

Background

The summer of 2012 I (Sampada KC) visited Shree Kalinchok School in Thamichangu, a remote village located in the hills of Dolakha district of Nepal. The school had 365 students enrolled, nine teachers, two main school buildings and a makeshift shanty to adjust for the lack of rooms in the main school building. In two classrooms of the main school building, 15 children aged 5-7 had only one bench to sit on, the rest sat on the concrete floor. The school itself is not fenced and is used as a passageway by the locals and the cattle to get across. There were no functioning toilets at the school and the backyard of the school was strewn with human waste. Children can only hope to be educated till the eighth grade and if they wish to be educated further, then they have to walk an hour away to another village. As a result, most students only study till eighth grade or drop out before they reach the eighth grade and then migrate to neighboring India for jobs. The Principal of the school Bhim Kumar Pandey told me that his and his staffs' efforts in encouraging children at the village to attend the school are frustrated by parents who say, "Why should I send my children to school when your school doesn't even have benches to sit on?" The locals understand that education is valuable for their children but are not convinced that the school provides a good enough environment for learning. We acknowledge that building a better school does not ensure a better education but it is a necessary step towards improving the quality of education and enrollment rates. This is consistent with Room to Read's findings that, "if schools are made more appealing in their physical structures, parents, students, and teachers are more likely to participate in education, possibly because their experiences there are improved by the facilities...and because the observable physical state of the school serves as a marker of overall educational quality."¹ While the school is in dire need of an infrastructural facelift, economic support in a scale big enough to address these issues is not forthcoming from either governmental or non-governmental organizations. And as a marginalized indigenous ethnic group of Nepal, the villagers of Thamichangu lack the political clout to circular their need for a better school at their village. Therefore, with our project we aim at facilitating the need felt by the locals of a better school for their children.

Thamichangu is a village that has 250 houses all belonging to the Thami ethnic minority of Nepal. The Government of Nepal finally recognized the Thami as an indigenous group of Nepal in 2001 and in 2004 the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities labeled them as "highly marginalized."² Before 2006 Nepal was a kingdom with a semi-feudal political system and was dominated by the high castes Brahmin and Chhetri ethnic groups of the Hindu caste system. The Thami are not Hindus, do not speak Nepali (the national language) as a mother tongue, and only number 35,000 in a country of 26 million. All these factors still limit the Thami in Nepal, even after the introduction of a modern democratic Nepali state following the end of the 10 year long Civil War in 2006. While the ongoing discourse on land politics and identity politics in Nepal has given minority groups like the Thamis reasons for hope, it has undermined the focus on important sectors such as education (Nepal only contributes 4.7% of the GDP to education³). Furthermore, in a remote region such as Thamichangu obtaining funds for development in education is an unlikely prospect given the current Nepali political situation. We aim to foster peaceful relationship between the Thamis and the Government of Nepal by bringing the two parties together in this school building project and we hope that Kathryn Davis' generosity would provide the essential monetary support to make this project a reality.

Objectives

In light of the main infrastructural changes needed at the school, the following are our objectives:

1. Replace the makeshift shanty with a two-storied stone building with two classrooms on each floor
2. Furnish the two classrooms on the main building and also the new building with desks and benches
3. Fence the school with walls made of locally available stones
4. Replace the two existing makeshift toilet with two borehole latrine toilets and running water inside

Budget:

In consultation with Sarki Man Thami-VDC and school secretary, Sundar Khadka-native of the area who has a startup business of herbal medicine and handmade Nepali paper and Bhim Kumar Pandey, the Principal of the school, I prepared a budget estimate for the project when I (Sampada KC) visited the school last summer (please see the budget proposal for a detailed description). While we hope the Davis grant to cover the majority of our expenses, the Village Development Committee has agreed to contribute USD 3420 towards the project. The locals of the village will help subsidize the labor costs by providing USD 3990 worth of volunteer labor. We understand that volunteer labor may leave room for exploitation, therefore we will make it our priority to ensure that the workers are not mistreated. The Thamis of the village will do all the building work (Thamis traditionally are the architects, builders and engineers in the village and almost all the houses in the village and neighboring villages are built by them). Additionally, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development Office of District Development Committee, Dolakha Charikot has agreed to provide any technical cooperation we may need

¹ Room to Read, "The Relationship between School Infrastructure and Educational Outcome" http://www.roomtoread.org/document_doc?id=554 (Room to Read is a non-profit organization focused on improving literacy and gender equality in education in the developing world and it has had a significant presence in Nepal since 1998.)

