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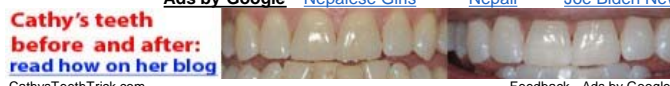
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Nurturing Nepaliness

By Deepak Adhikari

Taste of Nepal

No matter where you go, you are always a Nepali. Delicacies of New York restaurants can hardly kill your lingering taste for momos—Nepali version of dumplings. You may still long for a strong cup of tea and yearn for gundruk—fermented vegetable leaves. Eight thousand miles away from your homeland, here in this city too, there is no dearth of Nepali restaurants to serve you. Things were different when Kamal Pathak, a medical doctor, came to the US in the 1970s to further his study on Ear, Nose and Throat. He had left home with his wife Jyoti just a week after they tied the knot. America was a promised land for the couple to start their life anew. He joined the George Washington University for a five year long training. "It was totally a different place with no acquaintance around," says Jyoti, who now lives in Ithaca, New York. "We were homesick," she adds. But relishing dal, bhat and tarkari—at least once a day—gave them the feeling of being at home.

The first day she decided to cook at her apartment, Jyoti remembers, she visited a grocery in the neighborhood. She filled up shopping carts with chicken, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, vegetables and fruits. She was however not a good cook. The Pathaks had to gratify themselves with chicken soup and rice only. Months passed by. Though they met a few Nepali families, they could not find a Nepali cook book.

Jyoti knew almost nothing about Nepali cuisine four decades ago. But to an utter surprise of her relatives and friends in Nepal "Taste of Nepal"—a book on Nepali cuisine—hit the bookstores six months ago. It is an attempt to fill the dearth of information on Nepali food. The book published by Hippocrene Books hashes out 350 Nepali recipes. It won the 2008 "Best Foreign Cuisine Book" of Gourmand World Cookbook Awards. "People are surprised at the diverse culinary heritage of a small country like ours," says a jolly Jyoti.

Earlier, Mike Frame, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal, had written "Cooking in Nepal and Then Some". Mike, who owned Mike's Breakfast at Naxal in the Nepali capital, passed away three months ago. Born to a peasant's family in Minnesota in the US, he knew Nepali life in Dhankuta, developed liking to local cuisine and came up with the cook book. Jyoti followed Mike's footsteps. She would ask what condiments and ingredients were used in the food served in several Nepali social gatherings in the US. She would jot down the details. The note-taking culminated in the book about Nepali cuisine. It took her seven years to complete the book. So far, three thousand copies of the book have been sold, mainly in the US. She is elated by the positive feedbacks she is from the readers.



But she is bemused by the commonly held belief about Nepali food in the West. The belief is based on the narration from tourists visiting Nepal. "They complain of it as 'dull dal-bhat' but Nepali food is more than that," she says. She wants to prove that Nepali food can satiate people with catholic taste also. In her opinion it is a balanced diet. "Taste of Nepal" showcases the diversity in Nepali food. "A foodie would very much relish our food," she says. Nepali restaurants have cropped up in American cities, though some identify themselves as Indians to make the clients understand. It was a pleasant surprise for Jyoti to find a couple of Nepali restaurants in Baltimore, Maryland when she was there to attend an annual convention of the Association of Nepalese in America. "Nepali cuisine is well-liked by Europeans and Americans who love to travel far and wide," says Jyoti. Despite the fact that Dal-bhat-tarkari is the daily staple for most Nepalis in the US, many people in Nepal hold the belief that only burger and pizza are available in Western countries. "Almost everything people eat in Nepal is available here," says she. "The only difference is that vegetables are kept frozen here whereas you can buy fresh ones in Nepal". The condiments and ingredients for Nepali cuisine are available in Indian groceries.

