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Nepal, Factor 15

Nepal: Government and the Fight Against Gender and Cultural Discrimination

Imagine a country approximately the size and shape of the state of Tennessee, only about 56,136 square miles. For many it would be difficult to fathom such a relatively small country having much to offer. However, Nepal is exceedingly diverse, filled with many different peoples and lands. Inside those 56,136 square miles lay eight of the world's ten highest peaks, including Mount Everest, along with rolling hills and mountain streams, and flat, fertile terrain. The climate itself varies from arctic high up in the massive mountains, to temperate in the Central Hills, and finally to subtropical in the flat Terai region. The people of Nepal reflect the diversity of the land itself. Of 29 million Nepalese people there are a great number of different ethnicities and castes, which are sometimes used interchangeably. The Brahman, Chetri, Newar, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, Tharu, and others are all ethnic groups that call Nepal their home. Most of these groups descend from migrations out of India, Tibet, and Central Asia. Speaking over one hundred regional and indigenous languages, there are a few things that tie many of these different people together, aside from residing in the same country. Religion is considered extremely important to the people of Nepal and eighty-one percent of the population practices Hinduism, Islam with four percent, and other religions with four. Also, eighty-six percent of the population lives in rural areas; who, for the most part, work on farms. In fact, the agriculture industry comprises seventy-six percent of the entire work force according to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook.

A typical family in Nepal is dependent upon very small-scale subsistence farming for their livelihood. Maize, millet, paddy, mustard and legumes are the major crops, with maize being the most important. In addition to these crops households own an average of 2.5 buffalo, 3.5 cows, two bullocks, 5.2 goats, and 9.7 poultry. Thirty percent of the rural population lives on less than twelve U.S. dollars per person per month. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) most rural families are large, landless or with very little land, and rife with high illiteracy rates. Usually these people are of the lowest caste or indigenous population. Landholdings are, on average, a mere 0.8 hectares, making life a constant struggle to survive. In addition to this most families are deprived of basic social services such as primary health care, education, clean drinking water and sanitation services. Lack of cultivable land is one of the main problems facing Nepalese farmers today. Most of the poor are landless or depend on plots of land that are far too small to meet their subsistence farming needs.

Nepal consists of three basic separate ecological strata. The southern Terai plain, the Central Hill Complex, and the northern great Himalayas comprise different areas. The Terai region is considered subtropical and a mere one hundred meters above sea level. The majority of this area is covered in forest, though it is thinning out very quickly, and agricultural plots that feed most of the rest of the nation. The Central Hill Complex or "*Pahadi Bhag*" covers approximately sixty-four percent of the land area of Nepal. It lies between the southern Terai region and the northern mountains. Fifty-seven percent of the total population resides in this area, and it contains fertile, populated valleys such as Kathmandu and Pokhara. This area was once full of dense forests, but deforestation continues to degrade the habitat. Lastly, the northern area of Nepal contains the great mountains known as the Himalayas. In Sanskrit, Himalaya means "abode of snow" an apt description for an area containing eight of the fourteen highest peaks in the world including Mount Everest, the highest mountain of all. Just a mere eight percent of Nepal's population live in this rugged area; those that do are very closely linked religiously and culturally with the neighboring country of Tibet.

There are many barriers to improving farming in Nepal. They range from cultural and social barriers to physical and environmental. Deforestation, soil erosion and landslides, contaminated water, and the extreme hierarchical distinctions between classes are just a few of these barriers.

Deforestation is a problem that spans both the Terai region and the Central Hills region. This deforestation is, for the most part, caused by the overuse of wood as fuel for lack of viable alternatives. Despite the necessity for this fuel the destruction of the forests is causing much, much more harm than good. Another grave problem is soil erosion and landslides as a consequence. Water contamination is another major issue. High levels of arsenic, human and animal feces, agricultural runoff, and industrial effluents all work together to poison the waters of Nepal.

