

# Voice over Silence

STORIES OF CHANGE









# IMPRINT

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# FOREWORD

How do peacebuilding efforts translate into concrete realities in the lives of local communities? How can we support local peace practitioners, many of whom do not speak English, to share their authentic stories with an international audience? How can these stories be told in a way that their authors maintain ownership? These three leading questions have inspired the creation of the present book. Rather than providing definitive answers, this publication aims to offer a stage for the authentic voices of six Nepalese peacebuilders.

All authors have been engaged in different capacities with the Civil Peace Service (CPS) of GIZ in Nepal. The book explores their personal, emotional and culturally informed perspectives on how peace-building initiatives play out locally. It thereby illustrates that a one-size-fits-all approach is misguided in this highly complex and multifaceted field. Furthermore, it emphasises how peacebuilding can vary in its impact depending on the people involved, their cultural and gender identity, socio-economic background, as well as their dreams and aspirations.

As a result, the book aims to present a genuine and unpolished account of how its authors' perspectives and attitudes on conflict evolved in response to peacebuilding interventions. None of them are writers, but they are all outstanding storytellers. Their accounts have not been reframed for the sake of readability or to fit institutional or donor narratives. There are enough stories, reports and campaigns that talk about how communities have benefited from peacebuilding efforts, but not enough that are written by members of these communities themselves. Still, the hurdle of having to translate their stories from their native languages into English remains, which may dilute their authentic voices. Taking this interpretative power into account, all texts were translated by native speakers who have also been working in the authors' contexts for several years to minimise such translation bias as much as possible.

The debt of gratitude for making this book possible is owed to its six authors. Their courage in putting their intimate stories on paper and sharing them with the world cannot be overstated. They have chosen to shatter silence with their voices.

# CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



**Elias Marini Schäfer**  
**Advisor**  
**CPS of GIZ Nepal**





# Setting the Scene

In the first story, author Surendra Khatri takes us on his arduous journey – from being disabled by an explosive device left behind in his village of Beni to representing Nepalese disabled conflict victims on the international stage in Berlin. From dreaming of following in his father's footsteps and carrying on the collectively admired “Lahure” tradition of joining foreign armies, to becoming a voice for peace and reconciliation. His journey is one of courage and a profound redefinition of what it truly means to serve. From withdrawing from society for fear of stigmatisation to taking on the leadership role for disabled conflict victims, his story is also one of choosing voice over silence.

Since 2023, CPS of GIZ has been supporting Surendra's organisation the “National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims” (NNDCV). At the heart of this partnership stands the promotion of transitional justice in Nepal and the struggle against “selective amnesia” towards the decades-long conflict, being propagated by various political actors. This cooperation also focuses on memory work to preserve the lessons of the conflict for future generations. As Surendra mentions, this work “should go beyond books and return stories to public spaces, so history remains visible and alive.” However, such places of memory of the decade-long conflict are still a rarity on the “Roof of the World”.

One of such scarce sites of remembrance is the “Kumbhar Adda Disappeared Citizens' Memorial Park”, located in the southwestern Nepalese district of Bardiya, near the Indian border. The park has been a strategic partner of GIZ of CPS since 2023 and stands as a symbol of respect for those who were disappeared during the conflict, honoring their lives, their sacrifices and the changes they helped bring about in Nepal.

The second author of the chapter, Preeti Tharu, works in the park as a memory guide. Preeti belongs to the indigenous Tharu ethnic group. Historically marginalised by landlessness, bonded labour and cultural oppression, many Tharus were drawn to the Maoist movement's promise of dignity and land reform. This affiliation made them subject to severe state repression – disappearances, violence and lasting trauma. The Maoist side, on the other hand, also disappeared people whom they accused of collaborating with the state.

Preeti is one of many children in the district who lost their fathers. Now she strives to keep his memory and those of other conflict victims alive by sharing their unfinished stories with students and visitors from around the world. What makes the park so special is that it is managed and run by family members of conflict victims. It offers them a safe space where they can connect with their loved ones by narrating their stories. As Preeti points out, these stories are “not just words, they are bridges.”

