

## Interview with Sangeeta Thapa

Sangeeta Thapa is the Founder Director of the Siddhartha Art Gallery and Siddhartha Arts Foundation. In 2009 she established the Kathmandu Contemporary Art Center in collaboration with Celia Washington from the UK. The KCAC serves as a residency space and is located within the historic Patan Museum. KCAC also provides scholarships to young artists. Thapa is also a board member of the Patan Museum Development Committee. Over the last 28 years she has been actively involved in the promotion of contemporary art in Nepal. She works closely with the Australian Himalayan Foundation in providing bursaries to young artists. She has curated over 300 art shows of both Nepali and international artists at Siddhartha Art Gallery.



The Siddhartha Art Gallery believes that culture is an important component of development and co-ordinates special events that bring together artists, writers and musicians. The Gallery focuses on areas such as socio-cultural and political issues, as it believes that art can play a significant role in shaping national and international perceptions of the nation. The Siddhartha Art Gallery projects itself as a Gallery that has a conscience and is committed to social responsibility. The Gallery has organized book launches, poetry reading, lectures, musical concerts and fund-raising events alongside its exhibitions. Over the years, the Siddhartha Art Gallery has donated money to a range of projects from the Red Cross Earthquake Relief Fund to the Maternity Ward for Underprivileged Mothers in Prasutigriha Hospital, to the renovation of the Krishna Mandir and Tumba Narayan temple in Patan. In 2014 she coordinated Artist Relief Fund for flood victims and for earthquake victims in 2015. She co-ordinates workshops with visiting international artists and Nepali artists and students, and has conducted community art projects. She works as a consultant for collectors of Nepalese art and has won awards such as the Annapurna Award, Celebrating Womanhood Navadevi Award 2006 (jointly presented by Ministry for Women and Social Welfare and Creative Statements for contribution in the field of arts). In 2005 the Siddhartha Art Gallery won the Best Gallery of the Year Award. Sangeeta was also an art columnist for VOW magazine and has written for Nukta Art Journal, which is published in Pakistan and the prestigious Gallerie Magazine which is published in India. She has written a book on the drawings by the reclusive Nepali Artist Manuj Babu Mishra and has contributed a biographical essay to the volume 'Telling a Tale' published by Archana Thapa. Through the Siddhartha Arts Foundation she has held two

editions of the Kathmandu International Art Festival in 2009 and 2012 which brought international artists from 35 countries and which clocked over 4,00,000 visitors over a month. In 2014 she received a diploma in Arts Management from the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center. At present, the Siddhartha Arts Foundation is conducting classes in Arts Management, Art Criticism and Art Appreciation.

## Can you tell us about your family life and your childhood and who or what inspired you?

I was born on 5 May, 1961 in Thapathali, Kathmandu. I am the second daughter of Himalaya Shumsher Rana and Vijaya Rajya Laxmi Devi Laxmi Rana. I have an elder sister, an elder brother and a younger brother. My father was the Finance Secretary and the first Governor of Nepal Rastra Bank. Due to my father's association with the Nepali Congress, there were rumours that he might have been arrested so my father resigned from his job and went underground and fled to New York where he began a new chapter in his life with the United Nations. My mother took us all to America to join my father in 1962. I was just a year old and my younger brother was 22 days old when we made this move.

My mother is very bright and intelligent. She did not finish a University degree as she was married at the age of seventeen, but her wisdom has guided many aspects of our family life. Though she was very much a homemaker and did not have a professional career, she was fiercely independent and was preoccupied with her own building projects in Nepal. This was at a time when women did not undertake such projects at all.

I can proudly say that there was no discrimination between sons and daughters in my family. Even my grandfather Lt. General Laxman Shumsher Rana, broke all traditional norms when he sent my two aunts to Russia for further education. This was a landmark decision as during my Grandfather's time most of the girls went only to India for their further studies. Following this bold step, my Father was determined to give us the best education and sent us to school and University in the UK and USA.

As descendants of Dev Shumsher's family, who were exiled to east Nepal and then India, we cannot be placed into the category of 'affluent Ranas'. Dev Shumsher was banished for his democratic values, which conflicted with the autocratic rule of the Ranas. I only learnt about the internecine struggles within the Rana family after I came to live in Nepal in 1983. My siblings and I did not spend our formative years in Nepal, so we were removed from the feudal histories of our families. My

father served the UN in different countries: USA, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Pakistan. I learnt more from these travels than I ever did in school or University.