Soil erosion, instigated by deforestation and other factors, and the many problems it causes is another concern for the farmers of Nepal, and the rest of its citizens as well. Landslides, raised riverbeds and flooding, and non-arable soil are just three of the problems caused by the loss of the top soil. These things not only threaten farmers but all other citizens of this country as well. Landslides and floods have damaged countless homes and taken many lives. Due to the extremely wet climate, top soil is easily dislodged in the mountains and Central Hills and swept down into the Terai region, causing the flooding due to higher riverbeds.

Contaminated water has many negative effects on the people and ecosystem of Nepal. The arsenic contamination is especially serious. According to an article published by IRIN, 1.8 percent of Nepalese wells contain more than fifty parts per billion of arsenic. To put this in perspective, the World Health Organization's recommends that there be no more than ten parts per billion of arsenic, which an additional 5.6 percent of Nepalese wells exceed. Overall this means there are approximately 84,411 contaminated wells in this small country.

Lastly, the deep social disparities between classes are a major barrier to any kind of improvement in Nepal. The majority of Nepal's poorest citizens are of the lowest social castes in the country. Additionally, the majority of these poor citizens are also farmers. Thus most of Nepalese farmers fall into the lowest castes. This social distinction is a source of extreme discrimination against these people. As a result of their being in a low caste, they are considered unimportant to those in higher castes, those in power. This creates a cycle of discrimination towards the poorest citizens of Nepal, restricting aid they might get and their ability to make a living farming the land. Being seen as the lowest members of society mean that Nepalese farmers get the "shortest end of the stick," so to say, when it comes to any type of aid or assistance. In addition to this discrimination against those of the lower castes, there is also discrimination against women in plenty. Statistics state that the Nepalese population is 50.1 percent female. At first glance that seems like an even split, but it is not distributed evenly. In the urban areas there are much more men than women, but in the rural areas the opposite is true. This has come about because of a system biased against women, favoring men in employment and education. The huge gap between men and women in the literacy rate demonstrates this precisely. In Nepal the literacy rate for women is a mere twenty-five percent, while it is 54.5 percent for men, though this massive disparity is improving with newer generations.

To understand the government instability in this country, one must first understand the fact that Nepal has never been a solid republic or democracy. Recently, in May 2008 to be exact, Nepal finally broke the tradition of rule by monarchy by establishing the country as a republic. This didn't come about easily, however. In the year 1962, Nepal's very brief, three year excursion into multi-party politics ended when King Mahendra suspended parliament and took sole charge of the country. Twenty-nine years later, in 1991, democratic politics were introduced after much protesting by the people. However, this was marked by frequent governmental changes. In fact King Gyanendra, the last king of Nepal, assumed

executive powers both in 2002 and 2005. Another factor adding to the instability of the government was the Maoist insurrection, lasting ten years and leaving more than twelve thousand people dead and one hundred thousand displaced according to figures calculated by the United Nations. In December 2007 the Maoist rebels finally talked the parliamentary government into dissolving the monarchy which, in turn, left the Maoist Party the largest parliamentary party after elections took place in April 2008. Soon a Maoist-controlled government seized power. It wasn't long, however, before the Maoist-controlled government fell apart, only a year later in fact; it was replaced by a different coalition that completely excluded the Maoists from rolls in government. As one can see, it has only been until recently that the Nepalese government has pulled out from under the shadow of the monarchy that had ruled it for so many years. Today the president of the country is a man named Ram Bran Yadav. He became the first president of the republic government of Nepal in July 2008, when he was backed by the second-largest parliamentary party along with two smaller parties. However, the role of president is a mostly ceremonial position. A constantly changing government, overshadowed by civil war and unrest has left Nepal's government weakened and filled with strife, making it inefficient at distributing aid to its citizens who are most in need.

There are many things that the Nepalese government could do to improve the lives of rural farmers in this country. Most predominately, however, is the need to cultivate both gender and cultural equality. First and foremost the government must pursue strong legislation, making discrimination and bias illegal. However, laws themselves cannot force people to treat everyone equally, but they are the first step in the direction of gender and cultural equality. In the United States the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution passed in the year 1920. This amendment made gender equality a law, paving the way for women to reach the heights that they are at today. But there is still a fight for true equality in the United States today. This demonstrates that laws are the first step towards equality, a nudge in the right direction per se, but the Nepalese people will have to begin to change themselves as well.