# From Beni to Berlin

I was born on the banks of the river Ganges in India, although my family comes from Beni in rural Nepal. Like many families in my village, mine was influenced by the culture of the “Lahure.” My father served in the Indian Army and from an early age I was instilled with a strong sense of duty, resilience and responsibility. Growing up in an agricultural community without road access, I learned the value of hard work, sacrifice and family. I married at nineteen, became a father soon after and pursued enlistment in the Indian Army to provide for my family and fulfil my father’s greatest wish.

In June 2006, however, my life was changed forever. While tending goats near my home, I found an object wrapped in plastic foil that had been left behind from the conflict. When it exploded, I lost both my hands and nearly my life. Amid curfews, I faced delayed medical care, multiple surgeries and lasting trauma. What hurt me even more than my injuries was the stigma. I was labeled useless and my daughter was called unlucky.

Overwhelmed by guilt and depression, I withdrew from society for years, hiding my injuries and pain. I regained a sense of hope only five years later in 2011, when I attended a program organized by the Disabled Association of the Myagdi district. For the first time, I met others with disabilities who were living confidently and independently. This experience changed my understanding of disability – not as a personal tragedy, but as a social and justice issue rooted in conflict and exclusion. I subsequently began to attend many more such spaces.

I was also one of the 14 participants of the Story Workshop organised by the CPS of GIZ “Dealing with the Past” team in 2018. Frankly, I initially rejected the methodology of the story workshop. But once I heard others’ stories and had the opportunity to share my own, I realised the importance of such a safe space and its value for conflict victims. I was able to open up and tell stories that I had never told anyone before. I also realized that I am not alone with my conflict-caused disability. Even among this small group of only 14 storytellers, I felt heard. Knowing that the stories would finally be documented raised my hope for justice.







The stories first came together as a book titled “14 Stories” and later as a traveling photo exhibition that reached each of the storytellers’ own communities. The exhibition helped change how we were seen, building recognition and local support. During one of these journeys in 2018, a new vision emerged within me: to bring together civilians disabled by conflict from across Nepal. With support from the Peace Advisors of the CPS of GIZ “Dealing with the Past” team, that vision came to life. In 2019, a national assembly of 55 conflict-disabled civilians led to the formation of the “National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims” (NNDCV). The network was formally registered in 2020 and I was elected chairperson – a significant step in collective advocacy.

Conflict victims in Nepal repeatedly hear about various models of transitional justice, such as those in Rwanda, Colombia or South Africa. When it comes to the topic of dealing with the past, Germany is often cited as an example of a culture of memorialisation and peace education. I always wanted to witness these memorialisation and peace education efforts, practices and learnings first-hand. I also wanted to see how the injustices committed against people with disabilities during the Second World War were memorialised. When Ramesh (CPS of GIZ Peace Advisor) told me about the possibility of attending the Global Disability Summit in Berlin, it was like a dream coming true.

In the first week of April 2025, our network’s treasurer and I attended the “Global Disability Summit” in Berlin. In many of the opening remarks, the suffering of people affected by the Gaza conflict was acknowledged and the inclusion of people with disabilities was framed as inseparable from the suffering caused by armed conflict and the urgent need for humanitarian aid. This already gave us a sense that this platform recognised the shared realities of persons with disabilities in conflict-affected contexts and the need for recognition of our issues within the broader disability movement. For the “National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims” (NNDCV), our presence was not just symbolic. Among nearly 75 delegates from Nepal, we were the only ones representing conflict-caused disability, a reminder that this issue still struggles for recognition within the broader disability movement.

The summit allowed us to build international networks. Our meeting with the German medical technology company “Otto Bock” for instance opened practical avenues. NNDCV was linked to prosthetics production centres in India to support subsidised access to assistive devices – a crucial step towards restoring mobility and dignity to conflict-affected people in Nepal.



Visiting Berlin's memorials – the Berlin Wall, the Stumbling Stones, the German Resistance Museum and the organisation “Against Forgetting for Democracy” – sparked a new vision in me. Germany's commitment to memory, accessibility and education strengthened my resolve to document and archive stories of conflict-caused disability and to work towards a dedicated memory space in Nepal. Seeing accessible transport and inclusive infrastructure also renewed my commitment to universal implementation.

