

**DELAND:** Can you describe yourself in three words.

**DINESHD:** Conscientious, fair, responsible.

**DELAND:** Hi everyone, welcome to the Global Health Lives Podcast. I'm Delan Devakumar and today I'm with Dinesh Deokota who is a filmmaker and founder of Media for Development, a non-governmental organisation based in Kathmandu, Nepal. He makes documentary style films on topics such as migration, child marriage, altitude sickness, snake bites, all focusing on the real lives of people in their own voices. Dinesh, thanks for joining me today.

**DINESHD:** Thank you, lovely to be here Delan.

**DELAND:** So, we've done a couple of projects together, the first on air pollution where you produced a film describing some engagement work I'd done, and then we worked together on child marriage. Your films are beautifully made and I would certainly recommend listeners go on to YouTube and watch some of them. What struck me is just how impactful the films are, probably much more than the underlying research that I do, and this has been a bit of a theme, a recurring theme on the podcast of the power of the story. Can you tell me what drew you to media and telling stories in this way?

**DINESHD:** I come from a country where you know there are so many stories, so many stories, and I mean human interest stories, and I am a keen reader and I have, I should say I have an analytical mind and I can analyse what is going on within our society over here, and I could see these stories like you know, and a lot of people were telling it and the people who were talking about it, these weren't reaching the people who really needed to hear these stories. So, when I would see people were talking about it were big INGOs, big NGOs and they would do something about some subject and that project would finish and they would move on to the next project. Nothing much was being really done besides being addressed for a brief moment. So, living in this society and having that understanding, that analysis and seeing that not much has been done I sort of fell into filmmaking, documentary filmmaking, so it was I should say like a perfect marriage.

**DELAND:** So your early life was in the Eastern part of Nepal just on the border with India and you spent much of your childhood in a boarding school in Darjeeling in India. Can you describe what school was like and your early childhood was like.

**DINESHD:** So yes, so I went to boarding school- Well I was sent to a boarding school when I was five years old, it was called the Eaton of the East, a school called St. Pauls School in Darjeeling. It was established by the British when the English were still the rulers, the colonisers in India and so based on that system we had these idiosyncrasies you know the British idiosyncrasies mixed in there somewhere and it was a very happy part of my childhood. It's not just where I got an education but also where I got an education in inter-personal relationships. I still say it's the best days of my life and so it moulded me a lot, it moulded the way I thought, being in a boarding school from such a young age has had a very impressionable, a positive impression on the kind of person that I am today.

In that environment it gave you, I don't know, a little taste of dying colonialism as it might have existed, you know, before the independence of India. And the thing is schools like ours

sort of still hang on to that you know because it's so much a part of the history of the place because Darjeeling in itself was this hill station that was established for the British as a sanatorium. So when their soldiers or when their personnel in the hot plains of India when they got sick or when they had Malaria they could go up into this hill, very cold place and the climate resembles English weather, it's cold, it rains all the time. So factors like these probably made it a very ideal place for homesick Englishmen or British to have a bit of England in India and that's how the place got established and then slowly became the centre of education. So that was a legacy of the British over there, the old-style houses and the schools that they left behind.

**DELAND:** So then you went to university in the UK in Preston doing Hospitality Management in the early nineties. And I remember going to Preston myself, my first job was in Burnley, another one of these Northern Manchester towns and Preston was a very sought-after job in those days and I remember not getting a job in emergency medicine in Preston. You had a lot of fun there and sadly you developed your deep love of Manchester United there.

**DINESHD:** So once I finished my A-Levels I mean now what am I going to do? I was actually, when I was in school, I was seeing an Irish girl when she'd come over for some exchange, I forget, you know some exchange kind of. So we were seeing each other and one of the reasons was the romance, the love for her, that I wanted to follow. Sounds silly now, yes, but you know how love and romance can be like when you are 16/17, you know?

Yes, so that was one of the reasons, the second was I wanted exposure, like I said the school was wonderful. I was in a very cloistered kind of environment you know. So it was, the major factor for me was to go and see how the other world also is, and we've read about it in books. I grew up with Enid Blyton, I wanted to see what a Sunday tea and cake was like, you know. And these are all the things that I had formed in my mind.

So at that time one of the big things was okay Hospitality and Management because really tourism was booming, whatever, and I thought that sounds like a career for me. I mean I can be a very hospitable person a lot of the time, but maybe on a personal level and not much on a professional level. So I applied for a few places but then I got this very nice letter from the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, it was a combination of a few things that took me to England, and I am so much happier for it because the place just broadened my horizon.

**DELAND:** So then you returned to Kathmandu and you worked in Nepali television just as it was opening up from government control. What was it like in those early days?

