

May 1, 2007



I arrived at the village of Sarangkot in late afternoon on a motorcycle. Krishna, my driver, took me past terraced fields where men were tilling crops with buffaloes, past tiny homes spewing smoke from beneath their trusses where women prepared meals inside, past ramshackle schools where children were shouting and running excitedly on playgrounds. The road was rough, and he was struggling to navigate his bike up and down the steep dirt passes with the added weight of me and my luggage on the back. A warm breeze was blowing up the mountain from the lake below. The sun was setting behind the distant hills and it cast an ethereal light on the setting around me.

Krishna stopped the motorcycle in front of my new home, a colorful two-story concrete house, ostentatiously decorated, complete with a pillared balcony and terrace - clearly nicer than most homes in the village, and a far cry from the mud-walled and thatched-roofed accommodation in which I had imagined myself living.

A woman walked out to greet us. Without saying hello or introducing herself, she picked up my backpack and carried it inside. I bid Krishna farewell and followed her in. The house was as nice on the inside as it was on the outside: four bedrooms, a ceramic tiled bathroom with indoor plumbing, and a kitchen. She showed me my room on the second floor. I couldn't believe what I was seeing: I had a large bed, a mirror, two windows, a small couch, and a night stand.

"Tapaii-ko naam ke ho?" I asked the woman.

She looked at me incredulously. "My name is Indra," she replied in Nepali. "This is my house."

Indra left me in my room to begin unpacking. No more than five minutes after she left, I turned around to find two children in my room staring wide-eyed at me. They were nine-year old Bisal and three-year old Amrit, Indra's two children and my new host brothers. At the time, however, I could only assume their relationship to me; much like their mother, they said almost nothing despite my attempts to ask their names in both Nepali and English. For the next hour, they watched with great fascination as I emptied the contents of my bag - clothes, medicine, books, electronics, and toys - and played with each item when they thought I wasn't looking.

Indra finally returned to get her children. "You take rice?" she asked me.

"Take rice?"

"Rice. *Baat*. Eat?"

I nodded and followed her out of my room into the kitchen. The only thing on the dinner table was a metal plate piled high with the traditional Nepali meal, "*daal baat tarkari*" - lentils, rice, and vegetables. Indra pointed to the chair in front of it, and I sat. The setting was devoid of utensils, and I made some sort of hand-to-mouth gesture to Indra that was supposed to convey the meaning of a spoon. When she understood what I needed, she started to laugh. "No," she said in English, "use hand." So I did. I must have looked ridiculous. Indra and her children found my repeated failed attempts to get the rice from the plate to my mouth so hilarious that they postponed their own meals to watch me.

After dinner, it was time for bed. Safely in my room, I breathed a sigh of relief; I had made it through my first day with my family relatively unscathed. Lying down on my bed, I made the unwelcome discovery that my mattress was nothing more than a large piece of plywood. I was too tired to care; it was a place to sleep.

Just before turning out the lights, I heard a soft knock at my door. It was Indra and Bisal. “Bisal sleep you,” Indra said and pointed to my bed.

“Sleep me?” I asked confusedly.

She turned and left, leaving little Bisal standing alone with me in my room. “Sootam?” I asked. He nodded; I was not going to be sleeping alone that night. “Thik chaa - OK,” I said.

Before drifting off to sleep, I realized that just two weeks prior, I had been finishing up my last midterm at Dartmouth. Now, eight thousand miles away, I was eating meals with my hands and sleeping on plywood next to my nine-year old Nepali host brother up in a house in the Himalayas. My life had already changed so dramatically and abruptly, and I still had twelve weeks to go.

This was my first day in Sarangkot.

I spent the winter term of my junior year in college as a volunteer for Hope and Home: Himshikar Socio-Economic Society in the rural Himalayan village of Pandeli, Sarangkot, Nepal. Hope and Home is a Kathmandu-based NGO that places volunteers in schools, orphanages, and hospitals all over Nepal, working on projects as varied as environmental education, cultural and anthropological research, and medical internships. After a particularly rewarding home-stay with a family in Italy and my experience learning and teaching a foreign language, I decided to teach English as my volunteer project and combine this with a home-stay in a traditional Nepali home.

Before arriving in Nepal, I knew next to nothing about what to expect. I knew that I would be living with a family, but with volunteers constantly coming and going, it was impossible for my volunteer supervisor, Rabyn Aryal, to know exactly where and with whom I would live until the day I arrived in Kathmandu. Nepal is fascinating in that it is the site of cultural and geographic collisions: there are the Himalayas and Tibetan influences in the north, and the Indian plains and Hindu influences in the south. However, for me, this meant that I not only had to be prepared to live in just about every type of climate, but the myriad of languages and esoteric cultures left me unable to begin to imagine what my family might be like. Consequently, there was little for me to do to prepare for the “culture shock” that I was inevitably going to face.

The first few days in Nepal were indeed very challenging. I arrived in Kathmandu on December 13, 2007, after thirty-three hours of flights and layovers, lost luggage, and immigration scares. Kathmandu is a feast for the senses: the air is thick with the smell of diesel generators and motorcycle exhaust, colorful Tibetan tapestries and rugs hang outside stores, cars clog the streets and deliver a relentless stream of horn-honking, and cows and chickens wander aimlessly and are seemingly as numerous as people. Unsurprisingly, leaving the airport to find my hotel was one of the most overwhelming and terrifying memories of the trip. The feeling did not abate the next morning when I met Rabyn, my supervisor, and after a disastrous day of exploring the touristy and chaotic Thamel district, I wasn't so sure if I would make it for three months in Nepal.