At the Anne Frank Centre, preserved personal objects made me reflect on items from my own life – discarded in the name of healing or culture – that could have helped me to tell my story. Visiting memorial sites for people with disabilities inspired me to imagine localized memorials in my hometown Beni, that honour the lives of people like Krishna Lal Shrestha, a founding network member who recently passed away. My biggest takeaway was that even if justice is delayed, remembrance can restore dignity and inspire future generations.

Like the German government, the Nepali state must also commit to memorialisation that includes victims and their families at every stage. Memory work should go beyond books and return stories to public spaces, so history remains visible and alive. This is especially urgent for young people. The Nepali Gen-Z protests of September 2025 have created more people with disabilities, many of whom are unaware of the country's violent past and our long struggle for justice. As justice remains slow and uncertain, memorialisation can offer dignity, continuity and a way for future generations to carry the fight forward, even when today's survivors are no longer alive.

Ten years ago, my world was limited to Beni. Today, I work from Kathmandu, overseeing our network and contributing to the national disability and conflict victims movement. I am lobbying for a dedicated department within the transitional justice commissions to ensure accessibility for victims with conflict-caused disabilities. Looking ahead, I hope to help build a global network of conflict victims across countries and firmly establish conflict-caused disability within Nepal's disability movement. I also aspire to serve as a people's representative, shaping policies on disability, transitional justice and dignity for all survivors. I may have lost my hands, but I have gained a voice — and as long as voices like mine are heard, a more inclusive future remains possible.





# **AUTHOR**



**Surendra Khatri**  
**Chairperson**  
**National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims**



# The Journey of Finding My Voice

I write from a deep desire to share my story. There is a longing to open one's heart and break the dams of pain until it finally feels emptied. Yet alongside this desire lives fear—fear of being misunderstood, of my suffering being reduced to cheap sensationalism, of my name being dishonoured. Still, I trust you, dear reader. And so, with care and courage, I choose to share my story with you.

I was born in Bardiya in 2003, at the height of Nepal's decade-long armed conflict. Bardiya was among the places most deeply scarred by violence, disappearances, and killings. I was born into a large joint Tharu family of fifteen members. My parents, Prem Bahadur Tharu and Prem Kumari Tharu, already had a son before me. Because both of their names meant "love", they named me Preeti, which also means love in Nepali.

The Tharu community has long lived at the margins — shaped by landlessness, bonded labour, and cultural suppression. My father was a farmer by profession, but his life was much more than that. He loved cutting people's hair and was known across the village for his friendly nature. He welcomed everyone, spoke easily and carried a quiet passion for Taekwondo. These are the fragments of him that live on in stories told by others, because I was too young to know him myself.

I was only five months old when my father was forcibly disappeared by the Maoists. I never knew what it felt like to be held by him, to hear his voice, or to feel a father's love. With his disappearance, our lives changed abruptly. My mother became a single woman in a society that treats single women with suspicion and judgment. When she went out searching for her husband, villagers whispered and accused her of immoral behaviour. Overnight, she was forced to carry the roles of mother, father, and daughter-in-law — all while grieving and searching for answers.

Despite her own pain, my mother refused to remain still. She often tells me how she carried me tightly in her arms and walked 30 to 40 kilometers on foot to the district headquarters in Gulariya, hoping to find even a trace of my father. In those early years, there was little support. Later, some organisations helped with school uniforms, but survival remained a daily struggle shaped by uncertainty.





My childhood quietly reflected the inequalities faced by children growing up without fathers in Nepali society. Although we lived under the same roof as my uncle's family, my brother and I were treated differently. Our cousins studied in boarding schools while we attended government schools. We received one set of new clothes a year — only after my mother fought for it — while others wore new clothes and ate better food. After school, my brother and I worked in the fields, tending animals and helping with farm labour. Watching other children play while we worked filled my heart with a deep, unspoken ache.

