

TAKING REFUGE: *Bhutanese Refugees and Kamaiyas*

A Report on Global Youth Connect's Delegation to Nepal July and August 2001

Nepal is a land of beautiful and stunning contradictions that quietly blends cultural richness with sparkling mystery. Framed by the towering power of the snow-capped Himalayas and the unending greenness of the rice paddies stretching for miles through the hot, flat Terai lowlands, Nepalis are constantly in the shadow of the land. Hinduism, Buddhism and animist beliefs coexist and intermingle harmoniously. A fledgling democratic system combines with the vestiges of a hereditary monarchy. Nepal struggles to find the balance between poverty and economic growth, the forces of globalization and the desire to preserve tradition. Amidst the sweat, monsoons and mosquitoes of the southern lowlands of Nepal, a Global Youth Connect delegation connected with two groups of oppressed and exploited peoples who are taking refuge on opposite ends of the country, the Bhutanese refugees in the east and the Kamaiyas (former bonded laborers) in the west.



GYC Delegation Prepares for Their Trip

For six weeks during the summer of 2001, a group of Americans had a very unique opportunity to learn about the daily and political reality of human rights issues as they affect real people. We heard the stories of youth who are taking refuge. We learned of their greatest hopes and their biggest frustrations. Together we worked to explore possible solutions and to create collaborative projects to raise awareness, conduct advocacy and provide moral support. We grew as individuals by testing our personal boundaries and limitations, dissecting our own culture and exploring how the choices we make affect the lives of others.

Back at home, we continue to speak out and take action. Our greatest hope is that our efforts will add to the forces already at work to create change. And, at the end of the day, we know that we have successfully traversed cultural and national barriers by connecting at a fundamentally human level, forging bonds of friendship that will last our lifetime.

This delegation supported the twin mission of GYC, working in solidarity with three participants from GYC's 2000 Human Rights Learning Community (Hari Acharya, Mahabir Chaudhari, Dhani Ram Chaudhari) and providing young men and women with a unique opportunity to engage in on-the-ground work in support of human rights and social justice.

GYC designed this project as an integral part of its Youth Action Campaign for Peace in Bhutan, knowing that first-hand experience is a crucial aspect means of learning, raising awareness and inspiring people to take action. Campaign activities have also included: speaking engagements for Hari Acharya (a young Bhutanese refugee and activist) in New York City, San Francisco, Washington, DC with schools, colleges and community groups; a letter-writing campaign to President Clinton, the King of Bhutan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the NYC City Council; articles in the GYC newsletter; stories published on the GYC web site; meetings with decision-makers regarding the refugee crisis; etc. Last summer, Hari participated in GYC's Human Rights Learning Community, a training event that brought together 13 young activists from 8 different countries. It was this training that first brought the connection between Hari's work on the Bhutanese refugees living in eastern Nepal and Mahabir and Dhani's work with the Kamaiyas living in western Nepal.

In February/March 2001, GYC received a grant from the August Jonas Foundation to lead a delegation of six Camp Rising Sun alumni on a month-long human rights delegation to the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal. GYC decided to use the opportunity of travel to Nepal to extend the trip to include a solidarity visit by GYC's Executive

Director and a Bhutanese activist to investigate the current situation of the Kamaiyas, develop a plan for further action and to create bonds of solidarity between the Bhutanese refugees and the Kamaiyas.

Bhutanese Refugee Delegation (June 30-August 2, 2001)

During the first week in Jhapa (the eastern district of Nepal where the refugee camps are located), the delegation met with political parties in exile, international relief agencies (including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), Bhutanese human rights organizations, and young refugees. GYC's original plan for this initial week had involved the delegation spending a lot of time in the refugee camps. However, due to the precarious political situation surrounding the on-going verification process of the refugees, the Nepali government denied us formal access to the camps. Therefore, all of our meetings, workshops and interactions had to take place outside of the camps. Nonetheless, each member of the group was able to unofficially tour the camps to get a first-hand look at the situation.