**DINESHD:** I will just get back to Preston again and the UK again. So when I was there, I was exposed to very good television. I was exposed to good story telling you know? I still think that British TV is one of the best televisions in the world in terms of contents. Of course, it can be debatable and some people have their opinions but I think like the British television, radio is still the best and I was exposed to that. So it was there at the back of my mind so when I came back to Kathmandu, I had those ideas in my mind but I was not really thinking of getting into making documentary films or working in television stations, especially because when I came back media was still very, very restricted at that time. The King was

still in power and everything was very controlled, there was one television station, just the government mouthpiece.

The government allowed one private station to operate and they allowed one FM station to operate and I was looking around, like I said, professionally I'm not very good at hospitality. So with my wife right now who I've been with over 20 years so she was called for an audition as a presenter and this was a small TV station that had access to broadcast for two hours in the morning on the government channel. So I had accompanied her and the producer there, the guy doing the interview, so he asked me what are you up to? Because they were looking for young people so I rattled off a few ideas, like you know this could be great, could do this, could do that, and the next thing I know we are both hired.

**DELAND:**        **And then your next step was that you started your own freelance work and you went for human interest stories, if I can describe it in that way.**

**DINESHD:**        So after I worked at that station, I worked there for maybe I don't know about a year and then I was not happy with the kind of content that they wanted. I wanted something more and I was very lucky to have been actually trained in filmmaking by this organisation from Sri Lanka. And like I said, when you have analysis and experiences of what is going on around you but no one is telling their stories and then suddenly I took on this mantle, I said, "Okay, why not, I need to do new stories, I have been trained now," yes, I don't have a proper place to sort of, well I didn't have any proper place to exhibit my stories then, neither did I have the access to resources because at that time filmmaking was very, very expensive. But I knew there were stories that are there to be told.

So at that time we did acknowledge it was still a reserve for the elite, film elitist I should say like you know? The cameras were big and very few people had access to these, but I'm very grateful to Sony, they released this camera called Sony VX1000, but it is one of the cameras that revolutionised documentary and news filmmaking around the world. So from there I was able to actually start my personal filmmaking journey.

**DELAND:**        **So can you tell me about one of the first films you made on bonded labour?**

**DINESHD:**        So what was the case in Nepal is there is a group of people who live in the plains of Nepal, they are called the Kamaiyas. So, the Kamaiyas are a group of people who may be like their great grandfather took out a loan from one of the wealthy landowners, the landlords over there at the time. So obviously this guy can't pay back the loan, so now because he can't pay back the loan, he becomes bonded to that family in the sense that he becomes a slave. So he works this landlord's land, he goes to his house, he cleans his yards, he washes the dishes. The landlord says, "Oh, I want to have sex with your wife, bring your wife," so he has to take his wife. "Oh, I like your daughter," he has to take his daughter.

Over generations they become bonded to these landlords. Of course, the practice is outlawed right now. There was a big movement that had happened at that time to get rid of this practice. I worked with this agency, with this INGO, and developed this story with them because they had just got their freedom, I mean they were just released from the slavery, hundreds and thousands of people who were bonded as labours. Now suddenly you are relieved from this and what do you do? Where do you go? You know, what is your alternate

now? For two or three generations, three or four generations you have been relying on the landlord to give you basic food and shelter, so what do you do now?

So they were out of the landlord's sphere of influence and they had to go and live on their own. A very powerful experience for me was so these freed bonded slaves had occupied a government forest and had built like shacks to live and you know how it can get in the plains of Nepal at summertime with scorpions and snakes and rain. So there was a little shack and there was this lady there so I asked her, I was interviewing her on how things are, on her life at the moment after she had been freed, and she said, "Okay let me tell you what I have-" So I just let the camera run, so she went into a little hut and she came out with this little, not even a sack but a pouch of rice, some turmeric, some salt, one blanket, her mortar and pestle, and she put it out in front of me and she said, "This is all I have in the world, this is my only possession," and that had a very profound kind of impact on me. You know, it's a, here I am you know living in the same country, not knowing, not really knowing how people are actually experiencing life. We hear about it in the news because the papers write it, we read it but we don't really go into the depth of the human condition of what it is to be that, to live that. And I will say that sort of led me to researching or trying to do these human-interest stories. Which are there, it's in our face but we choose to ignore it because it's an uncomfortable truth for us.