To keep our family afloat, my mother raised buffaloes and pigs, sold goats and chickens and worked relentlessly. I supported her wherever I could. Even now, at 22, I feel that the childhood I lost still lives inside of me. The dreams of playing with dolls or toy cars have never fully disappeared. Sometimes I imagine that if my father were to return, I would finally become the small child I was never allowed to be.

As a child, I was often asked by friends where my father was. My mother would gently say he had “gone to bring radishes,” a phrase I repeated innocently to others. Only when I was twelve or thirteen did I understand that in our Tharu community, this phrase means death or disappearance. Looking back, I now understand that my mother was protecting and shielding us from a truth she feared would wound us too deeply.

For many years, my pain remained silent. That silence began to shift when I was nineteen and studying in Class 9. I was invited by Niranjana Chaudhary from the “Disappeared Citizens’ Memorial Park” to participate in a story-writing workshop organized by CPS of GIZ. Until then, I had never travelled away from home alone or participated independently in any victim-related activity.

On the first day of the workshop, when we were asked to introduce ourselves, my body froze. My hands trembled, my voice disappeared, and I burst into tears. Surrounded by senior participants and facilitators, I felt small and inadequate. I was convinced that I could never write a story. In our first exercise, I even confused the name of a dog with its owner. The mistake felt symbolic of how lost I felt at the time.

Yet, something quietly shifted by the second day. During an exercise about our favourite objects, I chose to write about my father's plate. When participants began sharing their stories, I realized something profound: although our lives were different, our pain as conflict victims was deeply shared. We cried together, listened to one another, and found connection through storytelling. That moment taught me that stories are not just words; they are bridges. By the end of the three-day workshop, I found my voice — still soft, but no longer silent.







This newfound courage did not disappear after the workshop. Soon after, I was asked to write stories about objects belonging to enforced disappeared persons preserved at the Memorial Park. At first, I struggled deeply. I doubted myself, rejected my own drafts and hesitated to submit them. But the first story I completed — about a pair of shorts worn by a disappeared person and their meaning for the family — received positive feedback. That encouragement reshaped how I saw myself. I went on to write four more stories and slowly began to claim the identity of a writer.

As an introverted person, interviewing others was challenging. Here again, my mother became my guide. Now serving as the “Bargar” (elected leader) of our village, she drew on her years of experience working with conflict victims to teach me how to listen with care and ask questions with respect. Listening to other women’s stories often felt like confronting my own pain, but it also revealed the immense contributions conflict-affected families have made to this country.

Three years later, I was among 12 young participants who attended a memory guide training with the CPS of GIZ “Dealing with the Past” team. By then, the “Disappeared Citizens’ Memorial Park” had become a sacred space for me — a place to honour lives, sacrifices, and unfinished histories like my father’s. In this training, I began to understand the history of the place I was born in and its people. I slowly understood where my story fit into the larger picture. And I realised how many young people knew nothing about this past, and how urgent it was to keep these memories alive.

Among the 68 objects preserved in the Park is my father’s favourite plate. Wherever I go today, whenever I see someone washing dishes — or when I wash a plate myself — I remember him. That plate has become a source of strength and inspiration. While guiding visitors, I share its story, hoping they will recognize it as a symbol of my father’s existence and our enduring hope that he will return to us one day.

Just as my mother once carried me while searching for my father, I now continue walking — seeking justice for him and for countless others like him. How long must we walk in search of justice for our fathers? While formal justice remains distant, I have found a sense of peace in reclaiming my voice. Through my story, I hope future generations understand the personal and societal cost of conflict — and ensure that this country and its people never again go to war against one another.







# AUTHOR



**Preeti Tharu**  
**Memory Guide**  
**Kumbhar Adda Disappeared Citizens'**  
**Memorial Park**





# Setting the Scene

In south-eastern Nepal, in the province of Madhesh, lie the municipalities of Lahan and Dhangadhimai. The province of Madhesh is recognised as Nepal's breadbasket and as an economic gateway to India, thriving from cross-border trade. It is here, in the Nepalese border town of Lahan, that the CPS of GIZ partner organisation the "All People's Development Centre" (APEC) has its base. APEC has been a partner organisation of the Civil Peace Service of GIZ for over a decade, with cooperation beginning in 2015.

