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## Poetry, Power, and Politics on the Roof of the World

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## Poetry, Power, and Politics on the Roof of the World

Teaching in an international setting offers opportunities to exchange the familiar and predictable for the unexpected. It is the surprises, the unforeseen challenges, the startling and serendipitous moments of discovery that remain for me the most memorable features of teaching abroad. These are also the experiences from which I have learned the most and which have most often underscored my fundamental kinship with the people and cultures I've come to know and respect beyond my customary habitat. This was again true for me this past year as a Fulbright Fellow teaching in Nepal, a so-called third-world country, whose spectacular mountain ranges have earned it the title of "roof of the world."

Immediately upon arriving in Kathmandu in April 2004, I underwent a detailed orientation at the American Embassy. The security warden gave me a long list of emergency numbers and sober reminders to keep a low profile, avoid travel in dangerous areas, stay away from political rallies, keep a safe distance from student demonstrations, and respect all city-wide bundhs (vehicular traffic strikes). As I left the embassy, it occurred to me that not one of my Tribhuvan University colleagues, in our e-mail correspondences prior to my arrival, had mentioned that the political climate was less than stable. Certainly I had been aware that King Gyanendra was at serious odds with the members of his parliament. And I had known that the Maoist insurgents were active in certain hill regions of Nepal. Yet, I was frankly amazed at the degree of political tension palpable and visible in the capital city of Kathmandu.

It didn't take me long to grasp why my well-intentioned academic counterparts in Kathmandu had not forewarned me. One, if I had had full knowledge of the political situation, I might have decided not to come. And two, what an American far from Kathmandu might consider fearful or threatening was routine and commonplace for my Nepalese colleagues, a daily condition they had learned to live with; they were confident that

they could provide a safe, secure work environment for me. And they did, without fail.

In spite of the political unrest and transportation uncertainties and by means of their complex personal networks and information pipelines, the members of the Tribhuvan University English Department were amazingly ambitious as well as resolute in their plans for academic and instructional meetings. They proved highly creative in arranging for me to conduct seminars, to develop curriculum, and to meet with various university administrators, committees, and department members to work on the programs in American Literature and American Studies they were determined to establish. It became increasingly clear to me that for these professors and their students in a small landlocked nation squeezed between giant neighbors (India and China) and a thoroughly self-absorbed monarch, literature stood as a much-desired gateway and window by which to study the larger world as well as to nourish personal dreams.

My Nepalese friends and colleagues were remarkably ingenious in finding secure locations for our gatherings. They cleverly spirited me around the city in taxis or on their motorcycles in ways that avoided demonstration hotspots, road barricades, and police lines. On one occasion, to be moved without restriction, I was taken to a meeting in an ambulance. Another time, we traveled ten miles to reach a point less than three miles away. Some mornings while reading the local English papers (*The Rising Nepal*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *The Nation*), I would discover that we had met in a particular locale the previous day to avoid a demonstration that had been occurring in another part of the city. Throughout my stay, my Nepalese colleagues came often and cheerfully to my well-guarded home for marathon work sessions but would leave abruptly an hour before dusk to avoid curfews and traffic blockades.

On several occasions when the atmosphere was calm on the Tribhuvan University's Kirtipur campus (a place I had wandered freely during my teaching fellowship there in 1995), I was able to enjoy lunch with a view of the Himalayas towering in the distance, to read books in a quiet library carrel, to meet with graduate students, and to share sweet milky Nepalese tea with animated young women eager to converse about their

studies. These peaceful, unrestricted days never seemed long enough, and I found myself increasingly adopting the Nepalese tendency to "seize the moment," because one could never be sure what tomorrow would bring in terms of power outages, water restrictions, downed phone and internet lines, or transportation strikes that limited food supplies in the markets as well as travel around the city.

It was on one of those peaceful days at the campus that I was unforgettably corralled into serving as a judge for a poetry contest. This proved to be no ordinary event. Thirty-eight students from the university's English Department—students whose first languages ranged from Nepali, Newari, and Hindi to Pahori, Maithili, and Sherpa—had planned to read poems they had created in English. More than five hundred students squeezed enthusiastically into a large room intended for no more than two hundred. Most seats had several occupants, every aisle was packed, and students sat in the windowsills and cross-legged along the edges of the platform. The air was electric with excitement, and each performing poet was greeted with thunderous applause.

For more than two hours I strained, with several other judges, to hear student readers whose heavily accented English challenged my listening skills to the absolute limit. Yet, in spite of 98 degree heat, the absence of microphones, and the grim concrete walls surrounding us, never will I forget the beauty and spirit of that afternoon—the passion, the intensity of conviction expressed by those students claiming poetry as the grand

vehicle by which to voice their most heartfelt thoughts and longings, in order, as one of them claimed, “To use words to turn myself into fire and melt the ice.”

As might be expected, there were poems about family, home, love, and death. However, almost all of the poems reflected in some way on the political agitation and anguish traumatizing the nation, the fear that grips the heart when “the pigeon’s ability to circle fearlessly is lost” or when “abruptly the eagle grabs the dove.” As I listened to these brave young poets, it struck me that while mountain climbers and adventurers from around the world come to Nepal to scale its spectacular peaks and span its incomparable crevasses, the Nepalese themselves in countless villages and valleys throughout the country awaken daily to the challenge of enduring—or somehow surmounting—the threats, strikes, insurgencies, oppression, and poverty surrounding them.

On that particular day, I saw poetry bring welcome light and vision into a dank auditorium. Poetry became both constructive and transformative—a way to express what seemed nearly unspeakable and to give voice to the deepest concerns of individuals as well as a nation. Poetry had never seemed more alive than it did that afternoon on the roof of the world. That day, far from home and familiar faces, I felt enveloped by the strength of the human spirit and the power of poetry, and I felt I was standing on sacred ground.