

▶ A Long Way From Dang

An honest smile and a presence that personify positive energy are hard to come across in a place like Nepal. The enduring antagonism amid traditions and modernity has left many tired and caught between schisms on grounded societal demands and the daring inner necessity for self-fulfillment.

However, a few brave voices and their incessant personal efforts are testimony that dreams are for the making.

Meet Balika Chaudhary.

She is not sure how old she is, and if it were not for the apparent signs of life's grievances on her face, her smile denotes the same enthusiasm for life as a young child's.

"I assume I'm around 30," she guesses.

Born in the small village of Bhagwargaon in Dang, Balika's family is one of many Tharu families that fled their ancestral hometown to Bardiya in the early 1980's.

"It was really difficult for our people there. The ruling caste wouldn't leave any daughters untouched, and so we had to flee," she says. This was just one of the many frustrations that took Balika and her

family of 10 to Bardiya as Kamaiyas, or bonded/indentured laborers.



For a family of 10, working to make ends meet on someone else's land was no joke.

"In the beginning, we literally lived in a one-room shack, and if we ate in the morning, the evening meal was never guaranteed," she laments. For her family, even musuroko madh (red pulse broth) and piseko jau (ground barley) were never taken for granted.

"If we had roti, the older ones got a whole and the younger ones were given half each," she recalls.

Economic disparity aside, what troubled Balika the most was the rigid structural positioning of women in her society and in her own family. She was not allowed to go to school, and the rhetoric behind it was the same as what has been heard many a time. In her family's eyes, there was just no point in investing in an education for her, a girl, because she was to be married off eventually in any case.

"They saw my education and possible subsequent success of no use to them," she conveys with a heavy sigh.

On the contrary, she not only went to school but also joined a local youth club. "It was all done through lying, sneaking around and sometimes even stealing," she shares.

When Balika was chosen to attend a local three-day

leadership training program, through the youth club, she was forced to make a real choice. The response of her family was upsetting, je sukai gar, marne bhayepani mar ("Do whatever, even die if you choose").

She left home that night, suicidal in thought with nowhere to go. Through a chance encounter with a man who later became her

counselor and mentor, she was convinced that her fight was not yet over.

She persevered through school. Having failed the English paper in her SLC exams, she went to tuition classes, seven kilometers from her home at four in the morning everyday, with money she had found, picked up and collected over the years.

This struggle meant nothing for her family, whose economic stability had grown over time. They had moved from being kamaiya-s to sukumbasi-s (squatters) and finally the rightful owners of their very own plot of land.

College came knocking, and for the first time, Balika was overwhelmed with her family's stance on her education. She needed Rs 1,800 for enrollment; the rest was to be taken care of by the Tharu Bidhyarthi Pariwar, a local NGO. Her family's persistence to deny her an education, despite being capable of handling the enrolment fee, baffled Balika. She managed to find her way to classes all the same, but the thought behind their refusal never left her.

Balika was chosen to represent her college in Kathmandu, and her family again looked the other way. More opportunities came her way, and she found her real passion in street theater in 2002.

There has been no turning back since then for Balika.

"Street theatre became my life," she says. Nepal was in a state of emergency, and

often she felt as though "in front of me were the army, behind were the Maoists, and there we were performing in the middle."

Her obvious talents in street drama landed her the opportunity to go to India and Denmark. Before taking off for the latter, she made another attempt to find solace in her family, but alas. In Denmark, she learned to channel her frustrations into her work; and when she came back, she was a celebrity of sorts.

"I was getting film offers, and people from NGOs wanted to hire me," she declares proudly. Her family finally agreed to come along to her premiere of a local Tharu film. Their subsequent breaking into tears at the end of the show made them realize what Balika was indeed capable of.

After working a few years with various youth groups in her region, Balika now works for Search for Common Ground, an INGO. Her passion for drama has not taken the backseat, however.

People now ask her how she got to where she is now, and what political affiliations she has. She says, "Only I know where I came from and how I got here. But I suppose, as they say, you can't know where you're going, until you know where you've been."

And that is genuine going for Balika Choudhary from Dang.

UNREPORTED LIVES

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