Whereas Nepal's formal justice system remains slow, complex and costly, community-based dispute resolution offers a faster, culturally accepted and cost-effective justice delivery method that prioritises reconciliation and social harmony over punitive measures. Both authors of this chapter, Ram Kumari Das and Durga Bahadur Khadka, were trained as such community-based dialogue facilitators as part of the cooperation between APEC and CPS of GIZ.

Ram Kumari Das recounts how she took up this role and became a pillar of her community by resolving disputes through dialogue. Her story is particularly powerful as she is a Dalit woman. Dalits are a group of people from lower castes who, in traditional Hindu communities, are religiously, culturally, socially, economically and historically oppressed, marginalised and treated as untouchables. In practice, untouchability means avoiding physical contact with people of lower castes, based on the belief that contact with people of lower castes could pollute members of higher castes. Untouchability and caste discrimination remain widespread in Nepalese society. The exclusion of Dalits from temples and access to water sources due to the concept of untouchability continues despite the legal abolition of the caste system in 1963 and the criminalisation of caste-based discrimination. Her story begins with the end of peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Muslims in her town of Lahan, triggered by the alleged killing of a cow during the Hindu festival of Tihar. Outraged by the rumours, violent communal clashes broke out, as cows are considered sacred according to most Hindus. It was APEC, with the support of CPS of GIZ, that established an interfaith dialogue committee to build bridges between the two religious communities and foster tolerance and sustainable peace.

Durga Bahadur Khadka's story focuses on personal change and dialogue as a transformative practice. In Nepal's patriarchal society, where men are conditioned from childhood to the role of head of the family, decision-maker and provider, Durga Bahadur Khadka illustrates how he has been able to critically reflect on this through dialogue. Breaking down such social, cultural and personal barricades to create spaces where voices, especially those of women and marginalised groups, are heard and valued is central to the work of CPS of GIZ and its partners in this thematic field.



# Building interfaith trust through dialogue

It was 2016 when violence suddenly struck my hometown of Lahan. Tensions between us, Hindus and Muslims, had already been brewing when we heard shocking rumours that Muslims had killed a cow during the Hindu Tihar festival. I was shocked and, at the same time, saddened by the senseless killing of a cow. The violent clashes that followed were hard to bear. Peace and coexistence between our communities felt impossible. To create a platform for dialogue between our faiths to return to peaceful coexistence, the “Hatemalo Interreligious Dialogue Committee” was established following a year of intensive dialogue with representatives from the different religious communities.

I have been actively involved in this inter-religious dialogue committee since its start. This initiative was launched by the “All Peoples’ Development Centre” (APEC) in Lahan, which believed dialogue between the leaders of both religious communities to be essential to prevent further violence.

In all honesty, I initially did not truly believe that successful inter-religious dialogue between Hindus and Muslims was possible. There was a strong climate of mistrust, accusations and dissent that existed between members of both faiths in Lahan. But little by little, relations between the opposing sides started improving. This happened through a dozen mini dialogues joined by leaders of the Muslim and Hindu communities, civil society organisations, teachers, and government officials. The dialogues served as spaces where they could exchange their thoughts and listen to each other's concerns without any finger-pointing. After slowly gaining mutual trust and respect, the Hindu and Muslim representatives agreed on an 11-point agreement to safeguard peaceful coexistence. As a Madeshi and Dalit woman, leading such an important dialogue and thereby fostering peace in my community filled me with pride and joy. All my life, I had struggled with being stereotyped and marginalised as a woman and a Dalit, and now I was the one spearheading the effort to shatter stereotypes between our communities for the sake of unity.

Today, the “Hatemalo Interreligious Dialogue Committee” also includes Buddhist and Christian religious leaders. This success was only possible because active listening and understanding for each other's concerns were at the center of the dialogue rounds.







Out of this experience, I developed a great desire to engage myself intensively with dialogue training for peaceful change. I actively participated in most of the training courses, workshops, dialogue summits and seminars organised by APEC and supported by CPS of GIZ. There, I strengthened my public speaking skills and understood the importance of patience, perseverance and honesty in facilitating dialogues between conflicting actors.

