnt that, to succeed, you had to write our and learn the answer to the textbook.

Our whole focus at the start of the year had been on improving the students' English as much as possible, and there was a clear step-change in their understanding and use of our language as the year went on. Our focus shifted, however, when we

realised that the most lasting impact of our time there would be to share some creative teaching methods with the other teachers. Himala was the obvious place to start.

One evening, while we were sharing a meal at Himala's house, we encouraged her younger brother, 11 year old Dilip, to help us make vocabulary cards for a game in Class 5 the next day. He jumped at the chance, and we asked Himala if she wanted to help. We explained how the game would work and, the next day, she came along to observe the lesson. Within a week, she had asked to borrow our Sharpies and had replicated the idea. Another idea that caught on among the staff was a star chart - we explained that all students in our classes did their homework because the reward was a star and, before long, we had to request parcels full of star stickers from our parents!

I knew before travelling to Nepal that my life in the UK and life in Harpe would feel very different, but most stark were the differences within the village itself - between the attitudes on marriage of Himala's and Tham Kumari's families and between the future career and travel prospects for Himala and for Anita. There was real mutual learning in our friendship with Himala - we shared our ideas on creative teaching methods and talked about the wider world, and she shared traditional Nepali life with us and taught us about hard work and dedication.



Figure 44. With Himala and students at school birthday celebrations.

## Conclusion

The stories of Pulmoti, Anita, Tham Kumari and Himala reveal so much about the place and people that have shaped my year in Nepal. There is such a mix - so much I have learned from each, as well as things I have been able to share from my different life experiences and perspectives. We are all (as Pulmoti's poem says) 'whole in [our] brokenness'. Women in Harpe have to juggle the demands of farming, education, cooking, caring for livestock and bringing up children - and the resources available to them, in their multi-tasking, depend on their caste, wealth and family. They are left with the challenge of integrating different worlds - the lives of family members abroad alongside theirs, the rapid developments in transport and communication alongside power cuts and landslides and simply the contrasting lives of others within the village compared to their own.

There was something raw and human about community life there which we in the UK often feel disconnected from. I was struck, on returning home, by how isolated and closeted our lives seem - lots of cars outside houses but nobody to be seen, lots of planning slots in the diary but sometimes an absence of connection when the long-awaited meeting actually happens. By contrast, in Harpe, community happened on the steps in front of our blue door and around smoky fires.

Given that this community study has been centred around poetry, it seems only right to finish it with poetry, as I feel the challenge of integrating different worlds. The first poem was written on the flight home and the second after almost two months at home.

2.7.17

I can try and tell you  
Try and put my senses into clumsy words

But there is something inexplicable  
about the way a mango tastes  
on the side of a road, when the sun is high  
golden, sweet slivers

About the singing and momentum  
of the kids on our school walk that  
carried us

About the frustration of a bad day  
when school was dysfunctional we  
were babysitting before dawn felt  
far from home, ill at midnight  
with only the toilet spider for company

There was something visceral about life  
that can only be lived, not described:  
the feel of Archan's tiny body sleeping, total  
trust  
as the dawn turned our skin to gold

23.8.17

For a while everything has been in motion  
or perhaps I have been in motion  
or both

And money and showers and supermarkets:  
this whole context, this whole world  
has felt wrong and extravagant isolated  
from the grift and fire and earth that  
grounded Nepali life

But as the dust begins to settle  
I am beginning to notice,  
in the rush of a train station  
on a grey Wednesday morning,  
the father holding his adopted son's hand  
the students hugging  
the paint-splattered artist with easel  
the music student walking to her own beat  
the melee and beauty of human life, wherever  
it is

And I am here  
wearing my Jake-inherited denim jacket  
and my orange soral, still paint splattered  
learning to live with the motion  
the dance of different worlds