The subsequent three weeks were spent in internships with the following local human rights groups – People's Forum for Human Rights-Bhutan (PFHRB), Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence (BRAVVE), and the Bhutanese Refugee Repatriation Committee (BRRRC). One participant interned with Global Youth Connect. Two members of the delegation were supposed to work with a fourth organization, the Association of Human Rights Activists-Bhutan (AHURA). However, GYC was requested by the Refugee Coordination Unit, the governmental department overseeing administration of the camps, to not work with AHURA. The RCU claimed that AHURA is not a transparent organization and is not supported by the government. AHURA claimed that the RCU does not like their very straightforward way of doing business. GYC reluctantly decided to honor the RCU's request because the delegation needed to rely on the good favor of the Nepali government for its safety, access and ability to do work in the future and because the RCU agreed to let the delegation unofficially visit the camps. Each of the participants assigned to work with AHURA took on other responsibilities. One person joined the team at BRRRC and another floated between several different organizations.

The two teachers participating in the delegation organized several lectures and workshops for young refugees and for teachers. These trainings were very successful and engaged hundreds of young people in the issues of democracy and governance.



Workshop with Refugee Women

During these 3 three weeks, GYC's Director conducted fact-finding, interviewed youth who had been verified, facilitated practical workshops with youth and women and provided technical assistance to local groups. Meetings were held with the following groups: Youth Organization of Bhutan; Bhutan People's Party; BRRRC; AHURA-Bhutan; PFHRB; Federation of Bhutanese Trade Unions; Nepal Red Cross Society; World Food Programme; Druk Yul People's Democratic Party; Democratic Youth of Bhutan; and BRAVVE. She also coordinated the overall activities and needs of the delegation. (Appendices: Notes from Meetings with Organizations; Trip Schedule)

The refugees have been living in camps for 10 years and are highly frustrated with their situation. They do not feel that the current verification process will result in a lasting political solution and eventual repatriation. They are mainly discouraged by the slowness of the process and the lack of transparency. Even the recent bilateral agreement to speed up the process has been met with a healthy dose of skepticism and ambiguity. Meanwhile the Bhutanese government continues to settle people on the refugee lands causing many to doubt the government's sincerity to see the refugees come back across border of Bhutan. The Nepali government has further isolated the refugees by closing off access to the camps to outsiders.

While their daily needs (food, health, medical care) are provided for there is a palpable sense of frustration and idleness pervasive among the refugees. Their movement to and from the camps is restricted. They are not allowed to work and so must rely heavily on charity. International donors are becoming fatigued. There is no longer money available for youth to complete their high school studies. Many youth are so frustrated that they are beginning to tentatively explore the possibility of violence as a means of solving their problems. There is a clear need for

additional international pressure on the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the crisis, as well as a practical need for funds to assist young refugees in completing their studies and for activities to build leadership and advocacy skills.

There are 56 non-governmental organizations and political parties working on behalf of 100,000 refugees (in addition to a handful of international relief agencies). Many of these organizations are only one or two people, composed of family members or largely inactive. There are a few organizations that are stronger than the others and that are engaged in advocacy and program work. There is no one organization or individual which stands out as a clear community leader. Rather, the voices are many, at times creating conflict, disunity and back-biting. While most NGO leaders were open to sharing information and ideas with the delegation, a lot of contradictory information was provided and in certain cases organizational leaders lied or manipulated the truth in face-to-face meetings with GYC. In one case a government official clearly abused his position of authority by asking GYC's Director to find a job in the U.S. for his son, subtly tying it to the delegation's ability to visit the refugee camps.

Amidst the clear signs of frustration and fatigue, desperation and dreams, there are seeds of hope. There is a genuine passion for change and an honest desire to do what it takes to return the refugees to their rightful homes. Most of the young people who connected with the delegation were hungry to tell their stories and explore positive solutions. They are anxious to be active and are only circumscribed by a lack of true freedom, lack of opportunity and lack of resources.