From then on, I was asked more often to facilitate dialogue processes and mediate conflicts in my community. In the course of this work, I came to realise how important active listening, refraining from expressing my personal opinion and allowing time for the conflicting parties to make decisions and explore alternative solutions are for sustainable conflict resolution. Initially, I would talk a lot and give plenty of advice based on my personal beliefs and experiences while facilitating dialogues. However, through facilitation training, I have learned to sharpen my listening skills and remain impartial, even though this can be rather challenging at times.

Through my work as a facilitator and my social commitment, I gained greater recognition from my community as a whole. I was twice elected as a ward member and therefore local representative of my municipality in Lahan. I was also appointed as a member of the Lahan municipality's judiciary committee. As a Dalit woman, I am really proud to represent these important institutions of democracy. My voice is getting stronger, I am being heard and can represent the concerns of those who, like me back then, have no voice. I understand their struggles and don't want the next generations to experience the same challenges. I aspire to a better, more equitable society.

Today, I feel very confident in facilitating dialogues and I am not afraid to speak out against social injustices in my community. The opportunity to connect with dialogue practitioners from different parts of Nepal and other countries, such as the Philippines, through CPS of GIZ initiatives like the Nepal Dialogues Summit has taught me that dialogue is not only essential for peaceful change in my district, but a powerful tool around the world.

I now facilitate over 30 conflict cases per year. If one of the disputants is aggressive or fearful during these dialogues, I talk to them, comfort them, calm them down and empathise with them without pressuring them to do anything. Only then do I encourage them to gradually share their thoughts and concerns. Facilitating dialogues has become my passion and my life's mission. This work is satisfying, but also difficult, as I am confronted with grievances daily. However, I also became aware that I need to invest time in my own self-care when I feel that I am not fully ready, emotionally and physically, to resolve conflicts and give my all.

Overall, however, this work gives me immense satisfaction and I am happy to be able to give something back to my community by resolving grievances and ending conflicts before they turn violent. I feel seen and respected and I am increasingly confident that through dialogue in my community and across Nepal, sustainable peace is indeed possible.





# **AUTHOR**



**Ram Kumari Das**  
**Treasurer Hatemalo Dialogue Committee**  
**& Elected Ward Member**



# A teacher's journey to inner change

I have been a teacher for more than two decades and currently teach at the Deurali Basic School in southern Nepal in the municipality of Dhangadhimai. As the eldest of three children, I have been involved in community service since childhood, which led me to pursue a career in teaching. As a teacher, you don't just teach pupils according to the syllabus, but you are often also asked to facilitate in minor or major conflicts within the community. This is how I began to see my profession as a vehicle for promoting dialogue, which sparked my interest in the subject.

It was not until many years later, however, that I received my first formal introduction and orientation to the principles of dialogue from the NGO All Peoples' Development Centre (APEC) in cooperation with CPS of GIZ. Since then, my passion for dialogue only grew, and I got involved in the Citizens' Peace Dialogue Committee, which works to promote interfaith and intercultural understanding in my community of Dhangadhimai.

I started understanding that the core of dialogue is not to analyse a conflict to win an argument, but rather putting aside one's personal opinions, reflecting on oneself, listening to everyone's views, and respecting them all. I have been engaging in dialogue with these ideals in mind. Nowadays, I tend to speak less and listen more in every dialogue, gathering, discussion, or meeting I attend within my community. Even within my family, I no longer feel comfortable persisting only on my own opinions or being as stubborn as I used to. Now, I strive to listen to the views of all my other family members. As far as possible, when speaking or sharing my thoughts in discussions, I am careful to avoid using language, words, or expressions that could offend others.

In meetings of my school management committee or the parents' council, I encourage all members to express their opinions on the topics under discussion and listen attentively to their viewpoints. As a teacher, I used to express my opinion very loudly and firmly and defend my arguments come what may. Now, I encourage the students in the classroom to share their insights and actively participate in dialogue at every lesson.





I have developed the inherent patience to listen attentively to the children's opinions and worries – something I have learnt from the “dialogue skills” practiced by dialogue facilitators. I am confident about this and can say so with conviction.

