

# **Tewa – Doing the Impossible**

## **Feminist Action in Nepal**

*The Founder's Story*

### **))) - Introducing Tewa - (((**

Tewa means 'support' in Nepali, the kind of support used to prop up leaning walls and buildings. It is the name of a non-governmental organization I initiated right after the World Conference on Women, Beijing September 1995, with a vision of establishing a truly sustainable development model in overly aid dependant Nepal. Tewa's mission statement reads:

*Tewa aims to increase the self-reliance of Nepalis by reducing dependency on foreign donors.  
It aims to inculcate the habit in Nepali men and women to donate regularly for the sustainable and equitable development of the country with special focus on women.*

Tewa was officially registered with the Lalitpur District Administration Office in April 1996 and has grown to comprise 21 dues-paying members of whom 9 are office bearers, a staff team of 12, an advisory body of 6 people, an ever increasing group of fund-raising volunteers (220 have received the training so far) who are trained and mobilized by Tewa, and a local donor base of over 1500 Nepalis. One hundred and thirty six women's organizations scattered in 46 districts of Nepal, have received grants from Tewa. Tewa also has a wide national level network of allies and supporters, and is a member of a growing International Network of Women's Funds, many inspired by Tewa's example.

Tewa's key activities are to raise money locally in an ongoing way for sustainable and equitable development and to make grants to rural women's organizations all over Nepal. Its aims are to promote modern philanthropy with a difference in keeping with the needs of present times, and to support the organizing of rural women in order to enhance their political voice and visibility. While doing this work Tewa pays particular attention to the philanthropic education of children, and human resource development of its entire team. The alternative model of development offered by Tewa is grounded in the reality of Nepal, but explicitly works to do away with established hierarchies of gender, class and caste, ethnicity, age and even geography. It demonstrates an inclusive, non-hierarchical structure that can be transparent and accountable, as well as trusting and respectful. Tewa therefore works in true partnerships that promote lateral opposed to top down relationships.

I was aware of the huge costs of rapid transition in a rapidly modernizing, urbanizing, and globalizing country in a new democracy which was established in 1990 after a people led revolution. In February 1996, just as Tewa was founded, the Maoist movement began in the remote western hills of Nepal and spread rapidly to seriously and increasingly impact the whole country. As a feminist activist, I was convinced that I needed to and would hand over leadership and the running of the organization to a younger woman, ideally at the end of five years. The article that follows is my account of the Tewa vision and the way we in Nepal, with the mutual support of feminists abroad, collectively realized that vision and successfully made a transition to new leadership a little more after five years.

On 1 June, 2001, just at the time of leadership transition in Tewa, the Palace Massacre occurred in which the Crown Prince killed 10 family members including his father the King. Since then there has been an escalation of violence, increasing destabilization and a rapid decline in the economic, political, and security sectors of Nepal. So the challenges are increasing as is the importance of Tewa's work in present Nepal.

### **))) - The Start-Up - (((**

The panel titled “Funding Our Future” organized by the Global Fund for Women/USA (GFW) at the World Conference for Women/’95 Huairou, Beijing, was the turning point. While putting my thoughts together for this panel, and in full recognition of the context of being located in Nepal at a time of very rapid transition, the idea of “Tewa”<sup>1</sup> was born. Even now I can recall that panel. The room was packed with many faces some of whom were very well known in terms of being celebrities and feminist leaders. At the end of my seven minute presentation I said something like “given the situation, I think I will quit my job and put together this organization, for I really see a possibility here”. Little did I realize that history was made that moment.

I was participating in the NGO Forum in Huairou, on behalf of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), and we had with us the President of the Janakpur Women’s Art Development Center (JWDC) – a project in a rural district of Nepal which was supported by Unifem. Bringing her to Beijing meant we also brought along with us the handicraft products from the Center for sale. This would mean that there could be more tangible benefits to take back to the women producers of JWDC. This meant that her participation in Beijing would be better understood and more readily accepted by the rest of the women at the Center. The four of us forming the Unifem/Nepal team, carried ceramics, and cloth to the NGO Forum, and set up shop anywhere and everywhere we could!

The day of my panel with the GFW was my only workshop day. Directly after my panel, I flew off to other venues choosing the topics that appealed to me. Later in the evening when I met my friends from the GFW on whose Board I was at the time, they were very excited. Did I know that Jane Fonda had announced in the forum that “if this Nepali woman does this work, I would like to support her”! At the time this meant little to me. I knew she was an actress, but had no idea of her connection with the media tycoon Ted Turner which was what was getting my US friends so excited. More realistic assurance came from the GFW itself pledging me a grant of US\$ 10,000 should I really decide to begin this organization!

The NGO Forum was a dynamic and a colourful venue where many events and forums were happening simultaneously at many different levels. The energy was powerful. What I had proclaimed earlier, was embedded like a seed in fertile soil and grew by the

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<sup>1</sup> “Tewa” is a Nepali word that implies support – it literally means the wooden prop-ups supporting houses that are at risk of falling, until repair and reconstruction can happen.

minute in my mind. It was as if I was possessed by the idea of founding an organization to do the work I dreamed of. By the time I left Beijing, not only did I see the whole picture of what this organization would do and how I would go about doing it, but I began to initiate possible action. I told Anne Firth Murray of the GFW that I would need this grant as quickly as they could disburse it – and I would send a proposal as soon as I could. I requested Patty Chang of the San Francisco Women’s Foundation and Krishanti Dharamraj of WILD, who were spending some time trekking in Nepal on their way back, if they would kindly take time to speak with a group of women whom I would try to pull together by the time they came back from their trek, so that possible Tewa members could have a better concept of a women’s fund. Hearing about it from the outside would make it more interesting and reassuring for prospective members. Patty and Krishanti both said “yes”. I began to talk with my Unifem colleagues about leaving my job. They were intrigued, but a little concerned. Particularly my boss, who also happens to be my mentor. Chandni Joshi knew that as a widow with three children in Nepal, I needed the job, and spoke of the possibilities for international positions and growth opportunities. Her wisdom and care I have always valued, but on reaching Nepal, I followed my heart and intuitive lead.

I quickly calculated that since my older daughter was just out of college, I could make ends meet with the earnings I would have from my house rent. I wanted to do this work voluntarily for a number of reasons, the key one being that in Tewa if we were to be truly sustainable, we needed to and must spread resources thinly for the optimum output. I began to speak with women from all walks of life in putting together a membership for Tewa. I again had a very clear idea that this needed to be and must be a women only group who were also diverse. Only women, because few women in Nepal at the time had the experience and the capacity to negotiate on development and on feminist issues and we could ill afford the confusions that could arise in a mixed group; and diverse, because in a newly emerging democracy like Nepal in a rapidly globalizing world we needed to cut across class, caste, ethnicity, and age to gather strength from our diversity rather than being isolated or limited by it.

Simultaneously, I also began to speak to my children about leaving my job and the possible implications of this on their lives. Fortunately for me the children were supportive and encouraging. Their undivided faith in me was poignant. My youngest however did not fully comprehend the implication of this act at the time. For several years later he said that I should not say “no” to a good job offer next time. But as the expanded family came to know of this decision, I was in trouble. What was I thinking of in leaving a UN job? What could be better? Did I not have a duty and responsibility towards my children! Many relatives and friends were skeptical. There must be something up my sleeve – after all I was well connected through my work with the GFW, and other “foreign friends”. There were still other impressions I could pick up. NGOs in Nepal are supposed to be “dollar farming” businesses. All this and more probably gave me a gut feeling at the time that I must do this work in a voluntary capacity. The last thing I could afford was an environment of mistrust and skepticism, and unhappiness for myself! I also started clearing space in a room in my house and approached Sabita Aryal, who had just retired from a secretarial position at the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) to see if she would like to work – though the salary would be peanuts compared to her salary at the UNDP.

Less than two weeks after returning from Beijing, a group of about 9 women attended the “talk” on the importance and experience of women’s funds given by Patty and Krishanti in my living room. At the end of the afternoon all of them said that this sounded like a good idea but they had no experience. However they were willing to trust my good judgment and “follow me”. Meera Jyoti, who is my friend since college days and who later chaired the Board of Tewa, told me that very afternoon, “I am doing this to support you.” This was the last thing I wanted, for I wanted to set-up an organization where certain values and disciplines were in place. One of them was that there would be total ownership and every team member empowered, so that we could in a given time frame have a transition of leadership. But Meera though naïve, was clearly supportive, and little did she know at the time, how Tewa would change her. I had set a five year time frame for my participation at Tewa. My friends would not understand this in the formative years and I did not need to confuse them then. For generally their understanding and experience of women’s organizations or NGOs in Nepal was very different than what we were going to be doing in Tewa. When they left Nepal, Patty and Krishanti felt they were a part of a historical moment and that there was a real possibility of this organization actually happening, but that the context was complex.

Tewa membership grew by the day. Some of the members were young activists who came to me for advice regarding the GFW grants, some were development professionals I knew of from before, and a few others were affluent housewives from large corporate houses or upper class families. A few of them were good friends whom I had known over a long time, others I had hardly ever talked to in the past, a few came out of the blue, rounding the membership to be a neat 21 in number. The women were either drawn to come around me at the time or I felt they could make a good member and approached them myself – whatever it was, it worked. For example, my friend Maggie Shah was thinking of founding her own family foundation, and I proposed that Tewa might provide a channel for her idea, at least until she started her own family foundation. She agreed to join. Having met me in an NGO forum of SAP/Nepal, Sharmila Karki came to meet me at home to learn and inquire about women’s work and activism, I told her the concept of founding Tewa and asked her if she would like to join us she too promptly said “yes”. I had barely met Neera Rana at Saathi (an organization working on the issue of violence against women), but had this intuitive sense that I must approach her for I felt that she could be part of the strong moral and ethical backbone for Tewa. I called her daughter Pramada Shah, whom I knew better for being in the same area of women’s work and activism, and made an appointment to visit Neera at her home. In Nepal, this is not considered a right approach. One, she did not know me at all, nor I her, and another, she had no experience in this area of women’s activism or development work. She was an upper class, upper caste housewife. How could I know if she would even listen to me? She did, and said “yes”! The membership was well balanced in terms of diversity and necessary professional skills. Time was the deciding factor in the cut off number for the membership. I was able to gather 21 women by the time we needed to work on our constitution which was required for official registration.

By this time Sabita joined the expanding Tewa team and I had cleared up the room in my house upstairs, so she could take some of the logistical work off my hands. I had also written the proposal for the GFW and had sent it off. Another vital decision was the name and logo of the organization that was required for the completion of the Tewa constitution. Regarding the logo, I called up a creative young artist that my daughter knew and asked him if he would be interested. When he said he would like to try, I called him to my home and talked to him for two hours telling him the dream that Tewa was to be, and in the context of Nepal what it was also not to be. The logo should be uncluttered and finally mirror the values and name of the organization, and the name likewise should reflect the logo. In a week's time, Keshar Joshi brought in several samples from among which there was a clear choice for those of us on the membership. The same day we brainstormed for the name. Again I was definite that we did not want an acronym, we wanted a Nepali name that was easy to understand throughout rural Nepal, most importantly - could reflect our ideology and values, and was easy on the tongue. Out of the list that we pulled together, "Tewa" meaning support, was an unanimous choice.

