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The Rest of the Story

A Nepalese village reminds that there often is a different reality behind the romantic narrative

By Abukar Adan '17

Photography by Andrew Konnerth '17, Providence College

As we drove towards the outskirts of Kathmandu for our rural excursion, the landscape began to change. The roadside litter and the pollution of the capital city transformed into striking green rice fields under a perfectly blue sky. In the distance workers tended their crops, which stretched into the vista of rolling hills. The scene was calming and beautiful. All of a sudden our gray tourist van began to shake, as the road gradually turned into dirt, disrupting the tranquility. After a few minutes of rocking back and forth, we arrived at Tika Bhairav village.

The rural excursion was part of my semester abroad in the IHP: Human Rights Program, which is intended to give us insight into the rhetoric and reality of human rights through an interdisciplinary, issues-based approach. Over the course of four months, we travel to New York City, Nepal, Jordan, and Chile and learn from a diverse set of individuals and institutions, from academics to indigenous activists, grassroots movements to international aid organizations. Through our visit to this tight-knit village in the hills of the Kathmandu Valley, we were given the opportunity to hear people's personal narratives.

As soon as we arrived, the locals gathered to greet us with a traditional ritual. The ceremony began with elders purifying the ground and getting rid of bad energies we may have been carrying by sprinkling holy water. We then formed a line to be individually



welcomed with a tika, a bundle of bright red and yellow flowers and a prayer shawl.

As the tika was gently placed on my forehead, I looked around for a few seconds and took in my surroundings. I noticed the cracks in the houses, the remnant of last April's earthquake, the laughter of children, and the scent of marinated spices. I collected my flowers and prayer shawl and proceeded to settle into my homestay.



Immediately after the ritual, we were served the traditional samay baji dish, which consisted of rice, lentils, spinach and roasted chicken mixed in spices. The families continued to bring more food and insisted that we keep eating. I was struck by the warmth with which we were received—and soon after, by the the deeply entrenched issues faced by the community.

Our guide for a walking tour of the village was a local resident. As we traversed the narrow, dusty trails, I saw bricks, tin roofs, and partially destroyed houses still under rubble of the devastating earthquake. Our guide spoke about the slow recovery process and the hardships still faced by the people. Throughout our tour, I also noticed self-aggrandizing signs of foreign donors and international aid organizations plastered on reconstruction sites. I was frustrated by the lack of engagement with the locals and the apparent mismanagement of resources.

We spent the night in the homes of the villagers and reconvened in the morning to have a conversation with different members of the community. We learned that, in the village, communal living is an essential aspect of life. Everyone assisted in maintaining the farms, which typically sustained the families for only three to four months of the year. Consequently, many of the men have traveled to other countries in search of employment as migrant laborers in the Gulf region, where they often encounter a host of other problems, from exploitation to imprisonment.

Driven by a desire for self-sufficiency, the women, who are often heads of the house, recently started a savings fund by collecting money from members of the community. Anyone can take out a loan, at relatively low interest, to run their business or put their children through school. The money is also used for empowerment of women and literacy. It was inspiring to see their collaborative effort.

When I arrived, I found myself enamored of the lush land and the beautiful blue mountains, and impressed by the warmth with which we were welcomed. Had I not had the opportunity to directly hear from the people, I may have left with this romanticized



view of the village. Our perceptions are at times far from reality.

As I boarded our gray van and we drove away from this community, I began think to about the notion of narratives. Who gets to tell the story of this village? What will be included/excluded? How will the story be received, shape public opinion and influence national and international policy? How will that narrative affect the lives of the

people who live there?

Maybe it's time that I became a bit more critical of the stories I hear about people who never get the opportunity to share their personal narratives, and instead have others speaking for and about them. This is the lesson I take with me, especially as an aspiring journalist who will likely be in a position to speak to, with, and for others.



Blogger
Abukar Adan '17

Abukar Adan '17, is from Portland, Maine, and works as an editorial assistant at *Colby Magazine*. A government major and education double major, he aspires to contribute to the discourses on social issues through journalism and documentary film-making. He is also a blogger for the *Huffington Post*. This summer he will be an intern with Maine Public Broadcasting.

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