The next step that could be taken to help the farming families of Nepal is education. With such a high illiteracy rate, education needs to be a high priority for the government of Nepal. By teaching the people of Nepal, a better understanding of many different factors affecting their lives can be reached. More knowledge of farming practices to reduce soil erosion and increase the amount of farmable land will help with crop yields. Knowledge of everyone's roles in society could, perhaps, increase equality. If one were to look towards the countries in the world that keep a strong emphasis on education, one will also see that they are also more strongly focused on civil rights and civil equality as well. The United States, despite its many trials throughout its past and even still today, has what could be considered a strong education system and also a strong focus on civil rights. Even though there are still many obstacles to true equality in the United States, it is one of the more equal nations of the world. Education has a very strong part to play in this. If Nepal were to begin a vigorous campaign to teach its people, to simply give them an understanding about the worth of all members of society be they women or men and women of lower castes, then, over time, the conditions would improve for the poorest citizens of this country.

In addition to the Nepalese government stepping up and taking action the global community can help as well. First of all attention must be brought to this issue. Not many people know anything about Nepal beyond the fact that Mount Everest is in this diverse and deeply troubled country. By bringing attention to the urgent plight of all Nepalese citizens, the world community can begin to take steps to aid this country's poor and perhaps even aid the government as it tries to address the many issues facing it today.

One organization working to aid this country is Volunteer Aid Nepal. According to its website Volunteer Aid Nepal, or VAID Nepal is a, "non-government, non-political, non-profit development organization working under the principle of 'Development through Volunteering.'" Essentially this organization uses the work of volunteers to empower the people of Nepal in what is called a "bottom up" development strategy. By volunteering time and knowledge, people from all across the globe can help

local volunteers take action to improve the conditions of people living under the strains of such extreme poverty, rather than waiting for aid to trickle down from those that are much more fortunate such as leaders in the Nepalese government. By investing in organizations like VAID Nepal and others such as the World Food Programme, everyone can help this country's poor citizens and farmers rise up out of the shadow of poverty that has marred their existence for so long.

Nepal is a small country, diverse in land and population. Romantic images of craggy peaks breaking the horizon as Sherpas visit ancient temples with many-colored prayer flags flapping in the cool mountain breeze abound in people's minds at the mention of this little nation. However, there is another side to the story. It is a torn nation as well. Torn by civil war, political strife, a strict and discriminatory caste system, an ineffective educational system, and gender discrimination which keeps the poor in the worst possible living conditions. Many of these poorest citizens are farmers. These farmers are men and women of the lowest castes, looked down upon by the rest of society, but essential to the future of their nation. Without these farmers many of Nepal's citizens wouldn't be able to get even the insufficient amount of food that they now receive. Without these farmers the very foundations of this country would collapse. But these essential citizens are facing many barriers to their way of life. Deforestation is causing dangerous soil erosion which in turn reduces the amount of land that it is possible to farm. Contaminated water risks the very lives of these farmers and is unsuitable for irrigation, causing poor crop yields which makes life even more difficult. And lastly, gender and cultural discrimination insures that the dire needs of Nepal's farmers are ignored or made to be less important than they really are. All together these many barriers may seem impenetrable, but there are things that both the government and the global community can do to help. The government can pass legislation enforcing equality and promote education to give knowledge to these farmers of sustainable farming practices that will insure larger yields, along with the ability to farm the same land year after year. Internationally, people can help by supporting aid organizations working to help Nepal through whatever means necessary. If we all recognize the importance of even a small country like Nepal, and we all work together to help this nation through its time of need, perhaps Nepal could rid itself of its label as one of the poorest countries in the world. However, in the end, it is not the government and the global community that can truly better Nepal as a country. They can give the push in the right direction, but it is the Nepalese people that truly hold the future of their country in their hands. Without their willingness to work for a better future for themselves and their country, Nepal will forever be enshrouded in the abysmal cloud of poverty and hunger.

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