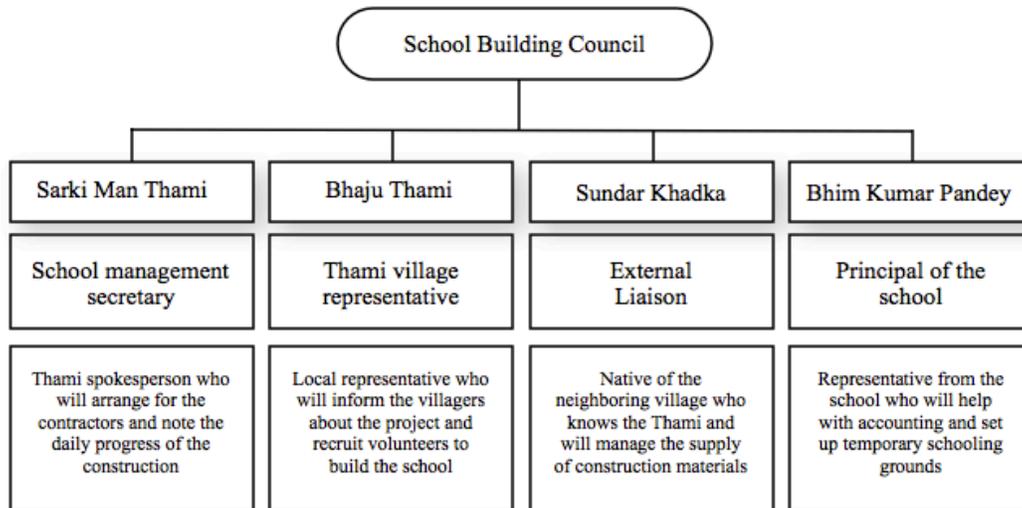
² Sara Shneiderman, "Reservations, Federalism and the Politics of Recognition in Nepal" 2008 http://www.academia.edu/466095/Reservations_Federalism_and_the_Politics_of_Recognition_in_Nepal_and_India

³ UNESCO http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121&IF_Language=en&BR_Country=5240

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to complete our project. In this endeavor, they have already helped us by preparing a construction plan for our building project based on an onsite observation done by their team (We have submitted an image file of this construction plan as part of the letters of support).

In order to complete these tasks in our targeted timeframe (May 20, 2013 - August 10, 2013) a school Building Council, detailed in the diagram below, will be formed. The concerned people have already confirmed that they are willing to coordinate with us in the mentioned capacities. Everyone involved in the project is either a local of the area or has grown up knowing the area. The local villagers of Thamichangu are especially excited by the prospect of the school refurbishment and they have already started collecting corn grain from each household to feed the workers who will be involved in the construction.



Building Materials and Construction

This project will mostly use locally available materials. But some materials like cement for plastering the walls of the inside of the building, iron rods and tin sheets for the roof, water taps and pipes for the toilets will be purchased and transported from the district headquarter in Charikot. The nearest road is a six hours walk away thus porters will have to manually transport materials to the building site. Additionally the rainy season might prove specially difficult for the transportation of the material, therefore as soon as the project is approved we will be in contact with Sundar Khadka and order the materials and store them at the building site before our arrival in May. All of the construction work will be completed by July and we will remain on site until August when the new facilities will be inaugurated.

Sustainability

By addressing the infrastructural problems of the school our project will help create a congenial environment for learning at the school. And because our project will involve the local people by assigning responsibilities through the School Building Council it will not be just another project that entrenches the psyche of dependence on an external party for development. In essence this project will help the locals to help themselves while we will only be facilitating funds and coordinating between the council members to ensure that the project is completed on time.

We believe that one of the strongest impacts that our project will have is in discouraging drop out rates at the school. Since the local villagers themselves will be investing their time and effort in building the school they will become stakeholders in the school and they will want to accrue the returns of their investment by sending their children to school. From a long term perspective, as drop out rate decreases and the retention rate increases, the school will be in a better position to expand classes up to the tenth grade and appeal to the government for the deployment of more teachers at the school. Our project will therefore create socially responsible agents who by participating in this infrastructure-building project will initiate a process of self-reliant development for their own village. To track the future progress of the school and the village we will remain in regular contact with the School Building Council through Sundar Khadka who frequently travels to Kathmandu and will be reachable by both phone and email. Also, the project brings together all the future stakeholders in the region: the government, the people, and local organizations. The Nepali government has agreed to partially finance the project, showing a dedication of the government to support people of marginalized communities. The people who themselves expressed a desire for this project have been waiting for a prospective infrastructural facelift of the school and are willing to invest their own time and effort for the construction. And we are already in conversation with the [Tuki Association Sunkoshi](#) for future projects to improve the quality of education provided to the children, thus strengthening the sustainability of the project.