My sister Pratima Pande, has received an MBA from the Queen of England for her work with Nepal-Britain Society. She is also the Director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust. My brother Ashoke Rana, is the CEO of the Himalayan Bank, Nepal. My younger brother Amar Rana deals with real estate. However his innings have been marred by the crash of real estate in market in Nepal.

I passed my childhood abroad and completed my school education in the UK. We were never over-indulged as children. My Mother upheld traditional Nepali values and was very strict. However our lives were unconventional, as we moved from country to country with my Father who worked for the UN for 26 years. My mother spent a considerable amount of time away from the family as she was busy with construction works.

Although he was a busy man, my Father used to help my younger brother and I complete our homework, and he set aside time to play sporting activities with us. My father inspired me to do something in my life. I was given the freedom to study whatever I wanted. I was always interested in art. I used to dream that I would be an artist or a writer in my childhood. I even attended an art college in the UK but I was disillusioned while I was there. I was hounded by a niggling feeling that it was a selfish obsession. How would I be able to serve my country or humanity like my father? I wanted to emulate him in so many ways.

I completed my O Levels at the United World College South East Asia, Singapore from 1976-1978. I also achieved my A Levels at Rosemead School, Sussex, UK from 1978–1980. In 1981, I completed the Foundation Year at the West Sussex College of Art and Design in the UK. By this year, I made the decision that I wanted to pursue a career with the UN and changed my area of study to Anthropology and Mass Communications at the George Mason University, Virginia, USA. However my life took an unexpected turn and I was unable to complete my undergraduate studies. My mother was worried that I would not return to Nepal - the pressure to return was tremendous. The same year I was introduced to my future husband Sunil Thapa in Nepal, who was also a student in Claremont Graduate School in California, USA and was interning with UNFPA in New York. His interest to join the UN, signified an overlapping of our dreams. I was married to Sunil on June 5th 1983.

As I had spent 22 years away from Nepal, it was initially difficult for me to adapt to my new life in Nepal as a daughter-in-law. However, I was fortunate as I was treated like a daughter of the house. I was constantly guided by my mother in law, who taught me how to conduct the pujas in the house,

how to cook Nepali food and how to run a household. She was an integral part of my children's life, as is my father-in-law, my husband's three sisters, and the precious uncles and aunts who live next door and are part of the family support system. My husband and his family gave me the freedom to follow my dreams. My mother-in-law looked after my two children while I was busy with the Gallery.

On the family front, I am proud of the humanitarian work that my husband does with UNHCR, even though it has meant he has spent a lot of time away from home. I have accompanied my husband on his assignments with UNHCR to Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Australia, East Timor, Iran, Kosovo and Kenya. Sunil and I were also committed to give our children high quality education. I take pride in the fact that my daughter has completed her Masters. The fact that both my children have now completed their education gives us much satisfaction. Many young Nepali graduates leave the country, so I am glad that my children have made the conscious decision to return and work in Nepal. I am also proud of the documentary that my daughter Seetashma made, 'Voices of the Abandoned', which focused on the plight of Nepali children during the armed conflict. Today, Seetashma is working for World Food Programme and has travelled the length and breadth of Nepal and has done a stint in Tanzania. My son, Siddhartha worked with the Helen Keller Foundation and has also travelled across Nepal in a bid to understand development practices in Nepal, its failures and its strengths. He is now busy with politics and helping his father who took early retirement in 2012, joined politics, won the election from Dhankuta where he was born and is currently the Minister for Commerce and Supplies in Government of Nepal. Unlike my parents, I have never limited my children's access to education or gone about finding a suitable bride or bridegroom for my children. With the education we have given them, my children can do this on their own.

