

Case studies from South Asia

From Meena Sharma: IHIRCON Nepal

Case 1

I had the chance to make a 22-day visit to the far western region of Nepal, Bajura, as a member of a child rights' monitoring team formed by the National Human Rights Commission and Save the Children, Norway, Nepal. No road transport is available in this area; you have to travel on foot to reach the villages where we were visiting the schools, teachers and others.

In Bajura I felt the pain and sorrow of the children who wanted to go to school, but were forced to stay at home for 70 days because of violent threats by the Maoist militant group. We held discussions with local and regional Maoist leaders and this led to the reopening of the closed schools. I was happy to hear later that the schools are running smoothly. The mass media coverage we gained after our arrival in our capital city, Kathmandu, also helped to bring this improvement. We forgot all the pain and mental tortures given sometimes by Maoist supporters and other people during our journey.

Case 2

In May 2006, when I was in the rural area with a foreign guest from Canada, we visited the Dang District to see the community peace group's empowerment.

The district coordinator Sharda, hired a vehicle to go to Halwar village. About 20 minutes before reaching the village suddenly a group of young boys and girls stopped the vehicle and questioned us: "Who are you? Where are you from? Where are you going? For how long will you stay in the district?" And so on.

We responded very politely. However they continuously pressed us to leave the village, stating that IHIRCON is not registered under Maoist authority in the village. The discussion went on for more than an hour. We knew that they had guns and that we were in their area where there is no government presence. Moreover we had foreign guests with us. Keeping all this in mind we decided to leave the matter and return back to the district headquarters as there was no other option.

We decided to talk with Maoist leaders so we went to see them directly after reaching Ghorahi and explained the incident. The next day, early in the morning at six o'clock, I left for Kathmandu. After reaching there I rang Sharda to tell her about my safe journey. She said that the Maoist leader had phoned her and apologised for the misbehaviour of their cadre and they invited us again to the village and promised not to disturb our work in the future.

We think that our one-hour-long negotiation, without being aggressive, in that awkward situation and talking with them very calmly and using nonviolent means, we were able to persuade those weapon holders who are use violent approaches. Now our programmes are running smoothly.

Case 3

In January 2003, I went on a human rights fact-finding mission to Makwanpur, Hetuda (mid region) with six others. Three days before, there had been shooting which killed 27 Maoist cadre, nine security forces and two innocent villagers. On reaching the site of the incident, we saw the situation was very bad. Two houses were still burning. While my colleagues went to observe the situation and I tried to join the groups of children. Most of them were wearing white clothes as they were mourning the death of their father and grandfather. They were collecting bullet shell covers used during the gun fight. After spending some time with them, I went to where the whole family were gathered and crying. The smoke was still coming out of their house. I sat behind the 85-year-old widow whose innocent husband had been killed by the cross fire. She told me what had happened. Meanwhile I saw a woman with young baby go into the house, sit in the corner and start to cry. With the family's permission I went inside alone.

After half an hour she stopped crying. I asked her: How old is your baby? She replied that he had been born two hours before this terrible incident. When the house caught fire, her father-in-law opened the

door. As he went out he was immediately shot dead; there was no other way he could leave the house. She then described how she broke the wooden wall with her bare hands and ran away leaving the baby behind. She fell in a hole dug behind her house and lost consciousness. "I found my baby at four o'clock next morning when a Maoist lady handed him to me. She said that she had rescued the baby." The young mother then sobbingly she revealed that they didn't have any thing to eat or wear as everything had been burned. There was no one to look after her and her family. She had been drinking water for three days.

Her story touched me. I spent nearly two hours with her but at that time I was helpless as we did not have the authority to provide any type of physical assistance to the victims. So I discussed her situation with my colleagues and we managed to give her 2,000 Rupees (about £16) to buy food and clothes, as she couldn't buy anything herself. We gave the money to the local Red Cross Society members. We discussed this issue with local Maoist leader and they promised to pay compensation to the victim's family. Likewise we met the government official and gave the real analysis of the situation as we were the first ones to reach the village. Moreover we also met the army head to try to explain the situation. Some of them promised us that they would continue the education of the victim's family; some promised to pay cash and the Maoists also paid a sum to them.

In Kathmandu during the release of the report, we met individual journalists and asked them to raise the situation of women and children of that area and also help the survivors. So I think that we are not able to do very big and drastic things overnight. If time, experience and situation permits we can make small initiatives that makes us feel proud. We can open another door for the next new job, hence we carry on...

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From Ramesh Sharma, Ekta Parishad

Nonviolence in Action

In 2003, I was working with Ekta Parishad (meaning United Forum), the movement working for people's land, water and forest rights. We were in the state of Chhattisgarh in the middle of India taking part in a "jeep yatra". This means driving from village to village meeting the villagers, listening to their problems and finding ways to help them solve these problems by encouraging them to organise. On 9 February, we were shocked to learn that one of our activists, Birju Baiga, had been killed by the Forest Protection Committee at his newly formed settlement. I arrived at the settlement two days later and pieced together the grim events. What would Ekta Parishad do?

But first some background. This area of Chhattisgarh is where many of the poorest people had for centuries relied on land in the forest to farm and to gather fruits. As Rajagopal, the Ekta Parishad leader says, "These forests are the people's supermarkets."

After Independence a lot of land was taken over by the Government. The people were resettled on other land but some of this proved inadequate for their needs. In such cases Ekta Parishad encouraged people to reclaim their hereditary land. Birju Baiga, an Ekta Parishad activist, settled his own and ten other families on land that he had been assured by the forest and police officials in Dharipara would be his entitlement. On February 9th 2003 Birju Baiga's small settlement was attacked. He was beaten to death by the Government's Forest Protection Committee, the small wooden framed houses burned to the ground and all their possessions taken. His wife, Jugri Bhai and her small child survived.

I immediately reported what had happened to Rajagopal, our leader. We decided to stage a nonviolent protest against the murder of Birju Baiga at the central crossroads of the nearby town of Pandaria. Rajagopal began fasting, taking only water.

About three hundred people gathered to hear the demands of many speakers. They called not only for the arrest of the officials involved in Birju's death but for justice for thousands of Baiga adivasis living under the cloud of eviction in Chhattisgarh. We demanded that there would be a halt to all evictions; that a task force would be set up to monitor land and forest issues, that adequate compensation would be given to Jugri Bai and her four children. We would sit indefinitely until our demands were met.

Important people and journalists came to meet Rajagopal. One meal a day was provided for the hundreds of people sitting down as a protest. If our demands were not met we would march 200km to the state capital, Raipur to make a huge protest.

By February 17, powerful people were taking notice. Some people wanted to use violence to bring greater attention to their cause. Rajagopal suggested if they wanted to do this they should go to a different organisation. Ekta Parishad will not use those methods. After gruelling discussions the Chief Minister agreed to meet us in Raipur. The Chief Minister was either sympathetic or was seeking votes in the next election. The result was that Jurga Bai would be compensated with 10 acres of land and 100,00 Rupees (about £1300) and land would be issued to 6,100 Baiga families. A task force would be set up to investigate land problems and the highest ranking District Forest officer was suspended and lower ranking officers would effectively lose their jobs. Our struggle still goes on.