So it's not just the bonded labour story like you know, trafficking for sex was, and still is, a huge problem in Nepal and we used to hear about it, read about it in the papers and go oh. But then when later we research the stories, when you hear of how girls are trafficked, you know the reasons behind the trafficking and it makes you feel, I wouldn't say guilty, but I would say it makes you feel that you could have done something about it, you should at least- I have this ability to at least start this conversation with people, to tell them okay it's not just the headline that you read, so many girls are trafficked for sex, but it's about why they were trafficked, who their families were, who these girls are, what were their experiences?

Things like these develop this interest in me to tell these stories I suppose yes.

**DELAND:** So tell me more about the migration work you've done. So you've documented some of these stories on young men and women who've moved primarily for work from Nepal to, I guess the Middle East countries or to India in particular.

**DINESHD:** So migration is not a new topic in Nepal. People have been migrating in the world for many years, especially to India. But ever since the resurgence of, well not the resurgence, but the rise of the Gulf countries migration has, outward migration for work has really shot up in Nepal. And migration is the reason Nepal is still not a failed state, it's the remittance that these workers from abroad, the money that they're sending is keeping this country afloat, well was until Covid struck, so we don't know what's going to happen now.

But a lot of people have benefited from migration and I think definitely the nation has benefited from migration, but there are horror stories in migration, there are absolute horror stories of young men and women who go out to the Gulf to work of how they've been duped when they were in Nepal, how they were duped when they reached their destination countries, how people who've taken out huge loans in order to be able to get that job, how they've mortgaged land to get these loans, they go there, they reach there and

there is no job for them or it is not the job that they applied for, or their salary is not even half of what was promised to them.

That's one, then we have the other, especially for the women, there's a lot of Nepali women who migrate out to work as domestic helps, I should say that as domestic servants, you know it's not even domestic help. The government for many years has made that illegal so they can't go through legal channels. So I've documented horror stories, horror stories of women who go illegally through India, through Bangladesh, through Sri Lanka, they reach these destination countries in the Middle East and they are taken to- I mean there's a couple of ladies who have told me about how they were paraded in front of prospective owners and how they ask them to turn around to sort of have a look at what they are like and sort of select them. "Oh, I'll take this one, I'll take that one, how much for this one?"

And their stories recount of how they felt like cattle in a cattle market like you know. Similar to the old slavery stories, it's the same thing, it's happening today, it's happening today in the Middle East, people don't know about it. And these women have no recourse to justice because they are undocumented, their passports are taken away by their owners and the problem is, as they work as, they go as domestic helps, domestic servants, they are locked inside a house and once you're inside somebody's house no one knows what happens inside that house. There are stories of rape, and a very common story is how they were starved, how they get to sleep only two or three hours a day, a very common story is how the mistress, the madam of the house would burn them with hot iron, throw boiling water on them and this is not like from one, two, three people it's a very common story.

So when I'm talking migration, yes, migration in Nepal it has helped the country a lot, but that's there you know. But for me it's to tell stories about what else is happening on a big scale? Who are these vulnerable people that are suffering vulnerabilities in order to look after and feed their families back home? Because I think the country should take certain responsibility which it hasn't as much as it should. You might also ask me like, okay why are you making these stories? Like when I make a film my film is not this film that is shown round the world, it goes to festivals and it's only money, no, it's not that kind of film.

So the films that I do are something that can be understood by the community over here and I take these films back to the communities. So once we've done a film we screen it to people back to the same community, we screen it there and we hold interaction so that people know like you know. I mean, of course they know that this happens but then of course have a discourse you know why it happens, what's happening, what can be done about it.

**DELAND: So maybe a good example of that kind of taking the film back to the community would be the child marriage project that we worked together on? So child marriage is illegal in Nepal and the government recently raised the age of marriage to 20, but I think overall about 40 per cent of girls are married by the age of 18, and in parts of the country almost all the girls and most of the boys are married as children and this is bad for their physical health, their mental health and also the health of their own children. Can you describe this project and how this issue came to your attention?**

**DINESHD: Especially in the plains of Nepal it's a tradition, it's cultural, that you know you marry your children early. Sometimes children are married when they are still in their mother's**

womb, so the fathers promise each other, okay your daughter is mine, your son is mine, once they reach 12, 13, we will marry them. Girls and boys get married when they're nine, 10 years old still over here. Of course, there's a law that says you can't marry until you're 20, but it's not really a law that is strictly enforced for a couple of reasons, one is the society is such where maybe like government interference does not really work.

So in one of my earlier trips I was in a certain place and I was speaking to a girl and she said, we were talking about like you know her further education, oh I was doing something on girls' education. So I was asking her so what's your plan? And she said, "Oh I have no plan, my parents have planned it for me," and that her marriage was, I think she said like in a couple of months, and I said like, "How old are you?" She said, "Thirteen." I said, "Do you want to be married?" She said, "No, I don't want to be married," and she became very, very emotional like you know, how she wanted to carry on education.