The Tewa constitution was drawn up with the help of Mohini Maharjan and Nirmala K.C. both of whom were young lawyers on our membership, and with the participation of the entire team. The ad-hoc executive board was decided upon with me as the Founding President of the Board, while I was also the self-designated Coordinator. Please note the title – which was chosen so that it would be less reflective of hierarchy and power than say "Executive Director"! For over six months we worked from my home, until Tewa was registered and we could put up a signboard in a rented space. In the meantime we also badly needed a messenger for the running around that was required to send out letters or run other errands for Tewa, and we found Kajiman Bhandari. There were two strong necessary criteria. One he must be trustworthy. Particularly because he would have to work from my home where at the time we were only women, myself, one of my daughters, and my house-keeper; and the other he must be comfortable to work with and respect the wishes of women supervisors, and there would be plenty of those around. In our organization he was also our equal, for we would refuse the traditional hierarchical boundaries of gender, class and caste, that he was used to in the past. Kajiman proved to be the messenger we were looking for. In those days, our entire team met in my living room for the many, many planning meetings we had, and Gita, my housekeeper kept us well supplied with endless cups of hot tea and biscuits.

In all this, the most important aspect for me was my Buddhist practice. Born and married into a conventional Hindu family, I moved into Buddhism after I connected with my Lama during my desperate search for my Guru or teacher following the death of my mother-in-law exactly two years after the death of my husband. The stringent and de-humanizing traditional and religious ritualistic practices for a Hindu widow were beyond my acceptance level as a feminist activist. Though in the past I fulfilled many roles and requirements expected of me for the sake of family harmony, by that time I was also clear as to where I should draw the line. At the time of my husband's death, I was too much in shock to even comprehend what was happening to me, but two years later when my

mother-in-law passed away, I had no cotton-wool over my eyes. Therefore when I met my Lama I just knew I was “home” and looked no further. So in the founding of Tewa it was very important for me that I receive the blessings of my Lamas. For me, doing Tewa was completely dedicated to my “dharma” and I made it the path of my practice.

Early on, I went to my Lamas who assured me this was very good work, and gave me blessings. Venerable Karma Thinley Rinpoche gave me a photo of a wrathful deity for protection, which with the help of Deepak Dewan, I hid behind the window curtains for months, for an unfounded fear of being seen to be superstitious, being so new myself to Tibetan Buddhism! This practice guided me to do what was right, to dedicate all my actions to dharma<sup>2</sup>, and to be compassionate and unattached. With the help of my teachers, I tried. With these events and happenings, and many more that are left unsaid here, a historical beginning was made – for development work and feminist action in Nepal, and for the women’s funds in the world which are certainly beginning to grow.

### **))) - The Office Set-Up & Building of a Team - (((**

As soon as Tewa was registered with the District Administration Office, we could move to a rented office space. We were also urgently in need of skilled staff. Hiring Sabita, and Kajiman had been easy. I felt confident to bring both of them into my home, Sabita was experienced and mature, and had managed UNDP secretarial support work so she had the necessary skills; and Kajiman seemed happy to work with and for women and to do necessary cleaning work at the office as well. High caste Nepali men have a hard time doing both owing to social conditionings. Kajiman had moved to the city from his hometown in the eastern hills of Nepal and was ready to adapt. Tewa’s work was more attractive for him compared to making and selling fresh fruit juices in a market in Kathmandu. But the other postings were a different matter. I was sure that we had to recruit the best people in terms of attitude and skills, however time and resource consuming this may be in the initial days.

We put out the advertisement (for women only), for a programme manager and began to work on defining clear cut policies and necessary criteria for our organizational development and programme work . The exciting thing was that we were not borrowing from any given model, so we could be very creative and shape the way we wanted to do our work in the world. A way that we felt was right. This was also difficult, for many of our members had none or very little organizational background, or else their experience was grounded in traditional or feudal set-ups. Most of the knowledge and experience of working in the development sector lay with me, but I did not want to be the only one bringing in the ideas and leading the way.

Therefore, early on I realized the need for the help of an external human resource development group – so I went to Parimal Jha of the Human Resource Development Center (HURDEC), a consulting firm which was then considered to be one of the best in the area. I also knew Parimal and some of the other people in HURDEC, and felt that

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Tewa would be an interesting model for them. I told him and Bikram Subba my plans for Tewa, and solicited their help in:

- Building our team, and
- In enabling a process that would allow for a total ownership by everyone in Tewa, so that the founding ideas of Tewa were no longer seen as being only mine.

I made it clear to them at the beginning that we could not afford to pay them their going consultancy rates but we would offer them a chance of being part of a successful story. I will never forget the look on their faces that day! They were certainly intrigued, and were sold to the idea. During the transition of my leadership in Tewa, Bikram Subba told me that they could have never imagined in those days that it would be possible for Tewa to develop in the way it now has, and that he felt truly happy to be included!

I knew exactly what was needed and the process that I wanted, and HURDEC thought of delivering this in the best possible way given the nature of our team. In this way with the facilitation of HURDEC, the Tewa team defined our vision and mission, our values and principals and the way we did our work. It was not only what we set out to do that was important, but the way we chose to do it. For I was convinced we had to pave and define a new culture of doing development work. In a Nepal heavily dependant on external donor aid (up to an estimated 70% of the government budget being subsidized by foreign grants and loans), where development had become synonymous with jobs for the “qualified”, where traditional feudal and patriarchal modus operandi were the practice, it was not only about doing things in a new way, but in de-learning the old practices. Feminist values of transparent and non-hierarchical structures, shared power and a just and equitable approach formed the rule. But “feminism” in countries like Nepal, has become synonymous with radical feminists associated with “bra-burning” which is perceived to be negative and borrowed from the west. Therefore though the language that defined the work we did in Tewa was in tune with the more acceptable development tongue, in actuality, Tewa’s entire work was an outcome of my feminist action where the personal was also political. This is an important recognition to make. More and more in our team today understand to varying degrees our feminist principles and culture, but it has not yet been an explicit statement on the organizational level. But our work spoke for itself. The way we did our work in Tewa remained true to feminist principals and values. The trick was then to enable HURDEC to do the needful, without me having to be too blatant about it.

Every exercise we did with HURDEC in the initial years, allowed for the building of our team. The membership and the staff by design was far from being homogeneous. We came from so many different backgrounds and were embedded in our own realities of class, culture, caste, ethnicity and age, besides professional and experiential capabilities. For in a newly democratic Nepal, diversity was my distinct choice. The leveling of the members in the group was not an easy task. However the time and resources spent in the initial days, paid off well, though this will continue to be an area where it is important to do ongoing work. When a big group of people move as one to get things done the results can and have been powerful. In Tewa the team meant everyone. The staff, the membership, the office bearers and often the volunteers, and sometimes even external allies who felt connected with our work.

A sense of what our team building meant can be illustrated by a little anecdote. Mohini was one of our young activists, and Neera was an older home-maker/social worker. Mohini came from an indigenous ethnic minority of the Kathmandu valley and Neera had her history rooted in a feudal upper caste past. Mohini at every meeting provoked Neera to join her in a “field-trip” implying that Neera would have much to learn but may not be able to withstand the rural environment and facilities. Neera always laughed and excused herself. Mohini was persistent. This went on for at least a year, until one day Neera told her that she would love to go and learn since she had not had such an experience herself, but she was a recent survivor of breast cancer and under medical advice, she had to be very careful not to exert herself. From that day on the dynamic changed. Mohini grew in her respect for Neera who had expressed how much she admired those who worked at the grassroots level. This incident in some unspoken way brought us all closer together.

By this time our efforts to recruit a woman manager had failed. Few women had the level of skills and the attitude we were looking for. In Nepal as in most aid dependant countries, qualified and competent women professionals were working for the donor agencies, were running their own organizations, or were abroad. Therefore we advertised again and kept it open for men. Even this time, we had to take two men instead of the one we planned, for neither of them could meet our complete requirement. The process for the recruitment was rigorous, but it was also transparent and respectful. This is when Deepak Dewan and Rabi Chitrakar joined the team, and I felt the support of having a full staff team, a whole year after beginning Tewa’s work. Deepak brought in administrative and programme management skills and Rabi, strength in financial programming and management, that we badly required for I had very limited expertise in the area.

Building a team requires ongoing effort, but proper induction is crucial. In the beginning, I made sure that I personally inducted each and every one to Tewa. Sitting hours with a possible new member or a newly recruited staff – to explain the philosophy and the politics of doing this work. Keeping nothing in the closet, being completely transparent and honest. Thus not only clarifying all queries and doubts they might have had, but getting them motivated and interested as well. Paying attention to this initial task impacted on the strength of the long-term work and the level of people’s involvement.

Since its initial days, Tewa has been lucky to involve a team of Tewa Advisors that emerged without any planning or intent. The story is as follows. Just as I was beginning to dream of Tewa, I was involved in an Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS) research project with Kiran Bhatia. In preparation for this research, I was to pull together a body of people who could be an advisory board for this work involving micro-credit for the empowerment of women which was an entry-point to a poverty-reduction programme. I chose six people, three men and three women professionals in Nepal including me, whom I knew we could count on for the finest and the most desired results in terms of professional competence, creative thinking, ethical grounding and a feminist vision. These people were: Mohan Man Sainju, Chandni Joshi, Arzu R. Deuba, Ganga D. Awasti, Anil Chitrakar from Nepal. Somehow, at this time there was pressure on me that a World Bank project that was perceived to emerge as an off shoot of this research,

should be housed under Tewa. This I knew would be suicidal. So I invited Kiran my colleague on this research and Betty Wilkinsen at IRIS/Nepal to join as Tewa Advisors along with the previous group of select people, and worked with and through them, to arrive at a logical conclusion as to why Tewa could not at this stage house a project of the World Bank. The arguments against were valid and there was little explanation required. At the end of the two-day process leading up to this decision, the group of six people were a part of the Tewa family as its advisory team!

Often in Nepal, advisors are seen to be honorary fixtures in organizations with very little direct hands-on work. This was not so for our advisors. There were too many roles for them. We needed them for serious advice, we “used them” as our credit cards, we required their inputs in our major policy and programming documents and we needed them for building our strength and for our moral backing. They did not let us down. Each of them has contributed to Tewa’s collective strength. I have been personally inspired, encouraged, and strengthened in all that I have been able to do in/with Tewa because of their wisdom and support!

Soon our office was a bustling place of motivated and busy people who had an environment that was unique in Nepal. We sat on the floor for our meetings, cooked our own lunch in the office (for eating out was expensive and neither was it convenient), the messenger participated in all our planning and team meetings, and moreover, everyone was paid only about one third of what they could be offered in the aid agencies, given their level of skills. Yet it was a motivated group of people who truly felt they were engaged in a struggle for equity and justice through innovative forms of philanthropy and grant-making to rural women groups.

### **))) – Doing It The Right Way – (((**

What we did and the way we did our work happened because we truly believed that was how things should be done. There were no footsteps to follow. We were redefining the culture of the work space and the way we did our work. These were some of the key words we focused on - transparency, accountability, participatory, non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic, respectful, and I coined a new one - “frugal efficiency”. For we had to do our work efficiently and effectively, but do it in a frugal way so we could be truly sustainable as an organization in a highly propped-up environment of aid-ridden Nepal. Again, it was crucial to redefine what we meant exactly by these words, when we were working in such a diverse and varied context as is possible in Nepal that is multi-lingual and multi-cultural and cuts across the caste and class hierarchy.