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Jyoti has been exploring about Nepali food even after the publication of the book. Every year, she goes to Nepal and conducts research on Nepali foods. She learns to prepare Nepali pickles from skilled elderly women. When her mother-in-law visited America, things became easier for her. She was schooled by her mother-in-law in the nuances of cooking. "She would show me how to cook while I sliced vegetables," she recalls. She has not forgotten the mantra of her mother-in-law. She used to say, an over-spiced food is never delicious. "Cooking is knowledge, it should be imparted from one generation to another," says Jyoti. With the young generation of Nepalis losing interest in traditional Nepali food, Jyoti fears that the knowledge would disappear with the old generation.

Nepali Radio in New York



Subway trains are always crowded in the bustling New York City. Board one of the Subways bound for Queens and get off in Ridgewood. A few minutes' walk will take you to an old four-storey building. As you descend through the stair at the back of the building, you will reach the backyard. Enter the room, you will find a few chairs, a big mirror, Nepali triangular flag and a laptop. Go further and you will meet Sahadev Paudel, 30.

From this tiny basement room that doubles as a recording studio, Paudel runs *Himali Swarharu*, an online radio program (also called podcast). "This is a Nepali radio from New York City," he announces to his listeners, most of them in America but also in Nepal as well as in other countries. Every Tuesday, he broadcasts a 45-minute programme; the content ranges from current political affairs in Nepal to the news of Nepali community in the US.

Sahadev is a theatre artist by vocation. "But I have been interested in radio programmes since my childhood," he says. A native of Hetauda, he left for Kathmandu after completing SLC in 1994. A year later, he enrolled in theatre courses run by Sanskritik Sansthan and taught by Sunil Pokharel and Anup Baral.

"The training changed the way I viewed theatre," he says. One year later, he formed a theatre group named *Akhyan* and started performing street plays. He retained his love for theatre. In 2002 came the moment he had been desperately waiting for. He was offered a three-week basic training on drama by New York-based School of Playback Theatre. He feels that he was fortunate enough to easily navigate the American life in New York City. "I found a bottle of water when I was really thirsty," he recalls.

He decided to stay in the US even after the completion of the training. He had interned as an assistant producer for an Asian theatre group. But he was not able to continue acting due to his foreign accent and complexion. The performances targeted American audience and rarely required a South Asian actor. He however worked with a local theatre group, Rising Sun Theatre. Eventually, he decided to dedicate his time and energy to the radio.

Despite his brief stint as an anchor of a children programme at Radio Sagarmatha in Nepal, he had to struggle to run a radio programme in New York. In 2002, Nepali newspapers or periodicals were aplenty. But no body had thought of running a radio programme.

A tech-savvy person, Sahadev googled and found out that Columbia University's radio station WKCR ran programmes in several languages. He contacted Tom Mayor, a programme producer there. Tom facilitated him to run a programme in Nepali language. He decided to broadcast a three-hour programme in Nepali. He invited local well-known Nepalis including academician Tara Niraula, lawyer Khagendra GC, actor Shailesh Shrestha, restaurateur Mridula Koirala and actor Sudhanshu Joshi. "I was really happy," he recalls. The programme title 'The Voice of Himal' was the genesis of the podcast he launched a year ago—Himali Swarharu. The programme has over two thousand listeners.

In 2003, Sahadev returned to Nepal. In Kathmandu, he formed another theatre group, Pipalbot Playback Theatre. Many people were curious to know about him when they were told that he was trained in theatre in the US. He also taught drama in Lincoln School in Kathmandu. In the autumn of that year, he traveled to Japan. He resumed theatre returning to Nepal after a month. But he also realised that it was tough for an artist to survive in Nepal. "I would often think about going back to the US and earning some money," he reminisces.

Back in New York, he had to do numerous odd jobs to earn a decent living. He worked from 8 pm to 8 am, sleeping during the day. "I did not see a sun set for six months," says Sahadev who now works in a health club from 8 am to 5 pm. This schedule provided him with time to indulge in his passion. "Then I started exploring about online radio," he says. He once again used Google to search for podcasting. After coming across a few websites, he figured out the ways to do a podcast. Like a reporter armed with curiosity, Sahadev kept on exploring. After learning the tricks of the trade, he launched nepaliradionyc.com on July 10, 2007.