So there it struck me again like you know, I mean I know there are child marriages in Nepal, but then I had not really met someone who had gone through that process or who was about to go through that process. So when I heard that, you know like the bonded labour story that also made me think, my God she is 13 years old, you know she is a child, but it got my interest and I wanted to understand this more. Then one fine day you fell out of the tree, we met and then we got discussing could we do something about it, and I think you were very helpful in this because we managed to get a bit of funding and we developed this film-

I've taken this film to like over 60,000/70,000 people from the same kind of community whilst screening to them directly, held direct interactions with them and like a bonus I think we've had over a million views as well on YouTube. But it's something even I thought could be something very impactful and like I don't pretend to say like hey, you know what we did is going to change the society suddenly, but I'm glad that we started this. I think we've discussed this before, we said like you know the idea was of doing this child marriage project, developing this film, taking this film to the community, was to plant that seed in the community's mind that it's not right. How we've spoken in the film of the generational problems that can arise as a result of child marriage, what the fathers face, what the grandfathers face, the grandkids are facing that today because of child marriage, and their children will face the same problems because of child marriage.

The basis of it all is child marriage, it's where it stems, it's when 12, 13 year old, 10 year old girl, 10, 12 year old boy gets married and that responsibility. They sort of become [s/l adults 00:23:38], at that age by the time a girl is 11, 12, she's pregnant, the boy is 12, 13, has to leave school because now at 13, 14 years old, or 15 years old, he's a father and he becomes economically responsible for this family. So he has to leave school, go out do some menial work because without education you are not going to be able to do much and all these factors contribute to the cycle of poverty that goes on and on and on within these societies.

**DELAND:** That also links back to the migration discussions we were having earlier, so these young men often leave the country to work.

**DINESHD:** Yes, that's exactly true. So when I say they leave school to work, so they leave school to work in brick factories, they leave to work in little restaurants in India, they leave to work to the Middle Eastern countries as labourers, as constructions workers. So child marriage is the basis for keeping the society in this poverty that they live in, that they've

been living in for like you know generations and the more it continues it's the same for the next generation as well.

**DELAND:** Can you tell me some of the reasons why it happens and the importance of the dowry and describe what the dowry system is.

**DINESHD:** Well one thing is culture, culture really- People have been you know they get married very early, there's a saying that if you marry before a girl menstruates then you own a blessing from one of the Gods, anyway you own a blessing. So there are cultural perpetual factors, but there are also economic factors which are intertwined. So one of these is the culture of dowry, so what happens is the girl has to pay a dowry to the boy, to the husband's family. So the younger the girl is the cheaper the dowry, the other is if she waits longer, she has to get married to an older guy, so the older guy has studied further, say he's passed his A-Levels or is in the first year of his college. Oh, so now the father will say, "My son has studied up to this level so for your daughter to marry my son you have to pay this much more dowry."

So factors like these, socioeconomic factors like these are the drivers to child marriage, but here are these kids who have absolutely no opportunity, or no- There is no way they can say no. You can't say no, your parents have wished it, since your parents have wished it- I mean you know you've seen the child marriage and like these girls are desperate to get an education, desperately saying I don't want to get married but they have no choice.

**DELAND:** Yes, it's so sad. I think there's one particular scene where there's a 13 year old girl and she's talking about what is going to happen to her when she's going to get married, and you have her voice playing whilst she's playing football outside and it's just the contrast between those two things, that she's having fun as a child and then she's talking about all the horrors about what is going to happen to her.

**DINESHD:** There are so many stories out there, you know, that needs telling, there are very important stories that needs telling, not just in developing countries like Nepal, even in developed countries, in apostrophes. So there are human interest stories, stories of difficulties, stories of strife and struggle and injustice that are everywhere. These days because we have so much access to technology you know, I think we should all start this campaign to tell stories on yourself, on your family, on your neighbours, so that we all know what's happening. Let's talk about things that need to be talked about and I hope everyone sort of joins in a visual or an audio story telling on this.

**DELAND:** Dinesh, thank you for speaking to me today about all the many important topics that you've worked on and I'm increasingly thinking that the type of work you do, telling stories, building narratives, allowing people to reflect, is really the most important thing in improving health. Thank you for joining me today.

**DINESHD:** Thank you very much Delan, it's been a pleasure.

**DELAND:** Thank you to my guest Dinesh Deokota. The episode was produced by Priscila de Morais Sato and myself, artwork by Bette Stinchcombe, the theme song is Paper Stars by Liam Hayden. This is a Global Health Lives Podcast. Thank you for listening.