### Can you tell us how you came to establish the Siddhartha Art Gallery in Nepal?

I returned to Nepal in 1983. An intensive tour of the local galleries made me realize that the contemporary art scene in Kathmandu needed promotion from the private sector. In 1985, I was able to raise funds privately to sponsor three prominent Nepali artists - Manoharman Poon, Jagdish Chitrakar and Shashikala Tiwari - to exhibit at the October Art Gallery in London. In 1987, I established the Siddhartha Art Gallery with Shashikala Tiwari, an eminent Nepali painter. As a curator, I was involved in various aspects of running a gallery, such as the preparation and design of the invitation cards, art cards, posters and brochures. I also installed the shows and wrote the accompanying curatorial texts for the exhibitions. I organized the publicity for the artists and the Gallery, which meant documenting and managing the promotion of Nepali Artists in cooperation with national, international and private media. I established venues for revolving exhibitions at the

Hyatt, the Annapurna Hotel and Cafe Mitra in Thamel. In a bid to bridge the art world with music, I initiated the Siddhartha Sandhya Musical Evenings at the Gallery. I also set up a website for the gallery ([www.siddharthaartgallery.com](http://www.siddharthaartgallery.com)) to promote and market contemporary Nepali art through the internet. We were the pioneer gallery in this respect. I learnt about marketing, public relations, and accounting on the job.

I also established an events management company, Infinity International, with my sister Pratma Pande, with the purpose of bringing world class entertainment to Nepal. All the events were designed to benefit charitable causes. With the Siddhartha Art Gallery and Infinity International, I have raised funds for various social causes: AIDS awareness/ earthquake victims/ renovations for historical sites and temples and for Kanti Children's Hospital, the New Maternity Wing for Underprivileged Mothers, Maiti Nepal, SAATHI (an NGO in Nepal), cleft-palette operations, Bhaktapur Music School and Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory.

The Siddhartha Art Gallery initiated community art projects that have brought together writers, poets, and people from different political persuasions and disparate social groups under the umbrella of art. I believe artists, writers and poets can play a vital role in bringing about awareness and social change. I am proud to be associated with the Australian Himalayan Foundation, which has been supporting four up-and-coming students each year with art scholarships.

In 2010, I also established the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre (KCAC) in collaboration with British artist Celia Washington, with the aim of providing residencies and bursaries to young Nepali artists and to foster intercultural dialogue. To date I have organized over 300 art events. Both the Siddhartha Art Gallery and KCAC are evolving with time and with our accumulated experiences. Though I am married into a political family, I have learnt more about my country through the artists of Nepal.

Both the nation and my family had to pay a heavy price during the twelve years of conflict. Our ancestral home in Dhankuta was razed to the ground and our farmlands taken over by the Maoists. I was disturbed by the abductions, executions and extortion that my family had to endure during this period. Perhaps this was the price we had to pay for belonging to a political family. Looking back now, even non-political families who were land owners were also not spared by the Maoists. As a democrat, my greatest fear was that the muzzling of artistic expression and freedom of the press would follow and I would have to leave my precious country.

**Apart from setting up the gallery and arts centre can you tell us about your main achievements and any challenges you have faced?**

Due to the work that I have been doing with the Gallery, I have been invited by various foundations such as USIS, Habiart Foundation, Prince Claus Foundation, The Mondrian Foundation and CKU Denmark, to participate in various tours and seminars and as a speaker. I have been invited to be a judge for various painting and photographic exhibitions. In the past five years I have judged at events such; as the Sovereign Art Foundation 2010, the Children's Art Competition conducted by Nepal Unilever 2010; the Children's Art Competition conducted by Rotary 2007; the Mr/Miss University Competition conducted by Wave Magazine 2007; a Children's Art Competition conducted by the European Union 2007 and the first year students' exhibition and review at Kathmandu University's Department of Fine Art and Design, in Bhaktapur, 2005.

Before this I judged on a variety of competitions such as on the spot Painting Competition marking World Aids Day in- 2004, the Gallery Moksh, Photographic Competition and the The Boss and Christian College/YMCA's 'Refugee. Children Painting Project' in Chennai, India. Others include the Soaltee Children Art Project, the Elite School's art project 'Earth Day' and the ASMAN Children's Paintings competition.

I have also received awards such as Celebrating Womanhood, Navadevi Award, 2006, a Certificate at the World Youth Peace Summit, February 2004; the 'Birendra Aishwarya Sewa Padak' 2001 Medal and 'Rajat Mahotsab Padak' 1998 Medal awarded in the occasion of His Majesty's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Ascension to the Throne. I was also awarded a Heritage Award (organized by the Lalitpur Heritage Society) presented by His Majesty the late King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev for the support and renovation of the 'Krishna Mandir' in Patan, Kathmandu, in 1998 and a Certificate of Appreciation (organized by the Nepal Heritage Society) presented by His Royal Highness the Crown Prince for the support and maintenance of the 'Thum Baha Narayana Temple' Patan, in 1998.