Usually leadership sets the example. Meera Jyoti, who took over the Board responsibility from me two years after we found Tewa, and myself, both came from privileged backgrounds of caste and class, and grew up in feudal and authoritarian environments, but thank heavens - we changed along the way! I was constantly aware of the need of my role to coach, nurture and empower the team; and Meera did no less. Together we often

confused our team members thoroughly but also inspired them at the same time. This had a ripple effect in the organization – and eventually Tewa built an automatic repellent system of expelling anything that was hierarchical and disrespectful, either on the basis of gender, position, class, or caste and ethnicity.

In terms of the office, we decided to create our physical space in a way that would be comfortable for everyone. Because our grantee groups would be women from rural Nepal, it was important to ensure that our physical space allowed all to sit on the floor (it is another thing that this is also one of the most economic ways to maximize the utility of the space). We always ate together, a simple meal cooked in Tewa, including Kajiman, and often extended this hospitality to delighted volunteers, grantees and other visitors who happened to walk in. We recycled everything we possibly could. We made sure that our cleaning woman who came from an “untouchable” (banned by law – but still widely practiced) caste in Nepal, would not be inhibited. She was given the responsibility to clean our office space and bathrooms, as well as the kitchen – this would be unheard of in most other places in Nepal.

The implication of this is so evident in a story I can now share. Whenever we had Tewa events – and these were frequent, we invited Maiya Deula to share a meal with us (her cleaning time never matched our office hours). She never turned up, so we kept food for her and her young husband who always accompanied her to help. This went on for 4 years. Then one day Maiya and her family actually came to an event and lined-up for food with us! We were ecstatic. I felt that we had succeeded in not only being non-hierarchical, but in actually challenging the age old practice of caste discrimination. It took us four years to heal the pain of systemic discrimination lodged in Maiya’s psyche as well as ours! But we were rewarded for our efforts.

With ongoing consultation with and within our team, we very carefully charted the way we would run our programme. Our Board meetings were open to all Tewa members and of course the staff (as required by the constitution at least two thirds of the board members, and over 50% of the general membership were always present). Early on in Tewa I recognized that we would require a very competent staff team if we were to do the kind of work we set out for ourselves. So the staff had all the programme knowledge and it made sense that they were given a chance to brief the Board themselves. This would help build their confidence, would train them in presentations, and likewise the board and membership would learn to value what they were doing. In terms of the membership, this was a great way to keep them informed and involved. This would also be a wonderful team-building exercise. So the board members would be making policy decisions, the staff would inform these choices, and the membership participated happily in all other things except decision-making. In fact in the initial years that I was there, we saved on Tewa resources, by inviting members (those who could) to bring in the refreshment for these meetings. At the most it would mean one such contribution a year, and the members did participate in this way as well. These meetings also greatly helped in building transparency, and non- hierarchical structures and provided learning all-around. But initially there was some resistance, one Tewa member just could not take the inclusiveness, for the practice everywhere else was so different. Ultimately she left.

Being a Board member generally meant one had status and recognition that came from the position. Not so in Tewa. The recognition only came with a well demonstrated ability for leadership and critical thinking, and as a Tewa Board member, we constantly had to work on both levels. But in the long run, this paid us excellent dividends.

Again, in terms of devolving power and building accountability, each of our key programmes or projects are conducted with the help of a committee. The committees are chaired by a board member, include responsible staff and interested team members, and have two external members drawn from our allies or donors depending on the level of their skills and expertise and/or interest in the relevant area. The external members are rotated every 2 years – allowing for wider participation and inclusiveness, and for Tewa to benefit from a varied range of external expertise. For the external members as well, their participation in our grant-making committee, meant in-depth learning and insights into grass-roots women’s groups, participation in a successful programme like Tewa, and the power to change what they collectively felt was required. This has been some of the most fascinating learning in Tewa for all of us. Whenever we felt that something needed to be changed in order to make our work better we could do it. From the legal aspect the Board had the final say, but the committees were the ones who really did the research and the thinking through. So when the homework was thorough, and the change was in the best interest of Tewa and the work it did for the women of Nepal, why should there be any resistance from the Board!

The many events in relation to fund-raising, annual volunteer recognition, or team-building, in Tewa are usually managed by the volunteers, bringing in their networks, their motivations, and creativity. One thing Tewa built in very early on was an annual recognition programme for our volunteers. This added value and recognition to the often thankless work they did in the world – and kept their motivation level very high. In fact initially every volunteer was aspiring to be a Tewa member and not remain “just” a volunteer, for often the work volunteers do, largely remains undervalued. This has changed however, for volunteers are highly valued and respected as central to Tewa’s work. It also became apparent early on to the volunteers, that out of every 100 rupees that a volunteer might raise for Tewa, 93% went directly to the grantee groups and only 7% was retained for direct programme support work. This was a very big motivation.

Understanding existing power hierarchies in Nepal, we defined how we wanted to do our grant-making and related outreach support. The way we sat, the language we spoke, what and how we ate and our behaviour with the grantees were all discussed by the staff team in great detail and defined accordingly. During a field visit, we would not sit on a chair even if we were offered one, we would not accept home hospitality, and if we needed to, we would pay in cash for it, we would explain our philosophy and programme right at the beginning without their asking, and we would try and schedule a time that would be suitable for them and not only us, recognizing that in a predominantly agrarian country people go by the seasonal calendar which varies according to geography.

Every one who visited Tewa had a right to “know” about Tewa, and we made sure one of us could do this even if it meant that in a small staff team, we spent more time in the

office than intended. This often happened, and the wonderful thing for me was to know that though our salaries were not high, and our work not easy, the turn-over of staff was very low. This confirmed my initial thought that if people can be in a learning and a growing environment, belong to/work for a larger goal, be in a supportive environment of respect and trust, we need little else. When Rabi needed to prepare for his exams and leave for Canada, when Bimala decided to join Action Aid, when Gyanu's 9 year old son died in a tragic accident, when Lamu lost her adopted daughter in a street accident, when Meera Jyoti our then President of the Board, was diagnosed with cancer, we were all there for our friends and colleagues like a solid family. Whether it meant doing their work for them, allowing them as much time as they needed, pooling resources and physical and emotional support for them, or just providing moral support – we were there. These were not times to count the loss of resources, time and energy. These were times to help do everything in our power to get our colleagues back on their feet. That is what we did. The high level of achievement by any standard in Tewa during its founding years, was probably owing to these values that we defined and put into practice from the very beginning.

### ))) – **The Programme** – (((

Tewa's programme was very much defined by the most felt needs in the context of Nepal at the time as well as my personal understanding of where I was in life and work, and what I felt was possible for me to do. Nepal was going through very rapid transitions. Modernity, urbanization, effects of globalization particularly in terms of communications and media, break-up of built-in social safety nets woven intricately into the family and community as institutions in the absence of government safety nets to fall back on, were too much to cope with. This effect was further heightened by a unstable new democracy with continuous change of leadership, corruption, sky-rocketing inflation, and growing unemployment.

Personally, I had matured and gained considerable experience in the development world, both within donor structures and in the institutions and networks I helped found or lead. As a Hindu widow I had raised my three children "successfully" and had just put my oldest daughter through college, therefore regaining some social approval in family circles. As a feminist I was completely sure that I did not want to perpetuate institutional structures I did not believe in, or where I felt I was limited in optimizing my work output. Also as a feminist and a time-tested and self-proclaimed activist, one did not discuss or rationalize when the call came from your gut level – one simply knew, trusted, and jumped – however strange this may sound. And looking back through time, though always undefined, "jumping" had paid in the past. The social cost of living in Nepal was growing by the day. This would certainly be heightened by the Maoist movement that had been announced around the same time as the founding of Tewa, and the cost as always, would be higher for women.

Therefore the essential design of the programme was to fund-raise locally, to help reassert that we could run "sustainable" structures in aid-ridden Nepal, and get away from

the notion of donor dependency. This would also help build communities, make philanthropy more relevant to present times and need, and in the process help restore human dignity to some extent. The spin-off gains would help educate external donors and NGOs, and if this could be successful, it would provide an inspirational model for feminist initiatives as well as for other development practitioners.

The other half of the programme would have to focus on the best possible niche for the use of the money we raised. Because we were planning on raising money in an ongoing way it was important to see how we could match this with ongoing giving. Owing to development interventions from the government, donors and the NGOs in terms of savings and credit programmes for rural women and a general environment post democracy, or simply owing to rising inflation, women were increasingly beginning to enter the outer domains of politics and the market. However, despite the fact that donor aid was to be increasingly directed to women in terms of reducing the gender gaps - particularly post WCW Beijing, owing to the lack of donor structures at the grassroots level, and women's limitations or restrictions in their mobility and voice, this resource hardly ever reached them. I felt that the best way to increase women's political visibility and voice was by helping them stay organized. Therefore the best use of our money would be in making small grants to groups of rural women all over Nepal, who were beginning to get organized but most of whom had almost no access to external resources. So this part of the Tewa programme focused on grant-making to rural women's groups.

Weaving all through the work of Tewa, was a personal commitment to ensure ongoing human resource development (HRD) at all levels. In Nepal, owing to lack of access to education by isolated hill communities, the ongoing experimentation in education in general (for example from English medium to Nepali medium), and the use of educational institutions for political mobilization by party leaders, formal education even for those who could afford to go to school remains inadequate. This has impacted directly on the professional capabilities of its people, particularly in a rapidly modernizing Nepal. Therefore, HRD is a built-in part of every programme work that we do in Tewa.

Even though the overall design and delivery modality of the Tewa programme followed my initial visualization, the Tewa team agreed and owned the key programme. In a process-led approach in any case the context and time defines programme responses. In our early years, we very soon learned that along the side of the main programme, we had to build in a support programme for women, and put together an "emergency fund" to urgently respond to women who in crisis situations have nowhere else to turn to. A few stories will illustrate this need to be able to respond to personal crisis.

A Board member sent to Tewa a woman who had had no luck at the newly established Ministry of Women and Social Welfare, and who was raving and ranting with a baby in her arms at the time that she was found. Sita was an abandoned wife, a mother with a less than a year old child, and hailed from a remote district. She had worked as a weaving instructor and was skilled, but she found no work in Kathmandu. She had knocked on the doors of all the NGOs and the Ministry without any success and by the

time she came to us she was in a state of great agitation and was psychologically unbalanced. We could not at this point let her down. After helping her to calm down, we promised to give her a monthly allowance to pay her rent, connected her with Mahaguthi (a fair trade crafts outlet) so she could weave and earn a living, and referred her to Maryknoll mental health institute so that she could receive treatment. Additionally, Tewa continued to provide ongoing emotional and practical support to Sita. Today, she has fully recovered. Tewa gave her, her last cumulative yearly stipend to start her own weaving and tailoring business, with the help of which she supports her child and herself.

In another incident, a friend of mine called me to say that he felt his landlady had a serious problem, but he could not help her - and would I look into this and see if Tewa could do something. Sarita was the second wife of a rich man who was older than her by over 30 years. He had three girls from his first wife, so when the new young wife from the village also gave birth to a daughter, the mother-in-law and the husband began to abuse her physically and emotionally. When I met her she was in a terrible condition. She said she could not die because of her little daughter, but her life was hell in her home and she felt there was no outlet for her. We provided her the space at Tewa. She was given a monthly honorarium so that she could eat, and be in Tewa during the day. When she was stronger and ready she began to prepare lunches/teas, easing away some of the work from Kajiman, who was beginning to get very busy. When Sarita first sat in our team meeting she could not even introduce herself – she could only weep uncontrollably, but within several months, she became very empowered. In a couple of years, the mother-in-law died, her relationship with her husband improved, she gave birth to a son and now lives happily in her home. She is an ever ready Tewa volunteer today!