Every week, he spends a slice of his weekly income (200 USD) to produce the programme. Even amid the busy working hours, he thinks about providing up-to-date news and entertainment through it. He has extended the programme from half-an-hour to 45 minutes, adding various segments such as open mike, community news, among others. He would interview Nepali politicians, actors, journalists, intellectuals from Nepal as well as those visiting the US. The programme also features Jiwan Yatra, an autobiographical segment about the life-experience of well-known Nepalis in the US. The programme airs poems and Nepali songs too.

Helping Hand from USA

In 1996, Omprakash Gnawali went to Butwal with his classmates at St. Xaviers Campus and spent a few days understanding the plight of homeless people there. They also launched awareness/educational campaigns. They wound up the programme after distributing gifts to the street children.

The visit left an indelible imprint in this 31-year old's mind. "During this trip, I got a first-hand experience of what it takes to be able to help others—you need lot more than good intentions," says Gnawali who is pursuing his PhD in computer science at the University of Southern California.

Six years after the memorable event, he was talking to Anita Shrestha, a social worker in Nepal. Together, they decided to establish an organisation to grant need-based assistance to poor children. He was doing his Masters in computer science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). "She and I hit upon the idea and we recruited some friends. Most of the founding board of directors were MIT students," he says. Thus was formed Nepalese Children Education Fund (NCEF).

Om is now the CEO of NCEF. "The idea is not novel but something that got us motivated," says Om, "We gathered a group of students who wanted to stop talking and start doing." Born in Palpa, Om migrated to Kathmandu with his parents when he was one-year-old.

Every year, NCEF forms a selection committee of five to seven volunteers. They evaluate the applications and select students with a majority vote. They typically look for family assets and income below a certain threshold, says he. NCEF regularly monitors the progress of the kids and support them up to grade 12. Why education for kids through NCEF? Om says, "Most people that I know who have been successful in leading a life with some basic human dignity have been able to do so through education."

Om passed SLC from Siddhartha Vanasthali in Balaju. Then he enrolled in St. Xaviers Campus for two years before coming to MIT. "I made lots of friends in Thamel and Jyathatole and spent most of my time playing hide and seek, rolling the wheels, and marbles in the narrow alleys of Jyatha and Ason, and flying the kites during Dashain," Om says while recalling his childhood days in Kathmandu. "I was very busy!"

Om says Kathmandu's inequality forces one to think about charity. "One cannot but be motivated for social work



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when one walks on the streets of Kathmandu," he says, "You can see humanity in its ugly forms there." He always wanted to visit many parts of Nepal and see lifestyles of the countrymen. After completing SLC, he along with a friend embarked on an east to west tour of Nepal. Om also went on a number of trekking trips including Sundarjal-Dhunche, Baglung-Annapurna Circuit area and Khaptad area.

An avid trekker, he says he was surprised how easy it is to get fooled and cheated by people during trips. "I was surprised that if you get past the inertia, it is entirely possible even for a person with a very modest budget to visit places that are famous." For example, visiting Khaptad only requires a daylong walk from the nearest road with regular bus services. Visiting Gosainkunda only takes a few hours' walk from the nearest road. "I was surprised that one could cover such distances so quickly even in a country like Nepal," he says. "We can at least make ourselves aware of who lives in the country; where they live and how they live."





According to him, beautiful hills and mountains are Nepal's assets. "We should develop tourism before it is too late," he says.

He points out that there are very few qualified people who care to serve the country. Rather than buckling down to make a new Nepal, we spent time blaming each other and indulge in our own poverty.


"Granted there are not a lot of people who are in a position to help others but it has become too convenient to blame the leaders, political instability, bad business environment, or corruption," argues Om.


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
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