As for the challenges I have faced, basically I love to be challenged by my work. If there were no obstacles in my work, I would have been bored a long time ago. My parents and my sister always worry that I push myself too hard and neglect my health. The fact of the matter is that I cannot live without art. I enjoy competing with myself - to push my levels of endurance, to come up with projects that require lateral thinking and creativity. I have always been bogged down with my inability to read, write and deliver a lecture in Nepali. This is a skill that I would really like to improve on. However, I have published four books by Nepali poets.

## What are your plans for the future?

I plan to organize events in the field of art that place Nepal on the international art circuit. In 2009, I launched an international art festival that focused on the plight of women across the globe. The

festival was organized under the banner: 'Separating Myth from Reality - the Status of Women'. Artists from twenty five countries participated in this event which opened up in six different venues across the capital.

In 2010, I wrote the text for a book on the drawings of the artist Manuj Babu Mishra. I also contributed a piece to the book "Telling a Tale" published by Archana Thapa Upreti. My future plans are to write a book relating to the development and practice of modern Nepali art.

### Do you have any suggestions for the women reading your story?

For Nepal to progress, I believe that women need equal access to nutrition, education and health. Sometimes it is the women who perpetuate a system where these basic needs are denied to their own daughters. When I meet women from the villages I am agog by the work that they do to support their homes, while the men just sit around. It makes me both sad and angry. If only this sort of energy and dedication could be tapped to build a better Nepal. Their strife, dedication, ability to sacrifice all for the family and their resilience has convinced me that it is only the women of Nepal who have the positive energy to lead this country.

I am from Finjoling Tatne, Nametar, Udyapur District of Nepal. I was born in a remote hill area of Nepal which was a small community of only about a hundred houses of Sherpas. My father (Rickjan Norbu Lama) used to read traditional lama scripts but didn't have a formal education and my mother was totally illiterate, but she was a genuine person and very aware about society. I was born on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1960 and started my formal education late because there weren't educational institutions in my village. The primary school in my village was established after the 1960s by the continuous effort of local people under the leadership of my parents. I didn't receive regular education. One of the main problems in Nepal is the tradition of not prioritizing formal education for daughters. I feel that historically there was discrimination between sons and daughters in my society due to a lack of awareness and a general lack of exposure to education. Facilities such as electricity, communication, and transportation were not available when I was younger. The focus of the family was on cattle herding, farming and supporting the family so there was no emphasis placed on education.

My childhood was not so different from other children in my community. During my childhood it was difficult to convince my parents to provide educational material and create a good environment for my education. My primary school teacher was also my cousin, T.N. Sherpa who helped me convince my parents to send me to school. I also got motivation from my Mitini (legal friends) called China Giri. In our society at that time, as I have mentioned, there was no culture of facilitating daughters for formal education and this was a major cause of difficulty. My initial formal education

was poor. At the end of grade five, I informally follow my younger brother Jhyang Nurbu Sherpa. I struggled in school and nearly didn't pass the end of year test to join the high school in Deury to grade six. My school was one day's hard walk on foot in southern part of my home village. I managed to reach the required standard though strong self-determination in my studies and the help of my teachers. By the start of grade six I was in a better position and after that I was continuously second top of the class until I reached grade ten. I am very happy to tell you that I was the first female from my village to acquire my School Leaving Certificate. It was not easy as at that time there was no electricity and it used to take five days to get to the market and come back with kerosene along with necessary goods from Lahan Bazar. So in my childhood education, kerosene was always scarce, which was needed to be able to read at night. I used to read till late at night, I only realised after the crow of cocks that morning had arrived. After a short sleep, I had to go with my sisters to take the livestock (sheep) for grazing. So my childhood and initial education was difficult and challenging with many scarcities.

I remember as a child asking my father many times: why do daughters have no rights on the property of their parents? Why aren't daughters allowed to go abroad and join the British army? So from an early age I was interested to know about the differences between boys and girls.

#### **Qualitative Analysis in Action**

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.