

Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Excerpt Skype Call between Susan Thieme and Raju Bhattarai (2019)

Susan Thieme: Before you came up with the idea of organising migrant groups you once said that it was important to give them a certain amount of financial literacy. How did you achieve this?

Raju Bhattarai: We wanted to establish an *economic literacy* within the migrants. People didn't know where to put their money. They used *hundi*¹ for money transactions, but often lost a lot with this practice. So, we collaborated with a bank and tried to spread the knowledge, how the banking system works. For that we created posters with cartoons, which showed a Nepali man going into a bank to save his money there. We published it everywhere in the area to show people that there is a bank they can use and how they can store their money.

ST: Why has it been important for you to help migrants building own organisations in a second phase?

RB: We saw that Nepali people were often not recognised by the politics. So the best way of getting recognition is to organise people. There have been organisations, but those were ignored. Some organisations conducted their work from America, and they couldn't connect to the people living in India. But we wanted organisations that are led by the people in India themselves, to minimise the amount of political influence from outside.

We wrote a proposal for them to get things started, but it took a really long time. And it was hard work. Often you hear that working in NGOs is like: being well settled, having a good salary, a car, nice hotel rooms; but this was never the truth for us. We had less sleep and a lot of trouble with the police, that searched my office a few times. I remember that I've gotten calls in the mid of the night from migrants that were captured by the police. I had to sneak out of home at 2 o'clock to go to the police station.

For me it was always important to let the migrants find their own way in becoming organised without too much intervention from us. Often people and organisations came to us and wanted to take benefits from our successes and organise things under our name and banner. But we didn't want this. It was important for us that they find their own way.

¹ An Indian financial instrument. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundi>

ST: What else did you do to become visible to other people and to politics?

RB: For example, we organised a big convention in a large auditorium. A lot of people from Indian organisations came to it and also political organisations attended.

And we did a silent walk through Delhi. A lot of migrants came and walked down the road, just whistling and using rattles. We didn't shout, no words, we didn't demand anything. This made more pressure to the government and finally we got invited by a ministry. This is a big thing in India because when you get called by a ministry you are either a big man – or in trouble. I was in trouble. In the end, we denied to meet and demanded that the migrant organisations founded by the watchmen would be registered as a trade union² – which was always denied at that time. They wanted these organisations to be just *associations*. But this wouldn't have given enough credit to their work. There are tons of associations in India, but it was important to us that their trade is being recognised.

ST: You told me that after this, you got a lot of problems. What happened?

RB: After our demand to recognise the *watchmen* organised by SASC as a trade union, things became very political and we faced a lot of trouble. The police came to my office, collecting documents and started records about us. They sealed our bank accounts and tried to find out what my linkage to Nepal is.³

At that time, there was a murder in India. The police commissioner gave out a warning afterwards, saying: "Don't hire any Nepali". We condemned that in the newspapers, because this was a strike against the 1950 treaty between Nepal and India that guarantees that Nepali have full rights to work in India.

We tried to conduct a meeting between the police commissioner and our people, so both sides can help to solve the conflict. But they declined every attempt for it. Instead they started an investigation about me. This was in about 2000. I didn't know that at that time until I got a letter from the court in 2006/2007. They blamed me that I was involved in Maoist conflicts. They blamed me for using the money of the organisations to help Maoists to escape to Delhi and to support them here.

² The change of status to a trade union guarantees that the work of watchmen is recognised as an official trade and profession. The trade union can then officially advocate fair working conditions.

³ At that time, there was a civil conflict in Nepal. It lasted from 1996 until 2006.

It is hard to fight for the rights of people. Whatever I was doing for these people, I got troubles with the government. And I'm not that kind of famous guy. I wouldn't have much support in prison. There are thousands of people like me in India. I knew that the police would come to my home and family soon, and I didn't have the money to fight this case in court to prove that I'm not guilty. So, I went to Europe.