Kamaiya Delegation (August 2-8, 2001)

GYC used the opportunity of travel to Nepal to conduct a second field visit in support of Learning Community activists Mahabir Chaudhari and Dhani Chaudhari. Mahabir and Dhani work with a community-based organization called Backward Society Education (BASE). BASE works to promote the rights of the indigenous Tharu community and other groups suffering discrimination as a result of Nepal's caste system. In particular, BASE works to empower and liberate the Kamaiyas, a group of Tharus who until recently were part of a system of institutionalized bonded labor. The Kamaiya system and the work of BASE was the main focus of GYC's solidarity visit. GYC's Executive Director was joined by Dhan Maya Alley, a young Bhutanese refugee and activist who was unable to attend last year's Learning Community due to refusal of a visa from the American embassy.¹

Last year (July 2000) the government of Nepal formally proclaimed the freedom of the Kamaiyas. However, the government had no formal plan in place to manage the implications of such a proclamation. While most of the Kamaiya are technically freed from bondage, their rights continue to be violated as the government drags its feet on distributing land that it has long promised to issue to the Kamaiyas. This largely illiterate and unskilled (except for agriculture) group is precariously squatting on public land in temporary camps while they wait for the government to do something.

The GYC delegation (Jennifer Kloes, Dhan Maya Alley, Mahabir Chaudhari) visited seven different Kamaiya camps in three western districts (Kailali, Kanchenpur, and Bardiya). These camps visits comprised the bulk of the time spent in the field. We met with only a handful of local organizations, including a representative coalition of the 17 NGOs that have been working together to distribute relief assistance to the Kamaiyas, as well as with Save the Children-US. GYC was scheduled to speak to some local government officials, but at the last minute they cancelled.

The situation in the camps is very bad (especially when contrasted with the order and cleanliness of the Bhutanese refugee camps). The one-room huts are made of sticks, bamboo and dirt. Many families have been provided with tin roofing and plastic sheeting to abate some of the problems caused by the insistent rains during the monsoon. There are virtually no health facilities and most children are not in school. Disease is rampant, exacerbated during the rains. In most camps each family has carefully measured out either 5 or 10 kattha of land. Green shoots of rice in the paddies offer their only hope of food. Many families are forced to look in the villages for work, a bleak

¹ Dhan Maya replaced Hari Acharya who at the last minute was unable to obtain a visa to travel to Nepal.

prospect in poverty-ridden Nepal. In some cases, Kamaiyas have voluntarily returned to work for their former landlords in order to keep their bellies full.

The Kamaiyas are largely outside of the care of the international community. While several international relief agencies have been providing assistance, donor fatigue is setting in and there are not enough resources available to meet the needs. Because the Kamaiyas are “internal refugees” they do not qualify to receive the assistance of UNHCR and many other international agencies.

There is a strong disconnect between policy being made at the national level and its implementation on the local level. Camp situations vary from district to district but the one thing that they all have in common is that very few Kamaiya have received land to call their own (even though the government claims otherwise). Officials are registering Kamaiyas and issuing ID cards, but have refused to issue cards to Kamaiyas whose former landlords will not sign the registration form. In some cases, families have received so-called “land certificates”. These official-looking certificates are backed by empty promises as they do not state the location of the land being granted, nor are families being shown where this land is located. The government also wants to limit the amount of land they grant to Kamaiyas to less than 5 katthas (5 khattas will only feed a family for a handful of months) while Kamaiyas themselves demand at least 10 kattha, and even with 10 katthas of land the Kamaiyas will have to supplement their income through finding outside work.



Activists Investigate Land Certificates

The camps are not protected and are vulnerable to intrusion from government officials (who conveniently point out that the Kamaiyas are there illegally) and Maoist insurgents who have a stronghold in the region. In Kailali district at least 3 camps were burned down by local government officials while the GYC delegation was touring the region.

The Kamaiyas are struggling to meet their needs for day-to-day survival. Mahabir’s organization (BASE) is very strong, well-supported and very capable of organizing at the grassroots. Because the monetary support of the relief agencies is dwindling, access to financial resources remains the number one priority for BASE in being able to meet the Kamaiyas needs for health, education, shelter and protection. They requested that GYC focus on raising awareness in the international community, especially with decision-makers, about the Kamaiyas on-going plight and need for support. They also requested that GYC assist them in mobilizing others participate in advocacy efforts on behalf of the Kamaiyas.