In another incident we supported a man who came to us in a state of trauma. He had lost his voice in an automobile accident. He was told that an operation in India would help but he had no money. Of course what Tewa gave him is just a little money, but more importantly the credibility to reach out to a much wider network that made it possible for him to collect the necessary funds. He got his voice back, and now works in an NGO that works in the prevention of trafficking of women and girls for prostitution.

These are just a few examples. We get many women but some men as well who walk into our office in a desperate situation, and in Nepal in the absence of government safety nets, we cannot just turn our backs and say this is not in our mandate. We have to do whatever we can.

### **))) – Fund-Raising – (((**

Nepal has an ancient traditional culture of giving which is rooted and engrained in the fabric of Nepali life whatever one's religious and cultural background. But philanthropy as is now understood in the modern world or as is practiced mainly in North America and Europe, is not so prevalent and neither is it understood. It is easy to raise funds for building a temple, or a rest house, or even to feed the hungry. To build a home for abandoned women, the elderly or orphans is more likely to be understood. But how can

one ask for money to support the empowerment of women? The very notion of this questions the fundamental belief that women are powerful. In Nepal, generally, women are “well looked after”, “provided for” and respected so what is the meaning when we say they are not empowered – they are literally worshiped like goddesses! This is veritably what will cross the mind of any possible Nepali donor – men and even women. Neither does the government have an incentive policy to encourage people to give in this way in the absence of trust laws, or tax deductible policy for donations. Furthermore, NGOs are also perceived as a “dollar-farming” industry, and there is little trust for them among the general public. Besides, “empowering women” through education or income-generating activities is the work of the donor agencies if not the government. What are the aid agencies doing in the country if not this!

Given this background, everyone on the outside thought local fund-raising was an impossible thing to do. Besides, Nepal is a “poor” country – who would or could afford to give money! But within Tewa we were excited by the possibility, and had designed our fund-raising strategy.

Early on in this process, I approached a woman who I felt could understand the value of the work we were doing because of her level of education, involvement and exposure. I went to her home, explained the intent of Tewa, and as I finished explaining and had not even solicited for support, Dr. Vijaya Laxmi Shrestha, said “wait, I’ll get you the cheque” and disappeared from my sight. When I looked at the cheque my jaws dropped. It was so large! Experiences like this kept me going even when no one could believe this work could be done in Nepal. In another incident, when Tewa was in its third year, our member Draupadi brought into Tewa a group of women from the remote rural areas of far western Nepal, who were being trained in her organization. At the end of our orientation on the philosophy and work of Tewa, a few of them asked if they could be donors and promptly reached for their bags. The largest gift was less than US \$5, but these gifts were precious. They demonstrated that these women understood the politics of our work and gave us full support!

We intended our fund-raising to be an activity and a process that would also help build community as the traditional safety nets disappeared, so it was important to raise money from the community itself. How do we do this when people are not educated or sensitized in this way, when there is little trust for the work of the NGOs, and when channels and means of communications like the postal service, or telephone are limited? This could only be done through a direct approach. Early on we put in place a fund-raising volunteer programme. Owing to my experience with the Global Fund for Women, I knew of their “money workshops” which was a tool on fund-raising, that they conducted for their grantees. As if by design, Anne firth Murray the Founder/President of the Global Fund for Women, happened to be present in Nepal to do a “money” workshop for us in the initial days. So with some tools and insights from the workshop, I initially designed a two-day fund-raising training targeting mainly “educated and resourceful” housewives in Kathmandu. This workshop/training package integrated mainly three things: motivation, position of women in the development concept, and practical tools on fund-raising suitable for this category of fund-raisers. The volunteers

would be supported through a mentoring programme for a three-month period, at the end of which closure would be drawn so that the volunteer could choose to remain on the Tewa network or not. During this three month period the volunteers would meet at regular periods and would interact with and learn from resource persons in the subject of their interest, and were supported practically and emotionally on the work they were doing for Tewa. The training package was firmed-up with the help of in-house resource person/s and was ready for delivery to our first batch of 16 volunteers towards the end of the first year. Early on there were two awards instituted for the outstanding volunteer who raised the most money and for the one who reached out to the biggest number of donors. Tewa Board member Sadhana Shrestha, and then volunteer staff Lily Thapa, instituted the two awards in the memory of their late husbands Birendra Shrestha, and Major/Dr. Amir Thapa. Tewa also instituted an additional outstanding volunteer award.

This approach of reaching donors through our volunteers, allowed us to reach out to hundreds of Nepalis beyond the capability of the team. The women who participated in our volunteer programme were transformed for life in terms of personal motivation and an overall understanding of women's issues. And Tewa benefited directly from broadening its donor base and spreading word on its philosophy. This programme expanded and grew to manage three or four trainings each year, with a separate programme officer to coordinate the programme. As word of the effective use of the training in relation to acquiring a birds eye view on development issues and practical resource mobilization techniques spread, aspiring development practitioners, NGO staff or students began to ask to be our volunteers. The challenge for us was how to maintain a balance where we could continue to bring in "educated and resourceful" housewives as well as those with professional experience.

There was very little frivolous money in Tewa. Besides I strongly felt that donor agencies had an obligation to invest in the human resource development of Nepal and that the opportunity we gave them to "partner" with a local organization would benefit them. I thought the fund-raising volunteer training as a part of the HRD programme, should be funded by a donor agency. Early on, a friend Claire Burkert who started the JWDC, suggested that I approach the Norwegian Save the Children Fund, Redd Barna as it was then called. I did, and Jon Kristiansen the Representative, signed a grant of Rs. 300,000 roughly amounting to US\$ 4000, for the first year, and followed this with another similar grant the following year. At the time that we received the grant we were not even formally registered – but this incident speaks highly of Jon's astuteness and true partnering spirit, especially considering our programme was not even designed to directly benefit children as their mandate required. This was a difficult act to follow for many other heads or responsible persons in organizations. Our subsequent experience of fund-raising for the HRD programme with local donor agencies was very different and educating in many ways, and I will talk more of this as I expand on the rest of the HRD programme.

Other fund-raising strategies were to organize events, run campaigns, and not miss any opportunity to educate on the need to give to women, and on the good work Tewa was beginning to do. Everything we did involved people, allowed them the satisfaction of

doing something and seeing direct results, and inspired them to talk with others about their involvement. This required a great deal of time and energy, beyond the limits of the small staff team we had. But every Tewa member was required to make a commitment to fund-raise and be a donor herself. It does not matter how small the size of the gift may be. Therefore the success of the programme rested on the participation of the full membership and the cadre of volunteers.

Fund-raising in Tewa continues to be an ongoing effort. According to recent data, donor retention in Tewa in spite of keeping them well informed and updated on Tewa activities, is only up to 7%. This means there is a need to bring in new donors in an ongoing way. Needless to say, Nepal's rapidly deteriorating political and economic situation is a further deterrent to the efforts we have made in local fund-raising. It also speaks of the need for ongoing investment of time and energy in this area of fund-raising despite the credibility we now have.

The important thing we learned was that however hard it was to do this work, we could raise money locally in Nepal. The money mostly came from individual donors, both women and men (though money is usually in the control of men, our volunteers were more comfortable in approaching the women in their family and friends circle), who mainly gave between 5 – 15 US dollars. By the time I handed over Tewa in June 2001, we were raising 12-15 hundred thousand Nepali rupees equivalent to US \$15,000 on average annually, and making approximately 20 –30 grants every year. Something unimaginable and unheard of in Nepal until then.

### **))) – Grant-Making – (((**

The grant-making programme had to be thought out very carefully. I had no clear idea when we could actually begin to give out money. Initially I thought this would not begin until the second year, considering the time required to ground Tewa as an organization and fund-raise to some extent. As we went along – it became apparent that it was important to begin making the grants in order to be able to continue to raise money. This meant the staff had to work quickly on the required criteria and a grant-making policy, do some kind of an out-reach that would allow for the rural women groups to learn about our grant-making programme, and raise enough money to respond to the suitable proposals.

We moved very quickly. We invited all the women's organizations that we knew in Kathmandu who were doing very good work at the local level, and briefed them about our programme. We handed out the criteria and a proposal format that would be required for the submission of the proposals, and requested them to ask the groups they thought would qualify, and who they thought could benefit, to apply within a given deadline in November. By this time we had managed to raise over 350,000 rupees (approximately US \$ 4500) for grant-making purposes. We received 11 requests, and 10 of those qualified following an appraisal visit by staff to 6 of those groups. In December 1996, we made our first set of grants. Another new ground was broken!

Having a very clear set of criteria enabled us to short-list proposals very quickly. The women groups had to be registered with the local Governments which meant we were not making grants to individual women, they had to be managed and run by women (though a few men could be included on their membership), office-bearers were not to be in similar positions in political parties, and the proposal writing must include the participation of the membership it would serve. Initially most of the requests came from organizations led by men. These did not qualify. However men whom we interacted with directly, were appreciative of the need women had, and sometimes helped in the out-reach and the writing of the proposals as well.

Owing to Nepal's limited infrastructure, geographic inaccessibility and lack of communication facilities, informing available women's groups was ongoing work. We used local development journals produced by donor agencies, our own membership who were involved in the area of development, and anyone we could find who would take the word out. My involvement at the time in development networks, women's groups, and occasional assignments with donor agencies also helped greatly in the outreach work in the initial years. However, from the fourth year onwards this was no longer a problem. Good word spread and Tewa received many inquiries from far-flung villages, either through people travelling to Kathmandu, letters, or telephone when it was possible. Each year the proposals grew in number. Yet the success of our fund-raising enabled us to cope. Yes, this was good news, for it meant that rural women were getting organized, but many lacked organizational development skills and there were only so many proposals that qualified though our proposal format in local language was simple and our process non-bureaucratic. We were clear that the category of the rural women organization we chose would be those who were "moving towards their own empowerment" and had already made some political assessment of the work that they were doing.

We made a provision for two kinds of grants. A regular grant given out in two cycles annually, of a maximum ceiling of 50,000 rupees (approximately US \$ 750) each, and a discretionary grants that were more flexible for urgent needs and could be made within 150,000 rupees annually. We have learnt since, that an average grant size ranges between 30 – 40 thousand rupees. Often donors and volunteers who raised money for us would question how we would monitor the grant and how could we make sure rural women would not misappropriate the funds. In the Nepal development context these would appear to be fairly valid questions. We planned to try and do at least thirty percent of the field visits ourselves, but we were also clear that the grants would be given with respect in an environment of trust. Therefore it was mandatory that we completely shared our entire philosophy with the prospective grantees, explained why we were doing this work, and how we raised our money in the initial stages of the process. This put our grant-making into perspective for our grantee groups. We have found that many times groups have used the grant to do more work than outlined in the project requirement. Some of them have become our donors voluntarily, others have begun to mobilize resources at the local level for themselves.

