

These pictures show children studying in a former cowshed and later, standing in front of the classroom that NYOF built to replace the shed:



## How You Can Help

Please join us in these efforts. There are so many ways to make a donation – you can write a check, pay by credit card, donate appreciated stocks or property, and, if your employer has a matching gift program for charitable donations, you can maximize your contribution by designating NYOF as the beneficiary in your company's program. Your donation will go far to help some of the most destitute children in this beautiful but poverty-stricken country. In my next letter, I will write about our other projects – the ever-expanding Nutritional Rehabilitation program, the kids at J and K House, and the many terrific youngsters NYOF helps in Nepal.

Warm regards,

Please visit our web site [www.nyof.org](http://www.nyof.org)

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Although no one knows for sure, it has been estimated that 25,000 children have been bonded away in five western districts in Nepal. Now that we know how to do it, we hope to expand to another area, earn the confidence of the community (as we have in Dang), bring some of the girls home from their labors, initiate an anti-bonding awareness campaign, and immediately enroll the mothers of the girls in micro lending to fund their enterprises. When the project is on its way, we will invite an international organization with more resources than NYOF to finish the job, as happened in Dang – and then move on to still another community.

## And That's Not All

We continue to transform the lives of many children in Nepal with our extensive scholarship program. We now support the education of over 2000 youngsters, from kindergarten to medical school. Most of them are girls because they have such a rough road to travel in Nepal. We like to emphasize

the education of girls because it has been demonstrated that all of society benefits. Girls who are educated marry later (child marriage is common in Nepal), have fewer children, and are more likely to educate their own daughters.

A generous donor is supporting 400 girls in school in various remote areas of Nepal. We included a few boys in the mix because when we encountered a family who offered their sons as prospective scholarship recipients, we would insist that the daughters be included also – a two-for-one special: two daughters received scholarships for each son enrolled. Last year, the drop-out rate among the kids in this program was astonishingly low. The drop-out rate in primary school in some rural areas is 50-70% or even higher. Only two girls dropped out of the 400 in our program. That's 400 little girls who were not married off or sent off to work and who will achieve literacy.

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DEAR FRIENDS Greetings to all of you after what seems like a long time.

*This letter will be devoted almost entirely to telling you about the latest developments in our Indentured Daughters program. There is so much to report, and the progress we have made is so exciting – no, thrilling – that I can hardly wait to tell you about it.*

Here is the “executive summary:” Years before we thought it would be possible, NYOF has all but eradicated the practice of bonding little girls for labor in the Deukhuri Valley in the Dang district of Nepal. The practice is common among the Tharu ethnic community. As of last January, through our efforts, 1600 girls have been freed from their labors, brought home to live with their families, and placed in school. This is a huge increase over the number enrolled in our program last year. Ninety-five percent of the girls in the Valley have now been rescued! The only ones who are still the victims of this pernicious practice are those whose employers will not allow them to return to their villages, because they know that the girls will join our program and will no longer be available to work virtually as slave labor.

## How We Did It

As most of you know, there was no opposition to this well-entrenched custom before NYOF entered the picture five years ago. We started with 32 girls and gave their parents a piglet (or a goat) to make up for their lost wages. Over

the years, we improved and refined our methods. At the end of last year, a large international aid organization looked into what we were doing, liked what they saw, and offered to help us. We trained their staff in our methods, and they enrolled 800 girls in one great swoop. Voila – add them to the 800 girls in our program, and that just about does it for the bonding practice in our target area.

## A Few Who Almost Slipped Through the Cracks

But still...there were dramas galore this January, when the contracts for the girls' labor are customarily made. Although no labor contractor would dare to show his face in the area where we are working because of local opposition, somehow a few girls were contracted away through the efforts of local men, working in secret with labor contractors from outside the community. (Contrast this to prior years, when hundreds of little girls were sent off to work in January.)

In Lamahi, the dusty town nearby that has a bus station from which the girls are shipped off, our staff discovered six little

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girls on a bus. Some of them were crying – none knew where they were going. Enter the local girls, former bonded laborers themselves, who are now enrolled in NYOF's program and have formed themselves into groups to oppose the practice. They jumped on the bus and talked almost all the girls into staying. One of them was only six years old.

## The Power of “Spin” in Rural Nepal

One major reason for NYOF's success is the energetic awareness campaign we have conducted for several years to persuade the locals that the practice of bonding their daughters is not only immoral but illegal. The annual festival in mid-January at which the contracts for the girls' labor are made, a national holiday celebrating



the approach of warmer weather and good health and good fortune to come, has been turned by our local workers into a sort of anti-bonding Carnivale, without the skimpy clothes. Street plays, posters, leaflets, rallies and speeches, all denounce this inhumane practice and remind the audience that it is illegal. Some of these activities continue throughout the year, with wall newspapers, kids' clubs, and mobilization of the local community to oppose the practice. The street plays, written and acted by former bonded children, are particularly effective, since most of the populace is illiterate. To bring the folks in, there is a dance performance prior to each play by the captivating young local girls, wearing local costumes. You can see one of them on the previous page – I'll bet Barnum and Bailey never had such a good-looking barker.