GYC’s Executive Director immediately engaged in advocacy through a brief meeting with the newly appointed Prime Minister of Nepal. Although the meeting lasted only a few minutes, this was an excellent opportunity to get the Prime Minister’s attention on both the issues of the Kamaiyas and the Bhutanese refugees at an early stage of his term in office. GYC handed the Prime Minister a letter with specific recommendations on both of these issues. The Prime Minister pledged to work more quickly to resolve these two long-standing issues.

At the heart of these two human rights dilemmas lies the common idea of seeking and taking refuge. The fundamental difference, however, between the Bhutanese refugee situation and the Kamaiyas lies in the tension between having freedom and meeting daily survival needs.

The Bhutanese refugees are not free. They are restricted by the confines of the refugee camps. They have no clear idea when their ability to repatriate to Bhutan may be gained. But, their everyday needs are taken care of – they are provided with food, water, education, clothing, shelter, etc. This has resulted in an unnatural sense of dependency on the outside world which unintentionally permeates its nascent movement for human rights and democracy. For 100,000 refugees there are 56 competing organizations working for change without a clear leader.

On the other hand, the Kamaiyas are now free but are unable to meet their daily survival needs. Because they have not crossed artificial international boundaries, they are not receiving many services from the outside community, but they have a freedom to seek opportunities. Through the organizing and educational efforts of BASE, the Kamaiyas feel strongly that they have the ability to claim their rights and mobilize for change. Kamaiyas greet

each other with the raising of a fist and an exclamation of “Jindabad!” (meaning unity) demonstrating that there is a high level of collaboration and solidarity among them. For 100,000 Kamaiyas there are 17 connected organizations, of which BASE is the strong leading group.

Evaluation of Success

While each participant had a different experience, the trip and the people we connected with have had a profound impact on each member of the delegation. There is a very strong desire to continue with follow-up activities. As one trip participant noted, “I feel as if I have a heavy weight on my shoulders. I feel I have the responsibility of fulfilling the promises I made to all of the refugees that I met.” Another noted, “I’m going to change the world!”

As a result of this trip, the delegation of American youth and teachers:

- Connected with Bhutanese refugees through a series of highly experiential and interactive meetings, workshops and internships;
- Explored the root causes of the Bhutanese refugee crisis and gained a better understanding of possible solutions;
- Developed skills and capacities to be better activists and advocates;
- Identified ways in which they can raise awareness and engage in advocacy on behalf of the refugees and discovered factors that may limit the possibility for change;
- Learned the complexities and beauty of a new and very different culture, and how these cultural complexities affect the nature of human rights work;
- Built long-lasting friendships that will endure throughout their lives;
- Experienced first-hand the difficult daily living situations that result from poverty and a lack of personal freedom to pursue opportunities and experiences; and
- Gained a better understanding of who they are as individuals – what is important to them, what their capacities and limitations are, how they can make a difference, etc.

Next Steps and Follow-up Activities

A lot of enthusiasm and ideas were generated by the trip participants for follow-up projects. All expressed interest in getting more involved, whether through a project of their own design or in collaboration with a project coordinated through GYC. There is, however, a natural challenge to sustain the energy that arose during the trip due to competing priorities, school and work loads, and GYC’s limited financial and human resources for follow-up coordination. GYC will engage in a specific set of follow-up activities and encourage members of the trip delegation to participate and take on leadership within the scope of these projects. These activities will be done in collaboration with the front-line activists that GYC supports, not in a formal collaboration with any organization on the ground (unless needed to implement a specific project). GYC will also encourage trip participants to engage in projects on their own and with the technical and moral support of the organization. Participation in this trip may encourage delegates to become more involved in other human rights and social justice issues that are not necessarily related to the Bhutanese refugee crisis.