Our grants have paid off in many unseen ways. In a rural environment it is more difficult for a group of women to be corrupt for the fear of “losing face”, for social recognition and acceptance is often their only security. So even if a few people “mess-up”, it is less likely for this behaviour to be perpetuated. People know each other, and their “Izzat”<sup>3</sup> is very important. Many people who give money think there has to be tight control and the hierarchy is very top down. whereas in Tewa I was determined to change this and make it horizontal – and enter a true partnership. After all, it was because the women were ready and chose to add on to their burdens and do “extra work” to change their own positions, that we were given the chance to even make a grant! In all my work with aid agencies in Nepal, and my work on the Board of the Global Fund for Women, I had learned and realized that only when the giving is done with complete trust and respect does it have a chance of earning the same value back for the donor. This was certainly true for women’s groups.

**Nepal Gramin Swavalambhan Bikas Kendra - Example of a Grantee group:**  
*Nepal Rural Self-Reliance Development Center:*

*This group had come together initially as a saving and credit group. They were acutely aware of the lack of access to health services. They learnt about Tewa through one of Tewa’s members who had done work in their area. When they approached us they were thinking of putting up a local pharmacy. During our conversations they saw the need to go back to do a more in depth needs assessment in the area of women’s health.*

*It did not take them long to identify their priority need in the area. Though they were very close to Kathmandu, they needed to walk for half an hour to two hours to reach a bus, or a taxi. In case of emergency a pregnant woman had little chance to make it to the hospitals in Kathmandu. They also had only one woman who was a traditional birth attendant (TBA) who was getting very old. Therefore the group decided that they would train two women from each of the 9 wards in the village development committee as TBAs. The women could benefit in receiving some payment in cash or kind, and in case of emergency they could save lives by making advanced referral to the nearest hospitals.*

*They received a grant of 36,000 rupees or approximately US \$ 500 from Tewa. Fifteen women received an intensive 15 day training as TBAs. They were carefully chosen and priority was given to economically and socially disadvantaged women. The group also received a second grant from Tewa two years later for income generation activity – to support the excellent work they were doing.*

At the level of the grant-making committee, the membership level, and at the level of the grantee groups every interaction was a tremendous learning space. We came from many different realities, conditionings and practices and we often had as much to de-learn as we had new things to learn. And in this doing we grew together both within Tewa and with the women’s organizations at the rural level. The sizes of the grants were not very big, but in rural Nepal, financial resources are scarce. Our grants went a long way in providing some crucial and critical support for women’s visibility and voice.

Particularly with this aspect of our programme the many angles and underlying issues meant that there was a need for ongoing review and analysis of the work we were doing. The important thing was also to do this work in a “participatory” way. Which would not only ensure the physical presence of the grantee representatives, but allow and enable for

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<sup>3</sup> Izzat is honour in Nepali and this often rests on the shoulders of women in traditional cultures.

some critical and strategic thinking on their part as well. This led us to do residential workshops in our office that were not very costly for it entailed little other cost than the travel and logistical costs for our grantee representatives. The good thing in Tewa was that at any point and time we always had a small group of in-house resource persons who had necessary skills in designing/running, and facilitating workshops.

The Tharu Mahila Utthan Kendra were a very successful women's organization in Bardia, Western Nepal. They had support from most of the donor agencies who had regional offices in Nepalganj. They approached us for a grant and said that they valued the non-bureaucratic and respectful way Tewa made grants, particularly because this was locally raised money. They wanted just to be a partner with Tewa and learn from us. There were/are many inspiring stories right from the beginning. These stories were like lamp-posts that lit-up our road whenever it got too dark or too difficult.

### **))) – Human Resource Development at Tewa – (((**

As I said earlier, we were committed to human resource development. It was something that was needed for our team and for our grantee groups as well. We could ill afford the time and resources to do HRD as a separate programme. So we found a nice balance in weaving it right through and building it into all of our key programme.

The biggest HRD effort was the training of our fund-raising volunteers – and we did receive some money for it for the initial two years from Redd Barna, as I shared with you earlier. Just as the funded period drew to a close, another donor agency showed interest in supporting our programme, and asked us to send in a proposal which we did. We went through the waiting, the several revisions of the proposal and more waiting. However, after a little over a year and a half of this process we decided that enough was enough. We would try no more. We had lost time, energy, and had been disillusioned enough not to try other donors at the same time. Was this intentional? Did this man deliberately delay our work? I cannot tell. This was a very good lesson for the team. It affirmed many lessons for our grant-making practices, and affirmed my earlier hunch that we should not spend time and energy in our initial years fundraising for operational costs. Because we had in-house resources, for we designed and delivered the workshops ourselves, we had our meeting room which was a multi-purpose space and prepared our own food, our costs were really minimal, and we could continue to do our work.

Through our networks in the Nepali development scene, we were able to bring in the best resource persons in the desired area. Being respectful of their time meant we provided a honorarium. Knowing our work, they were always ready and happy to come and most of them donated their honorarium back to Tewa and also became our donors. We continued with our HRD work in Tewa, for it was crucial for all our programme. We did it in many different ways and improvised whenever we needed to.

For our staff team and the in-house needs I was the resource. My earlier training and work with all the agencies, was helpful. I adapted a little from a few. I innovated for others. It worked! We wrote letters and field-visit reports, in-team memos, annual reports by standardizing all into a user friendly, non-fancy and effective way. Even preparing annual budgets and publishing work which I had not done before, I learnt and the team learned with me. Using HURDEC for our strategic planning and team-building exercises proved to be very useful. When we needed more technical back-up, we brought in experts who could teach the responsible staff members, or the staff went to suitable courses/institutions. None of the staff members had experience in fund-raising and grant-making work in the past other than me, and I did not want to perpetuate previous practices. So we all had to learn anew together.

We also made sure that the learning curve was high for all our team members including interested volunteers who were sent to training openings available for Tewa or were supported to go (as far as our time and resources allowed) to specific ones on the basis of their particular needs or interest. We could extend very little HRD support to our grantee groups in terms of their needs. We often tried to link them with donor agencies, and other NGO networks working at the local level – but this was an area of evident need that we could not fully respond to unless we designed a focused programme for then in this area. Unfortunately, the founding years were clearly not our time for doing it.

Being connected with the international women’s movement and particularly through my being on the Board of the Global Fund for Women, there were wider exposures available to the Tewa members and staff. For instance we were invited to the annual Women’s Funding Network/USA meeting and the Association of Women in Development (AWID) conferences. Each time we sent two of our team members selected by an independent committee. I chose not to go to these meetings myself, for my logic was that others could have a chance. In the early years, I went regularly to the GFW Board meetings anyway. Too much travel would also take away from the real work that needed to be done on the ground. Whereas for many of our members and staff this was their only chance of being exposed to the western world. Because Tewa was beginning to be visible in the women’s funding world we were also asked to make presentations in these forums. This also provided an expansive and a valuable learning opportunity for the Team.

My being on the Board of the GFW, provided parallel learning for my “doing Tewa” in many ways. Though the context was diametrically different, the feminist vision and action was the same. Personally, I grew in and with the GFW team which always provided me the forum to bounce my ideas, reflect, be stimulated and revitalize. Being in a safe space of feminist colleagues who thought alike and went along with all the madness of our lives was invigorating! Crossing borders is never easy, but my colleagues and the work we did at the GFW made it worth the costs. What was more - it brought in many gifts for Tewa in the most unexpected ways!

**))) – Where Did We Get The Money For Doing Our Work – (((**

Owing to my past experience of being on both sides of donor agencies in Nepal, I felt the best way out for Tewa's operational costs in the initial years would be to solicit necessary help from feminist funds in North America and Europe, and not to approach donor agencies based in Kathmandu. One, because I thought that the credit of doing Tewa should rest primarily with the feminist world. Two, I knew we could ill afford the time that would be required in dealing with and convincing a donor agency, if I was to make an exit from Tewa in five years as I intended to. Besides, the GFW was already pledging without even knowing fully what the intended programme was to be! Also remember the enthusiastic words of Jane Fonda which gave initial hope and inspiration at the panel in Huairou.

Our "frugal and hopefully sustainable" organization could be managed in a monthly cost of US\$1200. So the GFW made a disbursement of US\$ 10,000 at the end of 1995 and another grant of the same amount in early 1996. For the founding year this was necessary. A good half of it went to buying equipment and other one-time essential costs. Because the money came with so much trust and so "easily", it was wonderful. All my time could be used in grounding Tewa philosophically and programmatically. As we moved our work forward and it began to be talked about in western feminist circles, an amazing feminist philanthropist friend Tracy Gary asked permission to take our proposal from the GFW so that she could rewrite it for the Threshold Foundation which she knew of, but of which at the time I had no clue. What could be better? Something like this was unheard of! She did. The Threshold Foundation sent someone over to get to know Tewa, which I have appreciated. Their approach was "we don't know anything about your organization and how things work here. You tell us". Shortly after we received a grant of US\$ 12,000 from them and that saw us through our second year! Even to this day I get goose bumps when I think of the respect and support Tracy Gary extended to me in doing this work.

For the third year of running Tewa, I approached my colleague on the Board of the GFW – Marjan Sax who was a key founder of Mama Cash, Holland which can be considered to be the lead feminist fund internationally as they have been doing this work for 20 years now. The reason was that I wanted to diversify funding sources, and I certainly wanted Tewa to be associated with Mama Cash. Also my friend Marjan, who was so much more politically savvy than me, required little convincing of the value of the work Tewa was doing. She was obviously watching my mad moves with great fascination. In the third year our needs had grown owing to expansion, and we required some US\$ 23,000. The grant sizes of Mama Cash were much smaller. Marjan Sax did a personal fund-raising with her friends to raise the full amount for Tewa. In fund-raising, the acts of Marjan and Tracy will always be inspirational for me! Tewa owes them its dynamic growth during its formative years. I owe to them my strength to "do Tewa", particularly because everyone else was saying "you cannot do this in Nepal". The wisdom and support of these two women in particular can never be appreciated enough.

Again the perceived plan worked out. I meant to raise money for operational costs, only for the initial three years, after which I hoped to put an endowment fund in place. Having

no experience really in doing endowment funds before, and endowment funds not being a practice with NGOs in Nepal in the past, the man who set us rolling much earlier than we would otherwise have, was Prabhakar S. Rana, a veteran leader in the corporate sector in Nepal. We had gone to him to test corporate fund-raising, and he put the idea out. We hesitated and told him that we thought this was too early to start. He was convinced we should begin, and he was right. We began to launch campaigns and found matching grants. The Honouring Women Campaign which was a concept of the GFW was a very successful effort on our part. The Corporate Sector Campaign however gave us little money but a lot of learning and some allies in the corporate world. We did some strategic financial planning exercises to see exactly what we would require and we set to work. By the time I left, Tewa had secured more than its required 15 million rupee endowment fund. We had managed to raise a little over 16 million rupees. Gowher Rizvi at the Ford Foundation New Delhi at the time requires special mention. Tewa will always be grateful for that timely support in matching a part of the endowment fund from the Ford Foundation.

