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Art in the open

The Book Bus revisits Gorkha with tales, memories and art in tow

- Pranab Man Singh (/author/pranab+man+singh)

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SHARES

May 7, 2016-In April 2015, before the earthquake forever changed our present and futures, the Book Bus had made its way to Gorkha with a core team of science instructors. Some of them were planning lessons around the geological makeup of the region and had collected a variety of rocks and mineral samples. On April 25, our team was in Old Capital School, above and to the northeast of Gorkha when the earthquake struck. We were planning the next few days of science workshops, observations and experiments along with Book Bus readings.

(http://www.nicasiabank.com/)

For the next three days, with our hotel severely damaged, we setup camp on the school grounds. Distraught and fearful, we waited for the roads to clear so that we could return home to our loved ones. Over the next few days we witnessed a steady flow of people who had lost their homes move into the town. During those long days, punctuated by tremors and pauses, we engaged the children who were milling around the open ground in simple art activities. The act of creating amidst all the destruction grounded us and helped quell our fears. It brought us closer to the community, and it comforted and soothed the anxiety of the children.

A year on, it is clear that the earthquake has had tremendous political and personal ramifications. It is also evident that many of us are still trying to make sense of the events of the past year. As the Book Bus team, we decided that, for our first venture outside the valley since that fateful trip, we would return to Gorkha and finish what we had set out to accomplish. But, it no longer made any sense to repeat the same programmes. The science we had hoped to share had become a lived experience. We also no longer wanted to confine the programme to the enclosed spaces of a school when the whole community had taken us in during those difficult days right after the quake. So, we arrived in Gorkha with what had anchored our sanity in those terrifying days and what had given hope to the children and, in turn, their community: we brought art.

The Book Bus isn't just a bus with books. It is a library. And, like all libraries, it actively seeks to engage and work with the communities it visits. The Book Bus is funded by the US Embassy and run by our bookshop, Quixote's Cove. Like other libraries, we also collaborate with a variety of organisations and institutions to bring together people and ideas to enrich lives. Because of these common values, it made sense for us to collaborate with the Kathmandu University Center for Art and Design (KUCAD), a fine arts college, and photo.circle, a platform for photography in Nepal. A team of artists from KUCAD joined our trip while members from photo.circle setup five exhibits from Photo Kathmandu, Nepal's first international photography festival held in November, 2015.

With a collection of over 2,000 titles selected to match the interest of children and young adults, doing readings around the Book Bus is only natural. One story that most children like to listen to is the story of Ruby Bridges, an African American child who challenged segregation in schools back in 1960s Louisiana. Her tale has a visceral effect over students for its setting is familiar to them. After they hear the story, the discussion is often lively and personal, "They call me

bhaiya, bhaiya. They call me dhoti," is often a complaint we hear from children with dark skin, many yet to even hit their teens. "They make me sleep in cow sheds," a young girl in her early teens once shared. The honesty is sobering and the challenges seem unsurmountable. But, in the face of despair, we know that the knowledge and awareness that we kindle are the seeds of a more equitable tomorrow.

Wherever the Book Bus arrives, it immediately sparks curiosity in children and adults alike. The big shiny red bus is an anomaly on Nepal's roads and it invariably draws crowds and begins conversations. But, it would be no different to any ordinary truck if it didn't direct curiosity towards knowledge. It wouldn't be a library if it didn't let its visitors explore new ideas.

Every morning in Gorkha, Dalhangdai, the ever cheerful and enthusiastic driver of the Book Bus, parked the travelling library under the shade of a giant old peepul tree next to Rani Pokhari, a community run park. Every day, a group of children assembled under the tree, eagerly waiting for the side of the bus to swoosh open and offer them new worlds and magical tales.

Some of our regular visitors remembered us from last year. "I thought the bus was smaller," said one boy of nine. "But, maybe I have grown bigger," he beamed. In reality, we had taken a new and bigger bus. Throughout the day, people from the town made their way to the park and tried to parse together the purpose of a bus full of books. Around the bus and leading up to the Gorkha Museum, we had setup workshop spaces and exhibits from Photo Kathmandu. Student groups from nearby schools also came by and took turns reading, participating in workshops and art activities, and touring the exhibits.