However, Hope and Home provided me with a week of cultural orientation and language class that began two days after my arrival in Kathmandu. In this class, I learned that I would be living with a small family in a rural mountain village; as such, I also learned about cultural “dos and don'ts” that were appropriate for this living arrangement. Another Hope and Home supervisor, Bijen, introduced me to the city by taking me to the major religious sites of Swayambunath (affectionately known as Kathmandu's “Monkey Temple”) and Bodnath (the largest Tibetan settlement in the Valley). I learned how to bargain with street vendors, find cheap restaurants, use the public transportation system, and get around the city

without using a map. At the end of the week, I was feeling comfortable with the city and Nepali culture and decided that I was ready to move to live with my family.

It turns out that the Nepal I experienced in Kathmandu was a far cry from the Nepal I experienced in Sarangkot. Sarangkot is the general name given to a small mountain of about 5,000 feet near Pokhara, a large city 202 kilometers northwest of Kathmandu. There are nine villages on the mountain, each with approximately one-hundred homes. My village was called Pandeli. It had a primary school and a secondary school, both no more than a five minute walk from my home. A twenty minute vertical climb took you to the top of the mountain; here, the panorama of the Annapurna massif, Mt. Macchhapuchhare, and Hinchuli was so incredible - Lonely Planet: Nepal calls it a "religious experience" - that I find it nearly impossible to put into words.

I lived with only Indra, Bisal, and Amrit for about a week, until Indra's brother-in-law and his family of five moved in with us one day. So, for nearly all of my time in Pandeli, I was sharing one house with four rooms and four beds with eight other people and a dog.

I taught two English speaking and writing classes at the Shree Bal Prativa Primary School next door to my home. The students were mainly in their fifth year (11-12 years old) and sixth year (12-13 years old). Each class had approximately fifteen students and I would work with them for about three to four hours each day for six days a week. Because I was responsible for writing my own lesson plans, I was able to incorporate my own styles of teaching for the children (especially using games and songs). Many people have asked me how I spoke to the students without knowing Nepali; I found that most of the children by their fifth year are conversational in English, and they were able to communicate quite easily with me both in and out of class.

A typical school day started for me at 6:30 or 7:00 am, when I was woken up by either the rising sun or the cow lowing in the barn outside. Every day at 7:30, Indra brought me a cup of Nepali *dudh chiya* (milk tea, similar to chai tea). I would sit out on the balcony and read a book until around 9:00, when I went down to the barn to eat my *daal baat*. After this, I would help the children put on their school uniforms and walk with them next door to the school. I would stay there until 1:00 or 2:00. When finished, I went home, changed out of school clothes, and walked to my college-aged friend Arjun's house in another village for a lunch of *chewda* (dried, flattened rice) or *chow-chow* (Chinese chop suey). School was done at 4:00, so I would head back home and either play with the children and help them with homework or find a quiet place to read a book. Dinner was usually around 7:00, and all nine of us would cram into the kitchen or the barn to eat together. Post-dinner, I joined Yam (Indra's brother-in-law) and Indra to watch the Nepali news on their television (but I couldn't understand a word of it). Surprisingly, I was usually exhausted by 8:00 or 8:30 and would head to bed.

Saturdays were my days off from school. On these days, I usually walked for about two and a half hours through monkey-infested jungle to Pokhara to use the internet. If I needed to do laundry, I would hand-wash it in the river in the morning before I left. Occasionally, I would ride on the roof of the local bus down to the Pokhara cinema with Arjun and his friends to watch Indian Bollywood films. Sometimes I would just stay at home with a good book and sit in the sun.

Once I established this daily and weekly routine, I was able to take all of the surprises that village life threw at me in stride. January was the month of growth in the Hindu religion, and for thirty-one nights, I sat cross-legged in a circle around a sacred book and burning incense, saying prayers, ringing bells and making offerings to the Hindu gods. In early January, Arjun and I became sacred "mits" - soul mates, essentially - and we are now spiritually bound to each other for the rest of our lives. At a school picnic in February, a goat was sacrificed and everyone - including me - ate the entire animal, right down

to the blood that is boiled until it becomes solid (and it's surprisingly delicious). One time, Arjun took me to the village doctor when I had a stomachache; after taking my blood pressure and weight, the only thing that the doctor could tell me was that I was a "very fat man." And, on a fairly regular basis, I would turn on the light in the dark only to find a spider roughly the size of my fist on the wall next to the switch. I could go on and on.

My experience in Nepal was meaningful to me in many ways. First, I learned that I'm a very, very small person in a very, very small world. It is an idea that I never fully understood or appreciated before leaving the comforts of the United States and the rest of the affluent West. Secondly, this trip taught me to be a more independent person. I was solely responsible for the benefits and consequences of my decisions, and had relatively few people to turn to for help if I needed it. Finally, I know that I made a positive difference in the lives of my students. Even if they learned absolutely nothing about English in my classes, they undoubtedly learned a lot about a different culture - mine - and how it intersected and differed from their own.

At 6:30 a.m. on March 5, 2007, I said goodbye to my family for the last time. Arjun was waiting outside of my home on his motorcycle to drive me down to Pokhara to the bus station. We were all holding gifts that we had exchanged the night before as tokens of affection and remembrance. As I gave hugs to the men and offered my prayers to the women, I assured them that I would return one day to the village to see them again. I fully intend to follow through on that promise.

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