The support of individual feminists requires special mention. Many of my feminist friends - Marta Drury, Cindy Ewing and Luchie Ticzon, Judy Sturgis, Esther Hewlett, Gaylord Neely gave significant amounts of money annually and without the asking! All this money was also put into the Tewa Endowment Fund. The large grants from the Moriah Fund via Mary Ann Stein and the Shaler Adams Foundation via Margaret Shink require special mention. There were friends at home as well who supported in the same way. Greta Rana, Bijaya Laxmi Shrestha, Arzu R. Deuba, Bobby Malla, to mention but a few, and many others made their gifts in inspired ways. There were others as well both from our membership and on the outside who gave big gifts of money, and others who gave their skills and time in no less generous ways. Kaval Gulathi's timely grant from the Unniti Foundation which she and her late husband founded with their own money, for the publication of our book on education of philanthropy called "Twice Blessed"; and the Nepali "alikasi tewa" was instrumental in making so much more possible than what we could otherwise do. When Tewa had to put an emergency fund in place, as a safety net for women who were victims of abuse or abandonment, the Gaea Foundation stepped in with support.

Particularly in terms of building on the grant-making money, the "Tewa Teas" hosted by Susanne Jalbert and her friends in Denver, Colorado require special mention. These would be the acts of "partnership" in a world that can be a truly global community. Susanne, my long time friend familiar with my work and Nepal, has been hosting these teas a couple of times every year for 7 years so far, and recently has even inspired others to do them for Tewa. We send beautiful fabric woven by skilled weavers at Dhaka Weaves, Susanne sells them at these teas that she organizes. Voluntarily she sends 100% of the profit back to Tewa. This has been such a regular feature that Tewa has grown to depend on it. Dhaka Weaves has a regular buyer, and even the GFW gets publicity and a donation for channeling the money to Tewa, which can come to us as tax-deductible donations. In terms of ongoing support and dependability what can be a better example! This is particularly remarkable because Susanne is a high flying global consultant – and one would think that she would never have the "time" really!

Sometimes, gifts have been very small, but the acts of giving tremendous. They have come from our grantee groups, from rural women in Nepal, and inspired youth and children. And this is where Tewa's strength truly lies.

Remember Jane Fonda! Well, early on, on the advice of my friends at the GFW, I did send a proposal to her foundation. But heard nothing in response. Maybe the proposal never even reached her. But, what she had said at the Huairou panel, did certainly add more spice and excitement in the creation of Tewa at least in the initial year.

### **))) – Tewa's Visibility Walk – 2000 – ((( & The First International Women's Funds Meeting**

Being on both sides of the world, I had committed to hosting the much anticipated meeting of the International Women's Funds with the support from the whole team. The Global Fund also wanted to convene a meeting of the "GOOD 10" which comprised the 10 outstanding groups who had received a 10th Anniversary Grant of US\$ 10,000 from the GFW so that they could make these grants to women groups in their countries. The GFW wanted to learn about the use of this money and the issues they raised. Having recently expanded our office space and acquired an extra meeting room, we said we could do it. We decided to host this in our own office space in a very Nepali way! Participants would be expected to sit on the floor, eat lunches cooked by our volunteers, and be prepared for non-heated meeting space in January 2000. The GFW and Mama Cash who were funding the IWF meeting said this was acceptable. So for Tewa the preparations began.

I felt this was particularly well timed if we could see it as a time to get some visibility for Tewa. We were quite grounded as an organization by the year 2000 and my exit time was not too far away according to my plotting of events. Besides, hosting these meetings would be a valuable way to further strengthen Tewa as a Team as well as making it more visible! Therefore I thought of building a visibility walk that would be symbolic in many ways, heralding the new millennium and reaffirming women's global solidarity – in Nepal!

Tens of committees were formed, volunteers took complete charge for some of the tasks - like the food and hospitality committee and the banner committee. Each did their own fund-raising along the way. The staff team worked hard at bringing in representatives from grantee groups and designing a programme that would be meaningful to them. This included a Tewa grantee workshop to learn mutually about Tewa grant-making, exchange visits to local grantee groups, and study tours to expand their learning. We planned it so that the grantee workshop would come first. Grantees would lodge in Tewa for 3 days, the last day would be overlapped with the international visitors for the "Tewa Walk – 2000". The grantee representatives would leave and the IWF and GOOD –10

meetings would begin. Imagine bringing women from far-flung rural villages in Nepal, North and South Americas, Europe, and other countries together in the same venue.

For months the planning and the preparations went on. We wanted the visibility walk to be really visible! Colourful banners with slogans, a traditional drum band of only women (who were making their first historical public appearance) was organized, and beautiful larger than life paper mache Nepali dolls were made. The planning of food and logistics for the grantee groups (who also slept on the double purpose mats in the Tewa meeting room), the media coverage for the event the invitations and logistics for the walk, the public meeting at the end of the walk, the welcoming of international friends and many other preparations had to be carefully considered and executed. Reflecting back this could well have been a logistical nightmare as the events were challenging by any standards anywhere in the world.

We did not hire an events manager. Maybe there was not even one to be found for the kind of events we were bringing together. We did not even hire additional temporary staff! Meera and I co- coordinated the events. Our strength came from over 100 fund-raising volunteers we had already trained and mobilized, our own team, our allies and children. Each extended the support and resource that they could. Tewa felt like a perfect colossal family pulsating with love and care for each other, just getting ready to put out their best efforts for visitors. Children have grown to become an important part of Tewa, as future philanthropists. They were there in full support as well, colouring, pasting, and sticking each invitation card. Some days the work continued late into the night and we would just work and eat an evening meal together. Never in my past years had I experienced such an amazing sense of euphoria at the work place! The most wonderful thing was that in all of the two months when committees began to meet regularly, there was not one incidence of anger, sadness, or of “being upset”. The Tewa team demonstrated its strength, built further on it, learned, and grew together through doing these events and hosting these meetings.

When the time arrived we were actually ready. The arrival of the grantees came first. Fourteen women came. The strategic workshop with grantees, the donor-grantee and volunteer-grantee interaction programme, and interviews with journalists from different media groups, visit to near-by grantee groups, and study visits all went smoothly with tremendous mutual learning all around. We took turns to sleep-in with our grantee sisters and to take them out for meals in a nearby restaurant. I will never forget that when Maili Tamang from Sindhupalchowk (a half a day of motor ride and 3 days of walking away from Kathmandu) arrived, I sent Kajiman running for some hair oil and a comb. Maili joined after a good wash-up, feet-scrub, and an oiled plaited hair. Maili spoke Nepali with difficulty (speaking her native Tamang). Her organization was bringing her community together for the prevention of women trafficked for prostitution. The sixty year old Krishna from Baitadi in Far Western Nepal was one of the rare educated women in this region. She was working to educate women and girls. I mention her age to highlight the implication of her doing this work. In Nepal women die earlier than men and the average longevity does not go too far beyond sixty, but in Baitadi district it is far less. We talked well into the night, shared dreams, laughed, sang, and wept together.

Who could have imagined that in this community of women many would not otherwise even have had a chance of sitting together given the reality of class and caste hierarchies. In Tewa, we were a group of long lost sisters who had found each other in the forest of our lives.

The day for the “Tewa Walk – 2000” arrived. We gathered in the Tewa grounds on the misty, chilly January morning. Donors, grantees, allies, advisors, team members, volunteers, feminist colleagues, and development practitioners began to troop in and just as we were beginning to be organized for the walk our international visitors arrived – from 14 countries! The chill of the morning evaporated with the mist that rose with the sun. We walked the narrow lanes of the historical city of Patan – a colourful stream of over 500 people, women, children and men, with the traditional drum-playing women announcing the walk. Here we were: Tewa, women’s work, global solidarity in feminist action, and the collective historical beginning of the International Women’s Funds! All along the way women sang and danced. I can honestly say that a more powerful and beautiful event such as this will be very rare to find in a lifetime. This can be captured in June Kingsly’s words (my colleague on the Board of GFW who was over 70 years of age). When I asked her at the time if she liked being a part of this event, she said “ I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. This is the most memorable event of my life other than my wedding some 50 years back!” Her voice still rings in my ears.

We circled the city and came into the public grounds where a podium, and shamiyanas<sup>4</sup> were put-up and where volunteers were ready to serve drinks and refreshments. The Chief District Officer, the Secretary General of the Social Welfare Council, Mayor of Lalitpur Sub-Metro City, senior police personnel, and other invited dignitaries were already beginning to gather. Besides the formal addresses, this event was also marked by the launching of the Tewa book “Twice Blessed,” the annual recognition programme for the outstanding volunteers, and a street theater presentation on the education of philanthropy. This was a forum where Kavita Ramdas spoke on behalf of the International Women’s Funds, and Sulochana Sharma on behalf of the Tewa Grantees on the same platform. It was a charged moment in our history and in our lives.

On completion of the Walk, we were barely halfway through the events. On the next day the 2 day workshops of the IWFs and the GOOD –10 began. It will be very hard to capture the details of these meetings. The GOOD – 10 meeting was planned by Misty Sangani at the GFW, and my friend Michele Andina, who had earlier researched the GFW grantees. The IWF was managed and facilitated by the GFW and Mama Cash. Logistically, the rooms were warmed with kerosene heaters and the space was a little tight, but the wonderful break times where the volunteers served freshly prepared hot meals and the excitement of making history in terms of the IWFs made-up for all the gaps. The food was divinely prepared with love and care, and served to perfection while still retaining our inherent practice of frugality!

The field experience of being in Nepal and experiencing Tewa’s work and grantees was what I feel made the biggest impact on the visiting participants. For it was only in those

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<sup>4</sup> Colourful tents and partitions.

days that I learned that the GFW had tried so hard to encourage other women's funds to happen - with little success. With our example it looked like from then on there would be no stopping women's funds from growing. This has proven to be true. At the time, other than Mama Cash and GFW in the "developed" world, and Semillias (Mexico) and Tewa, no other fund had been really proven. Pitseng and Wheat in Africa, Nirnaya in India, Angela Borba in Brazil, and the emerging African Women's Development Fund, were all in some little way hesitant or had met with difficulties in developing their funds. The network was now established and the ball was rolling. When the third IWFs meeting was hosted by Nirnaya in Hyderabad, India in 2001 there were over 15 active women's funds! The Mongolian Women's Fund (present in the GOOD - 10 meeting) was an exceptional example! A group of members visited Tewa and invited Tewa to Mongolia as well. Several others from the GOOD -10 group graduated to be full fledged women's funds. So I feel that hosting these meetings in Nepal in many ways catalyzed the growing movement of the IWFs, and therefore, the growth of the women's movement as a whole.

### ))) – Tewa Film – (((

The need for documentation is essential not only for institutional history, but also for learning, particularly in the area of feminist activism. So that time may not erase, overwrite, translate, or be untrue to the original events and processes. In Nepal, particularly from the point of Tewa's ground-breaking achievement this was very important. At one of our early events, Suman Basnet a young media professional, who had become our donor, offered help in this area. He gladly offered his services voluntarily. Somehow this stayed in my mind. As I was beginning to plan my exit from Tewa, I built in a component in the proposal that was being submitted to the Ford Foundation, New Delhi for the production of a documentary film that would capture its first 5 years of history. So we worked with Suman to budget the cost of such a production. True to his words, Suman reassured us of his willingness to volunteer his technical time as a director/producer, and gave us an estimated cost for the production. The Ford Foundation approved the budget, and the work began on the documentary titled: Investing in Women – Tewa's first Five Years.

