

Interview with Rita Thapa

Rita Thapa is widely recognized for her ground-breaking work in founding Tewa. She has over thirty-five years' experience as a feminist educator, community activist, initiating and supporting institutions for women's empowerment and for peace. Rita also founded and led (2001-2009) Nagarik Aawaz, an initiative for conflict transformation and peace-building in Nepal. In recognition of this exceptional "innovative contribution to the public good,"

Rita received the rare honour of being named an Ashoka Fellow. She served as a past Board Member and Chair of the Global Fund for Women and the Urgent Action Fund. In 2005, she was included in the 1000 Women for Peace Nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. She also served on the Board of the Global Fund for Community Foundation (GFCF) and the South Asian Women's Fund (SWAF).



Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

I was born in Chhetrapati Kathmandu in January 1952. I was born in a privileged social class. My father, Brajendra Bahadur Basnyat was a senior government officer and my mother Jibesheshwari Basnyat was a homemaker. We are two children to my parents, we are both daughters. I did not experience scarcities or shortages during my childhood. There were no apparent discriminations between sons and daughters in my family. But activities like bicycling and horse riding were not allowed for daughters.

I used to visit different parts of the country with my father during my childhood since my father had his postings in various districts. From these early visits, I came to understand the conditions and the diversity of rural Nepal.

I did my Senior Cambridge examination from Saint Mary's High School. Some conservative and traditional aspects of society had affected me in my life too. One of the major points is that I got

married at the age of eighteen before I completed my higher education. After marriage, I continued my further higher studies. I completed a

Bachelor of Education from Tribhuvan University in 1975 and Post Graduate Diploma from IDS Sussex University UK in 1994. Similarly I completed an MA in Peace & Conflict Studies from Panasastra University, Cambodia & Applied Conflict Transformation Studies in 2007-2009.

Who or what has been your inspiration and what are your future aims?

Talking about inspiration, all the way my life inspired me at each moment. I was extraordinarily talented during my school studies. I had good talents in the field of music, arts and vocals. I was determined to go for Arts and never thought to go for Medicine since in Nepal as an extraordinary student my parents wished for me to join Medicine. During my career I was influenced by Ms. Chandani Joshi for the work of development. As I have passed my life I had dealt with different conditions, which I have been pointers as teachers. And all these conditions taught me to deal with the situation. Ms. Indira Rana a lawyer of repute and who was a social activist also influenced me and inspired me and my work.

Can you tell us about your present position and who supported or inspired you?

Since women in Nepal had little rights, I quickly learned to create spaces for women whenever an opportunity arose. Thus with other colleagues, I founded the first Patan Lady Jaycees Chapter in 1979. Later around 1986 I was also involved in helping found the Women Entrepreneur Association Nepal. I was able to identify and analyse the issues of gender from my own home because I was the female member of a traditional and patriarchal society, which has traditional cultures to find females as second class citizens at that time.

I started a formal career in NGOs after the death of my husband to fulfil the basic needs of my children. But I always disagreed and rebelled with the hierarchies they produced in those institutions which were not transparent and not accountable.

Talking about major career positions in my life I had Volunteered from 2006 to 2010 WAPPDCA/ Sankalpa in the position of Founding Member and Coordinator, where I was responsible for setting up the secretariat of WAPPDCA in its founding year and coordinating WAPPDCA to strengthen it institutionally and programmatically since November 2009. Similarly I was responsible to ensure WAPPDCA's significant transition by registering it as a network NGO – Sankalapa, linking it nationally

and internationally with women's organizations and strengthening its organizational capacities and securing funding. Sankalpa has initiated a nationwide women's movement and is in the process of supporting the MoPR in the implementation of NAP on UN SCR 1325 & 1820.

In a similar manner I served as a Founder Chair/Chief Executive Officer of Nagarik Aawaz (NA) from July 2001 to October 2009 where I took responsibility for initiating and the running of NA, to work in the area of conflict transformation and peace building in Nepal. I was responsible for establishing NA and securing funds for running NA, and its programmatic and financial needs. Also for designing and ensuring out-reach and networks to deliver programmes to effectively minimize the impacts of conflict in Nepal, providing relief assistance, and plan and strategize in a pro-active way for long-term reconstruction and peace-building work. In this role I am an advocate for peace, working for those directly affected by the conflict so that they are provided with a safety net and ongoing motivation for community level peace building work.

Accordingly I served as Founder/Coordinator of Tewa from September 1995 to June-2001. I ensured in establishing the norms of transparency, inclusion, public participation, and transition of leadership. During my work in Tewa I was helping model and initiate a philanthropic organization (the first of its kind) in Nepal. I was responsible for founding/establishing Tewa and securing the financial management of the organization. This included: developing fund-raising and grant-making strategies and criteria, hiring and training of staff and a cadre of development workers and volunteers, ensuring the self-reliant sustainability of this fund and the support to rural women's groups and handing over an established self-reliant organization to younger leadership.

Earlier work experiences include being the National Consultant for UNIFEM/UNDP from August 1993 to December 1996. I was responsible to appraise, supervise, monitor, and evaluate the overall UNIFEM programme in Nepal. I worked closely with NPC/NG to provide ongoing input on formulating and appraisal of gender/WID component of UNDP projects. I helped initiated the first UNDP/Nepal gender training programme and represented UNIFEM/UNDP at the WID donor Group Meeting.

What have been your main achievements and challenges?

So far I don't consider a major achievement has been achieved. But demonstrating a transfer of leadership in at Tewa, and Nagarik Aawaz, in less than six years, and 9 years respectively after accomplishing all the tasks I set out for both organizations in Nepal are no mean tasks. In Tewa, I established an endowment fund before my departure but owing to heightened conflict, the bank interest rates declined sharply, so on my suggestions the endowment was invested to buy two acres

or sixteen ropanis of land for the same institution in Dhapakhel, Kathmandu. Today Tewa has completed eight major infrastructures and has completed its remaining infrastructure and landscaping to enable a good community space which can generate resources for Tewa's ongoing operational costs.

Talking about the challenges I have faced many of them as we all do. It is obvious to have challenges working in a country like Nepal. All the challenges I have faced, I believe are lessons for further developments.

What are your future plans?

I have no specific plans other than those guided by the context and the work I do here for the larger good of the women of Nepal. I will try to fulfil all the responsibilities demanded by time and our local context.

Finally, do you have any suggestion or advice for women in Nepal?

Our vision and mission needs to be clear and for the larger good. Development will not always occur as we wish but we need to be responsible to try to increase and enhance the quality of human lives everywhere that we serve. We will need to be transparent and respectful of others. Women do most of the hard work to sustain families and communities so they need to be supported in doing their work practically and morally. Women are caring for everyone in their communities, but no one cares for them in an ongoing way – we all need to be mindful of this and honour the contributions women make to their communities and the nation.

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.