The effectiveness of our efforts was tested when the international organization that helped us out tried an experiment. Their employees approached a couple of fathers of local girls, waving wads of rupees under their noses, and asking to buy their daughters for labor. The fathers reproached them with the Tharu equivalent of "Get outta here – don't you know this is illegal?"

### A Study in Contrasts – Gita and Nirmala

At this year's anti-bonding rally during the festival, the very first girl enrolled in NYOF's program in January 2000 spoke to a large audience about how much her life changed after we persuaded her parents to bring her home and allow her to go to school. She has been working personally to convince parents to keep their daughters at home. This lovely

young woman will soon graduate from high school, and there is a NYOF college scholarship waiting for her if she passes the college entrance exam.

Nothing better illustrates the power of this program than the pictures below. The first shows Gita, a 10 year old who was talked off the bus which was taking her to live with a strange family in a city far away. Like most of these kids and their parents, she did not even know where she was going. She had been sold by her father, against her mother's wishes, for \$43 for a year's labor. Both Gita and her mother were sobbing when our rescue squad came upon them. The second shows Nirmala, the girl who spoke at the rally.

NYOF's aim is to transform the lives of the powerless Gitas of Nepal so that they attain the competence and independence of girls like Nirmala.



### Future Entrepreneurs

Another critical element of this program is micro lending, a project carried out by a local non-profit foundation. This allows the mothers of the girls enrolled in NYOF's program to borrow small amounts of money so that they can start small local businesses and ultimately earn enough to pay the education costs of their daughters. For the time being, these costs are met by NYOF.

The mothers have formed themselves into groups of five, and each member of the group is involved in approving the projects of the other members and setting a repayment schedule. It has been found throughout the world that when it comes to paying back a loan, peer pressure is far more effective than the usual techniques used by bankers. The women are engaged in different enterprises – some agricultural, some craft-based. This woman has learned to repair bicycles and is making a good living:



The granting of small loans to women for income generation has spread throughout the developing world and has transformed the lives of many impoverished families. But in the world of Tharu women, there is a special twist. Most of the members of this ethnic group have been bonded to landlords for generations. The father

worked the land, and for his efforts, he received only a portion of the crop. So when he had to pay for medical care or a wedding or needed cash for any other reason, he had to borrow money from the landlord. These debts were passed on from generation to generation in a virtually feudal system. The families of the bonded laborers were also obliged to work for the landlord.

To the credit of the Nepali government, this system was abolished a few years ago, and all debts were wiped out by law. But this left many formerly bonded laborers in desperate condition, since the government was unable to fulfill its promise to grant all of them land on which to settle. Thus the practice of indenturing daughters has continued, not only because it is a custom, but also out of economic necessity.

We see the effects of this sorry history to this day. The mothers in the micro lending program are extraordinarily hesitant to borrow enough money to start their local businesses. Some of them ask for loans of only \$8 or \$10 because they fear that if they borrow more, their debts will haunt them throughout their lives and the lives of their children. Now even in Nepal, this is not enough to start a business, so that the staff of the lending organization has to coax them to borrow enough for a successful start and to assure them that the micro lending system is different from the one that kept them in bondage for generations.

### We're Not Quite There Yet

Although our efforts in the Deukhuri Valley have been successful beyond our most optimistic projections, much

remains to be done. We are obligated to continue to pay the education costs of the girls enrolled in our program until their mothers can do so, and we would like to maintain the awareness project at some level for a while to reinforce the community's opposition to the bonding practice.

In addition, as in all human enterprises, our success has led to some unintended consequences. When we enroll a girl into our program in January, we immediately place her in a literacy class so that when school starts a few months later, she does not have to begin in kindergarten. This year, our local manager noticed that the literacy classes were unusually crowded. When he questioned the students, he discovered that some local girls who were not laborers had sneaked into the class. Although their parents could not afford to send them to school, they desperately wanted to learn to read and write. They burst into tears when they were found out. Well – of course, it is intolerable to deprive children of an education just because their parents did not sell them off as laborers, so we will add these children to our scholarship roster as well.

Another consequence that we did not plan for was school overcrowding. The small village schools simply cannot accommodate an additional 1600 children. The average class size is currently 80 students, far greater than any classroom in the area can hold. So some kids listen to the teacher at the small barred windows or crowd into the doorway of the classroom. In one school, children were studying in a former open-air barn from which the cows had just been evicted. Those who still can't be accommodated

study under a tree, sitting on rice bags carried from home, as the teacher runs from one tree to another with his blackboard, trying to instruct all the children. The area has terrible weather – extremely hot and humid in the summer and cold and clammy in the winter, so the classroom shortage endangers the health of the students.



To meet this challenge, we have started to build additional classrooms. The community donates the land, labor (except for technical assistance), and some material. In fact, it meets one-third of the \$2100 cost of a classroom, so that NYOF's cost is only \$1400. Last year, we constructed several new classrooms that have ample windows for air circulation and concrete roofs (instead the tin roofs common in the area that radiate heat unbearably).