I along with some other technical experts who were found in-team like Rupa Joshi, or were external like Ramyata Limbu, and related and responsible Tewa staff, worked with Suman on providing information and advice during the production process of this film. For me the sharing of this story is important for the many gifts it brought to us all. Suman was stand-by from the beginning so we did not even look for someone else for I had seen his work before and knew that he met the standards and the creativity we would require. Besides his standing offer on every occasion we had a chance to talk, he spoke of his respect and commitment to Tewa's work – and he met his mark that way as well. The money came and our production costs were so nominal that we did not have trouble convincing our donor. Suman brought in Dr. Sunam to work with him on script writing and music selection for the documentary. We already had with us a Tewa song that was

composed by a famous Nepali lyricist, Chetra Pratap Adhikari, and we wanted to use this song (which is beautifully worded) as well.

The man, Suman brought in to write the script, had no idea of Tewa. I had to sit with him and tell my story, and revise the script as necessary. The selection of grantees for field visits, the interviews, and the issues and the programme highlights had to be carefully done and screened, so that the documentary could be seen anywhere in the world and be understood in the reality of Nepal's socio-economic context. In this process, Sunam got very inspired and though he had not written music in 5/6 years wrote music for the song and found and chose the ideal voice for the song. He also composed original music for the entire documentary! I found this very moving.

While doing Tewa, many gifts came without the asking, and this making of the documentary was clearly one of those gifts. In Kathmandu, when we launched the documentary as a part of introducing Hema K. C. the incoming Coordinator of Tewa, there were many men as well in the audience who were not only moved to tears, but admitted it without reservation!

### **))) – Transitions of Leadership In Tewa – (((**

As the woman who dreamed the Tewa dream and brought it all together in the larger sense, I had no choice but to begin by being in all the leadership roles myself. This was not only because we were doing something that was until then thought to be impossible, but also because I wanted to do Tewa very differently than the usual way of doing organizations. In two years time many things were in place. The team was inspired and strong, the programme was proven, and our philosophy and practice was being understood and accepted. From the day I knew I would “do Tewa” I also knew that I wanted to exit in a given time which ideally would be five years. If a successful transition of leadership happened, not only would I know that I had been truly successful in founding Tewa, but we would also make history in Nepal in bringing in younger leadership and in handing over a successful organization. Personally I was convinced that this was the only way I would choose to work, thereby developing second-line leadership of women. This was the only way I could feel assured that my learning did not go to waste, that the path that I chose to travel was a little easier for those who would follow, and that I personally would have the joy of knowing that I was gifted to coach and mentor at least a few younger women in my life time. This wish stemmed from my previous experience of knowing that for me in my feminist path there was hardly any one to turn to or to follow. I certainly admired a few women who went before me, but in Nepal they mostly worked independently. It was hard to find a forum where I could get an experience of learning from them. I wanted in my own little way to change this for the women (and hopefully a few men) who would follow my lead.

So after two years, I began to support Meera Jyoti's preparation for the role of president of the Board. Meera was painfully aware of her lack of knowledge and experience in women and development issues and in the ways of an organization. I persisted and

encouraged and argued that there never would be a better opportunity to take on such a responsibility, for I was on the Board with her, both as a board colleague, and as the coordinator of Tewa. I pledged my support for her and promised to assist her as and whenever she needed me. Yet Meera was not convinced and neither was the team, who seriously felt that my role as the leader of the Tewa membership/team was still required. Finally after a lot of convincing and cajoling, the team and Meera relented and agreed. I was joyful. For it would only be through doing that we could learn, and somehow I knew from the strengths Meera carried that she would not only make a fine leader, but was also our best bet for the facilitation of the handing over of my coordinator-ship in years to follow. This would then mark the beginning of a bigger transition that would surely evolve in Tewa.

Needless to say Meera was perfect for the role at the time. By this time She had understood that she was not only “supporting Rita” but that she herself was actually a part of making feminist/women’s funds history! She grew and sparkled with and in Tewa which had become her priority. She was wise, honest, sincere, motivated, and committed, and came with the additional benefits of being in a prominent corporate family of considerable social recognition, prestige, and the strengths of a dominant indigenous ethnic group of the Kathmandu valley. Meera was intuitively led and carried a very clear sense of what was right and what was not for attempts (intentional or otherwise) at bringing any kind of confusion or discord between us or in Tewa, just evaporated. Meera and I carried a history of being friends since our college days so we had grown to really know each other, and had gained tremendous respect for each other over the years.

The success of this transition in Tewa, the Tewa Walk – 2000, and the additional years of work and growth in Tewa, made me confident that the time had come for us to begin talking about my exit. I knew this would be a very hard thing to accept, and so I knew the need for an over all strategy which while enabling a smooth transition would also help build confidence and motivation in the team. I perceived a year-long strategy would be required which would facilitate this transition. It began with a workshop with the help of HURDEC, that would allow the team to basically see for themselves that our programme was in place and that it could now be run with or without Rita. It was remarkable that this in-team exercise left little space for confusion. It was very revealing for the staff and the team members to see that the Tewa team had the capacity to run the organization without the day-to-day help of the Founder. For me this was probably my biggest day! This was a team I had coached and guided and supported and on that particular afternoon it had dawned on them that they could “do” Tewa themselves!

So at that very meeting, we put together a support team for the transition process which comprised of advisors: Dr. Mohan Man Sainju and Dr. Arzu Deuba, and external expert Binod Shrestha and Parimal Jha of HURDEC along with Meera Jyoti representing the Board/team and Deepak Dewan representing staff. A time-line was drafted for the entire process with an overlapping time of 6 months for the incoming and the outgoing coordinators. From this day on I was very explicit about the leadership transition and took every opportunity to get this message out. However the outside world not

understanding the preparatory work that had been done and the process that had been put in place could not see this happening. There was denial, skepticism, alarm, and disbelief! How can you do this? Tewa will not survive without you! Many of the people who said these things were people who were seriously concerned and were well-meaning. They simply did not see the possibility. For me, this was all the more reason for Tewa to demonstrate a timely and successful transition. Therefore there was a need to talk openly about it, prepare and plan with the staff so that they could take more responsibility and do more autonomous decision-making, and get the process for the transition rolling.

At the time of the transition, Tewa was in a fairly good place. The programmes were proven and time-tested. Local fund-raising was possible (hard as it may be), and women's groups were getting organized all over rural Nepal. They increasingly looked for our support. We were raising anything from 10 to 15 hundred thousand rupees each year and giving out 20 to 30 grants annually. The fund-raising volunteer programme had trained and mobilized over 120 volunteers, the Tewa rules and the "Tewa style" was clear to every one involved closely with us. We had secured an endowment fund of over 16 million rupees. We had a core team of 9 trained and dedicated staff – all of whom were committed to staying with Tewa for at least a year after our over-lapping time. I did not want anything disrupting the process until Hema, the new co-ordinator had a good grip of the organization. Meera along with the rest of the team agreed/decided she would run a second term of office so that we could all benefit by not having to deal with another transition of the Board at the same time.

The entire Tewa team was convinced that we were ready for finding my replacement. Given the context, we needed to do some work with the external environment. We pulled in groups of people and invited them to Tewa to speak to them about the transition and the process we had put in place, asking them to encourage any women candidates they thought were worthy to apply. We organized a meeting particularly for the feminists and/or activists soliciting their help in this process. We also had a programme interaction with other NGOs/agencies to dispel the curiosity around my departure from Tewa! We were again careful as to when and how to place advertising, do the the short-listing of the applicants, design the process for interviewing. We were just as much aware about the need to ensure the visibility of the in-coming coordinator. Making sure that this whole process was owned by the entire team and that we truly practiced each of our values and principles.

When the day for the interview approached, we had five candidates short-listed and a few out of those were certainly promising. Yet most of the applications were from women who were looking for a break rather than from those who understood the depth and the level of skills required for the position. This was expected, most good women professionals were already inside the donor structures or were running their own organizations. We were no competition for the scale of donor salaries and benefits. We could not afford to be if we were to be truly sustainable in the real sense of the word. On the morning of the interview only two of the interviewees turned-up. There was no information from the other three who had confirmed they would come for the interview up to our last reminder call of the previous day!

Parimal suggested we postpone it – but I intervened to provide a logic. We had prepared for everything, one of the short-listed candidates was an in-team selection, and would have been acceptable to us anyway. What did we have to lose? Why not give it a chance, maybe we would be surprised! The logic prevailed. We went ahead with the day-long process for the interview. By the end of the day it was a clear decision for the selection panel. The external applicant far out did our in-team candidate in terms of experience, feminist vision, and analysis. She was unanimously selected!

Again, the process of informing and inducting Hema K.C as the incoming Tewa Coordinator was unusual but done with our style of sensitivity and care. I invited Hema's husband to my home for a briefing and a chat. Hema was a young woman who was not only committed to changing the position of women, but was also desiring at the time to manage and lead a women's organization. The fit was perfect. During our overlapping time which was also her probation period, Hema was offered a job (for which she had applied earlier) both by Helvetas/Nepal and Action Aid/Nepal. The fact that she declined these organization's offers, spoke highly of her commitment to Tewa, particularly since their salary and compensation would be much more attractive than what Tewa could offer. The team did every thing to welcome and induct Hema in the best possible way. I did my level best to be as open and transparent with her in all aspects of Tewa's work and philosophy while underplaying myself in terms of visibility. In the context of Nepal, this became important for I had gained recognition and visibility. We had to build this for Hema as well, for she did not come from Kathmandu's known circle and was much younger and therefore far less experienced. I had to make sure she was not undermined or over shadowed in any way. Between Meera and myself, and many of our wonderful team members, this was truly possible. I hope someday when Hema writes her story she will reaffirm this.

It cannot be said that this transition was completely devoid of any negativity. There were some misunderstandings and unrest among a small circle of team members. One of the Board members had to be asked to resign. But this was a show of team strength and solidarity rather than of its weakness. There were profound lessons to be learned by the team in this process. Having been a part of some significant leadership transitions, I can today say with complete honesty, that a smoother and a happier one would be hard to put in place. Hema and I overlapped for six months. I never felt like we stepped on each others toes even once. There was simply no need to do so. The entire Tewa team played out its part in facilitating the transition in a remarkable way thanks to our advisors, members, staff and many volunteers and allies.

At this time, as if by chance, I received a gift of \$US 10,000 that the GFW awarded to each of its outgoing Board members to give to the organizations of their choice. I gifted \$ US 5,000 of it for Tewa's transition costs. This money allowed Tewa to host necessary meetings and workshops, and other incurring costs that was necessary in allowing a good, smooth transition. It was also available for other skills development costs for the incoming coordinator in preparation for her new role in Tewa, as she felt the need for them.

The final formal handing-over was an intimate ceremony in the Tewa complex attended only by our team and closest allies. We gathered under a colourful tent. Staff Sharmita Gurung facilitated the event. Meera Jyoti was in hospital in Delhi so the then Vice President Meera Arjyal, played her role. Both Hema and I made our speeches. Representatives of the volunteers and staff spoke. Maiya Deula brought us bouquets. The event celebrated the incoming and honoured the outgoing in the way Tewa does its work. Meera Jyoti and Kanchan Rana sponsored a three day holiday for me and my son in Pokhara, a tourist destination in Nepal. Maggie Shah drew a wonderful closure to the event drawing us all into a circle that symbolically enclosed all our grantee women. It was a very moving and powerful event for all of us. From the day I began dreaming of Tewa in Huairou/Beijing, in September 1995 till the day of the formal handing over on 26 June, 2002, 5 years and 9 months had passed.