The members of the Padheli Tol Sudhar Sanstha, who generously supported our stay and allowed us to use their parks and local spaces, at first, thought our programme was just for children. An old man from above the old town, after spending a good twenty minutes eyeing the photo exhibits, came up and asked, "I get the art and the books help the kids, but what do you get from looking at photos?" That evening, as the light faded, we sat on the open courtyard next to the park and projected pictures of old Gorkha and surrounding areas from the archives of the Nepal Picture Library. We showed Abu Khaireni before it was even a village, Mugling before the bridge was built, and Gorkha Bazaar before it had any shops. We shared the stories of the people in the photos and the people who took the photos. We impressed upon the viewers that Nepali history is their history. Towards the end of the evening, we encouraged them to share their old photos with the archive. We encouraged them to share their stories.

During the day, some of the instructors worked with students to write their family histories by situating where their family was and what they were doing during momentous occasions in Nepali history. The stories brought everyone together, but also revealed the violence and misery that is often hidden behind the innocence of children. Other members of the team worked with community members and local businesses. A couple of artists befriended the local barber, Nagendra. Over many cups of tea they got to know him and his fascination with South Indian action flicks. The artists drew their inspiration from this when they worked with Nagendra and his loyal patrons to come up with an idea for a mural for his store. The mural cemented Nagendra's reputation as a 'stylist' rather than just a barber. His most regular clients, teenagers with fancy hair styles, helped make the mural. They also came to learn the whole process from conception to sketching to mixing colours to painting and finally installing the work. Plans for making more of such paintings were already afoot. After the work was installed, the lady from the shop across the road was visibly upset. "If I had known you were going to make something like that, I would have asked you to do it for my shop too!" she complained.

Creative production and hands-on learning have become so alien to Nepal's educational system that the benefits of nurturing creativity and imagination are not always self-evident. Karuna Rai, the Chief of Gorkha Museum and one of the initiative's strongest supporters, has been trying her best to make the museum and its cultural and historical collection a part of the educational experience of the children in Gorkha. "We have a limited budget, but we have been running educational tours for students here and have been encouraging them to become members. We have over 900 members now," she shares. "Programmes like the Book Bus really help to show the importance and relevance of a cultural and artistic education."

On the final day, we wanted to bring together all of our various activities and exhibit all the quirky and cool things that had been produced. So, we reached out to local media houses and spread the word throughout the community that April 27, 2016, would be our final day exhibition. On that day we exhibited murals, portraits of local community children, old photos we had only received in the past few days, soft toys we had built in collaboration with the children, and in the evening, we even put up a shadow puppet show based on a few local myths. Putting up an entire exhibit in a day was incredibly tiring. But, by the end of the day, every community member we talked to wanted us to stay longer or wanted us to come back. Their joy, the memories, and the relationships we developed, we hope, will stay with them for just as long as they surely will stay with us.

(http:,

(Inputs by Anudeep Dewan, Nasala Chitrakar, and Venisha Udas)

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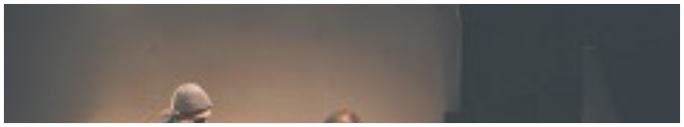

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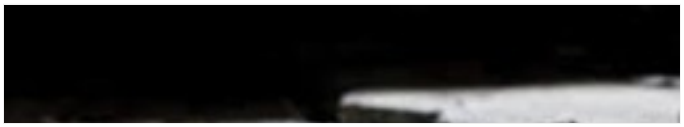

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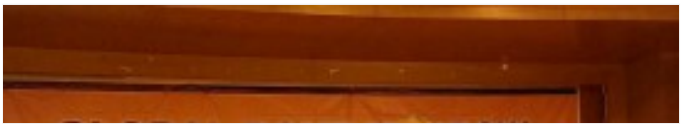

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