The following is only a sampling of the possibilities for follow-up engagement:

- *Awareness Raising, Documentation and Reporting.* GYC will prepare a comprehensive written report based on its field experience working the Bhutanese refugees and the Kamaiyas as a means of raising awareness and persuading others to take action. This report will combine facts, information and analysis about each situation, pictures, a profile of young activists working on the issue, and recommendations for action. GYC will distribute this report to key decision-makers, interested organizations, potential funders and will make it available to young people who are a part of the GYC network. GYC will publish stories and pictures from its field work on its web site. GYC will also publish an article in its newsletter which currently reaches out to more than 1600 youth and adult allies around the world. GYC will also work to engage local, national and international media in publishing articles and information on both the Bhutanese refugee issue and the Kamaiya issue. A number of the participants have expressed their interest in writing

articles about their experience on the delegation and an analysis of the Bhutanese refugee crisis. Many of the participants will look to publish articles in their college newspapers, alumni magazines, international youth publications and in the Camp Rising Sun magazine.

- *Advocacy.* GYC will continue to mobilize young people in its network to take action as needed to put pressure on international decision-makers regarding the refugee situation. As needed, GYC can utilize its listserv and connection with the Student Action Network to sponsor letter-writing campaigns. GYC can also work closely with the delegation members during any action opportunities to encourage a wide range of young people to get involved (i.e., outreach). Since returning to the US, GYC has already requested Learning Community participants and members of the Nepal delegation to sign on to a letter to the Prime Minister expressing concern over the current plight of the Kamaiyas.
- *Fundraising for Education and New Programs.* GYC may be able to mobilize resources in order to provide additional educational opportunities for Bhutanese refugees and Kamaiya youth. GYC also hopes to build relationships with funders and key organizations in order to get them interested in supporting new and needed programs on the ground in Nepal (e.g., leadership training for youth in non-violent organizing strategies, computer training, journalism courses, women's counseling center, etc.) GYC has already established a scholarship fund to raise money to assist young refugees in finishing their high school studies. GYC should consider extending this scholarship fund to include monies for the education of Kamaiya youth and children.
- *Asia Society/PhotoVoice Event.* In September 2001, the Asia Society and PhotoVoice will host a photography exhibition in New York City that highlights pictures taken by young Bhutanese refugees of their lives in the camps (Rose Class). GYC will publicize this event through its network and encourage people to attend the exhibit. In addition, the Asia Society has asked GYC to help organize a youth workshop in conjunction with the exhibition and has invited the two teachers who participated in the delegation to design educational curriculum that will be accessed by teachers across the country.
- *Small Grants.* GYC provided a small grant to both the Youth Organization of Bhutan and to BASE to assist them in their work. In the future, GYC may wish to build the capacity of these two organizations to raise funds to support their work and to facilitate the building of relationships with foundations, individuals and organizations interested in their work.
- *Education in NYC Classrooms.* The two NYC teachers who participated in the delegation have expressed their desire to bring their experiences in the field in Nepal into their classrooms and plan to use their experience as part of lesson plans with their students (they have access to hundreds of students) and will also likely engage them in advocacy projects. They will also connect these students to GYC. One of the teachers has also expressed an interest in making human rights the focus of one of the elective courses they teach.
- *Pen Pal Program:* This program will be launched in collaboration with the two teachers who participated in the trip. GYC will also reach out to additional organizations in the New York City area to get them to participate in the project. Approximately 1,000 young Bhutanese refugees are interested in participating.
- *Collaboration and Coordination on the Two Issues.* It is important to find a common thread between the two issues (e.g., "taking refuge") and, if possible, to present most advocacy and awareness-raising opportunities as a comprehensive package that demonstrates the interconnectedness and similarities between the two issues. GYC needs to be concerned with providing equal attention to both of these issues. In addition, GYC needs to find ways to ensure that there is a continued connection on the ground in Nepal between these two issues and that activists are working in solidarity with each other. In particular, Mahabir offered to explore the possibility of organizing a leadership training for youth in the Bhutanese refugee camps and BASE offered to be of assistance in any way possible to support the refugees' cause. In particular, they extended an offer to open up access to the Prime Minister if needed (BASE has strong connections with the Nepali government). Hopefully the two will continue to share information and

strategies about effective human rights work among themselves. It would also be great to see some of the Bhutanese refugees become more active on issues outside of their own and there is an opportunity to organize them to work in solidarity with the Kamaiyas issue. GYC should seriously explore organizing a second youth human rights delegation to Nepal in December/January that combines trips to explore both issues and looks at the commonalities and differences between the two issues.