### **))) – The Way Forward – For Tewa & Me – (((**

One year before, just at the time I was initiating the discussion on my transition with the team, I had the gift of an idea. I felt that given a rapidly declining economic situation in Nepal, it would be a good idea to invest our endowment fund in buying land and in building our own office and some rental space. In a three-phase activity we could build our own office, rental spaces, women’s activity area, craft, recreation space and ultimately the creation of a South Asian Resource and Research Center on Philanthropy. Also, in doing this project not only would we be “visible” structurally, but we could set an example of creating an eco-friendly and accessible space for women primarily, but also the community as a whole. Of course this would be an ambitious plan requiring much more than what we had in our endowment fund, but we had broken much new ground in doing Tewa in the past. Hopefully the team would be challenged to take this up as a viable “project”. They did!

Not only did the team respond to the idea wholeheartedly but the timing was perfect. For any perceived vacuum that would be left by my forth-coming departure as the founder and coordinator was filled by the idea of having such a challenging job to do ahead of us. The idea was also appealing in the face of a swiftly deteriorating economic and financial situation in Nepal. This also provided a serious role for me in translating this vision into action without being directly involved in the day-to-day running of Tewa. From then onwards the process for the transition was matched by a parallel process designed for the Tewa Land and Building Development. An autonomous Committee was established, co-chaired by the then Chair of the Board, Meera Jyoti and myself and was inclusive of a wide range of external experts and Tewa allies.

By the time I left, Tewa's key programme was secure, funding was in place, and the team was confident. Being a process oriented organization there would always be adjustments to make to ongoing needs and demands, but there was very little confusion in doing this work. Furthermore, its importance and credibility had grown with the growth of the International Women's Funds that were beginning to emerge in many parts of the developing world. Also, in an aid-ridden country like Nepal, the strength of being truly self-reliant and sustainable was a valuable lesson in the development world. This model was beginning to be visible to NGOs and community groups wanting to be more involved in local resource mobilization and in the creation of an endowment fund. Therefore for Tewa we had made our point. The possibility of local fund-raising and the need to support emerging groups of rural women was an established fact. At the very minimum, all Tewa needed to do was to give this work continuity and sustenance.

One of my lesser desired goals in handing over Tewa, was also to have the chance to rest. Not only had I literally worked non-stop in the last fifteen years since the death of my husband, but in my multiple role in doing Tewa I felt completely mentally drained and physically exhausted. However, several weeks before the day of the formal transition which was to be on 26 June, 2001 arrived, Nepal faced its blackest day in history - the unprecedented Palace Massacre of 1 June, 2001 when the Crown Prince killed 10 members of his immediate family including his father, the King. Even before the official 13 days of national mourning was over, violence resulting from the Maoist responses escalated. Nepal reeled under shock and disbelief as the death of a dozen on one or the other side became daily "dal-bhat"<sup>5</sup>. In this outrageous unfolding of events, what was becoming apparent to an ordinary Nepali was that the political leaders and parties had failed the people. The Maoist movement was shifting more and more away from its ideological basis to desperate armed action, the state machinery was virtually non-existent for the greater number of Nepalis, and we had no infrastructure whatsoever in place for the required realistic relief operations.

This situation was very agitating for me personally, but I found that even among my colleagues in the development circle it was not easy to talk about it. People were either in a make-believe world and did not quite see how bad the situation was, or they were thinking of personal security and were cautious about speaking openly. Suddenly trust seemed to have disappeared on all sides, or else everyone was simply trying to cope with all the adjustments that had to be made in their professional and the personal lives. So I began to gather colleagues and friends to discuss the idea of starting a political party – mad as it sounds to me now. Though everyone thought it was a great idea, no one could plunge in to make it happen. This idea was therefore easy to drop. But I have learned since then that activists don't "rest" in times of desperation. Out of the smoke of this agitation an institution to work on conflict transformation and peace-building work in Nepal, "Nagarik Aawaz" was beginning to emerge even as the day of the formal handing over of Tewa's leadership role dawned.

My commitment to this work is not a choice I have made happily, but it is one that I could not help but make. When you see so much of the bigger picture and when you have

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<sup>5</sup> The staple food of Nepalis consisting of rice and a lentil soup eaten as a morning and an evening meal.

been so gifted in the past with such learning – how can anyone just turn their back? The stage was set for my involvement in conflict transformation and peace-building work in Nepal.

### **))) – Insights and Lessons Learned – (((**

Needless to say that breaking new ground, and doing intense work for almost six years brought much learning. I am sure this happened for all of us who were/have been a part of “doing” Tewa. I will expand on a few lessons that have been of real value to me.

It is now crystal clear to me that the purpose of doing development work has to be for the “larger good”. In the case of Tewa it was primarily to bring about the voice and visibility of women and to strengthen community. So whatever the path chosen to make this happen, the purpose was clear. Doing Tewa was not to found an organization, do a project, have a job, or to be recognized. All this and much more has also happened in the process, but these were not my primary considerations. I am convinced that had I tried to do the same thing with a purpose to serve myself none of this would have been achieved.

Basically when the purpose was so clear and my conviction that I could do and had to do this work so strong, it is a gift of life. Not doing Tewa would be life sapping just as doing it was life giving. On the practical side, at the time it appeared to be just the reverse. I was quitting my job with UNIFEM and a fully granted New-Zealand government ministerial NODZA scholarship, to do this work in a volunteer capacity. But I would not have grown like this had I not done Tewa. Worse still, hundreds of women’s groups and thousands of lives would not have been touched or transformed if I had not taken the initial plunge.

It would be remiss of me to allow you to think that all this was my doing. I was the one who struck the fire, but many pieces of wood ignited to keep the fire burning. It has been very humbling to learn that no one human being could possibly do something like Tewa. I could only do my bits to share the vision, and pave the path that many would walk with me, and more after me. Help and support came from all sides in the most magical ways often without the asking!

I also learned that the biggest gift we can make to each other is to allow each other to be on the path of self discovery and to be engaged in meaningful work. Therefore when we are fund-raising or asking for volunteer support, we are giving people the opportunity to grow and stay happy.

Something learned in my previous years of engagement with development work, but that I could fully practice and validate in our work at Tewa, was that one could not do good work on the outside without ongoing work within one self. Meaning, that development work requires us to be engaged in communities with men and women. We have no right to interfere in their lives, unless we are committed to making it better for them than it was. This commitment is bound to require total dedication and perseverance,

compassion, and a great deal of innate wisdom. I could not have had the strength both moral and physical, to do this work had I not received the teachings and the blessings of my Lamas, which allowed my work to also be my spiritual journey.

Often in our lives today we expect the outcomes and the results to be 100% but we are not ready to invest as much in the beginnings. Or maybe it is better to understand the age old idiom “a stitch in time saves nine”. Investing in team-building, in strategic thinking and planning, in building trust and ownership, and in defining values and our work culture at the very beginning and in an ongoing way, were the most important ingredients for the outstanding achievements of Tewa in a remarkably short span of time, particularly when we take into account the many adverse conditions of a country like Nepal.

The equally important lesson that was reaffirmed for me many times over in Tewa was the need to value and honour people both those with whom we work and those who we work for. This valuing of people can only come from a recognition of their strengths and an unconditional care for them. These values will carry people to a level where they are best in touch with their own spirits. Once people are in their spaces of comfort and power they give so much more than one would think was ever possible, and more so, they give unconditionally, for that giving sustains their spirits as well. Only when we can nurture others are we also sustained in our life force.

One thing I had always wondered and worried about even in feminist circles was a lack of ability among leaders to take the time to coach others and to let go. This was worrying because it created a vicious circle where the leaders would feel no one else was capable of taking on their roles. Because they had not invested the time in sharing their knowledge and in coaching others it was evidently less likely for others to be able to fill in their spots. I worked on the aspect of “handing over” to younger leadership from day one of initiating Tewa. I wanted to pass on Tewa to a team more capable than me, to young feminist leaders, and to a whole host of professionals who would feel confident to “hand-over” to younger leadership when their opportunity to do so came, and who understand the responsibilities this would require on their parts. I was able to do this in a record time in Tewa.

While preserving the culture and tradition diversity brings, it is the unity in diversity that can be the real strength. Learning to respect each other and leveling the ground made unity in diversity a possibility in Tewa.

I learned that the most important thing in handing over Tewa, was to be able to trust others and also to trust myself enough and not be afraid of the unknown. This trust could only come from a sense of feeling secure – in the life force of Tewa, and in my own. So when the transition of leadership happened, it became a very liberating experience and a source of great strength for me. So yes, non-grasping allows for abundant growth and richness all around and creates immense possibilities.

### ))) - In Conclusion - (((

Finally, I must be honest and say that all these wonderful things did not happen just like that. There have been costs in doing Tewa – and many of these costs have been very personal. When I had no money, it meant that the people who were most impacted by it were my children. I could not afford to visit my daughters in India as they attended college and I kept them on a stringent budget – we could not afford to talk on the phone except once every two weeks. That cry from my then fourteen year son Sashank, “please don’t refuse a good job next time” implied that there were some serious things we could not afford like visits to the dentist for example. In fact, here is a story. Shortly after beginning Tewa’s work I lost my dental crown. But I did not dare go to my dentist (for he was one of the best and certainly the most expensive) and chewed from only one side of my jaw, and smiled in the same way. It was only after 3 years when I received an anonymous gift that I could visit him.

Living in Nepal and choosing to work like this can mean many other similar things. When I applied for the Ashoka fellowship, it was certainly not to be recognized for my work, but for the fact that the stipend could pay for Sashank’s tuition. I am forever grateful that my children, Prativa, Riva and Sashank had such a clear sense of justice. They not only valued my work, but they also were willing to take risks by my side as well.

When we do work like Tewa there is no pension package, no gratuity, no “social security”, and very little recognition in the mainstream world. My work is better known and valued internationally in the women’s funding world, than probably in Nepal. So when any of us makes a commitment to do this kind of work, not only must we go into it in full recognition of this reality, but anyone else who believes in these kinds of work and can support these “social entrepreneurs” as Ashoka calls them, must lend them the physical, emotional and the moral backing that they can. So yes, the costs are always there, and we must be in full recognition of this so that we can be better prepared for it, mentally and emotionally. Hopefully these kinds of work will become the mainstream ways of running our world in the future.

In getting to do Tewa, I was given the rare gift of making my dream a reality. The learning and the lessons, the growth and the expansion of vision, and the wealth of gifts that no money can buy has filled my life with the knowing of inner strength and peace. I have been humbled by the vitality of Tewa’s life force, and all the possibilities it holds for us in the future. The time for doing Tewa was so right. This brings to mind a beautiful quote from Bruce Cockburn’s song “A Dream Like Mine” cited by Brain Malani in the introduction of his book “Designing the Green Economy”.

*“When you know, even for a moment, that it is your time,  
then you can walk with the power of a thousand generations”*

It was clearly one of those time for me. I was tired of being told this could not be done in Nepal. It was obvious that we had to demonstrate a model where we could “do this organization in a truly sustainable way” and hand over the leadership to a younger

woman. The important thing here was to demonstrate a model and extend the possibility to everyone. Not to think of doing everything by myself for no one person in this world really can. The demonstration of this model in Nepal, is triggering a whole different reality. A reality that can be transformative, according to feminist principals and vision. A reality where men and women can walk together in solidarity and strength, being empowered by the knowledge that we are building a more balanced and a better world.