My empathy and compassion for others' feelings and concerns have also increased, along with my self-confidence in facilitating dialogues. This motivated me to volunteer and facilitate dialogue programmes in my community. For example, I facilitated a one-day dialogue programme on “Combating Drug Abuse” organised by the district office of my municipality. Drug abuse has become an increasing problem, especially among young people in my community, due to its geographical proximity to the border and the easy availability of narcotics.

Broken families, economic hardship, stigmatisation and isolation of users, and the transmission of consumption-related diseases are among the terrible effects on my community. The main objectives of the dialogue were therefore to raise awareness, promote change and foster social harmony and understanding. The main participants in this program have been adolescents over the age of 15, parents, teachers, civil society members, representatives of local political parties, police inspectors with their teams, ward chairs, chief administrative officers, members of the “Citizens' Peace Dialogue Committee” and representatives of APEC.

The dialogue focused on the types of illicit substances and their effects commonly found in southern Nepal, the underlying reasons for substance abuse and its implications on health. Since the topic of drug abuse is never discussed in public and is not being taught in schools, since it is considered taboo, this dialogue programme has significantly raised awareness on this issue. Five inclusive dialogue groups were formed.

The summarised ideas and opinions from each group discussion were presented by the group leaders. I was very happy that all participants, whether young or old, actively contributed. I found them to be inquisitive, eager and patient. I felt a great sense of accomplishment in having been able to facilitate an inclusive dialogue on such a highly relevant topic in a manner that touched the hearts of the participants.

After the program ended, some participants requested that I conduct similar dialogues again. They expressed that discussions had been very fruitful. This motivates me further to become a more skilled dialogue facilitator.

I decided to devote my life after retirement from teaching entirely to promoting dialogue to transform my community and society. After all, without dialogue there can be no peace, no trust, no social cohesion and no democracy.







# **AUTHOR**



**Durga Bahadur Khadka**  
**School teacher**  
**Deurali Basic School**



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# Setting the Scene

The following two change stories by the authors Saraswati Adhikari and Amir Raj Thapa are set in Nepal's capital Kathmandu and the neighboring city of Lalitpur. The two cities are separated merely by the Bagmati River, which is considered sacred by both Hindus and Buddhists, acting as a natural boundary.

In the bustling city of Lalitpur, Amir Raj Thapa runs his bookshop where books and artworks from all over the world are gathered under one roof. Much more than just a bookstore, it serves as a meeting point for people from all walks of life in a country where public libraries are few and far between and the divide between social classes goes back to childhood. Amir Raj Thapa sees a higher purpose for bookstores than just selling books: they are brand ambassadors for peace. He is adamant that each one of us is a storyteller, whether via social media or face-to-face in conversation with strangers, colleagues, friends and loved ones. Reflecting on this, Amir Raj Thapa explains that it is the responsibility of every one of us to be sensitive, considerate and empathetic towards others, thereby acting in a conflict-sensitive manner. In this spirit, CPS of GIZ places conflict-sensitive media activities at the very centre of its efforts in the field of non-violent conflict transformation.

On the other side of the river lies the Mandala Theatre. Since 2014, in collaboration with CPS of GIZ, it has staged countless plays, programmes and exhibitions aimed at supporting conflict transformation, transitional justice and social cohesion in Nepal. It is here, on the sidelines of the Nepal International Theatre Festival 2025, that the chairwoman of a theatre group, actress and scriptwriter Saraswati Adhikari, embarks on a theatre workshop organised by CPS of GIZ on the topic of “Breaking Menstrual Stigma”.

In Nepal, the stigma surrounding menstruation is still deeply ingrained in large parts of society. The conservative practice of “Chhaupadi”, a form of menstrual taboo, excludes women and girls from participating in normal family activities and religious ceremonies during their menstruation. This often results in them not receiving an education and being exposed to significant health risks such as infections and smoke poisoning in poorly ventilated Chhaupadi huts. Menstruation remains a taboo subject, and children are not taught about it at school nor are they allowed to discuss it with their parents at home. The taboo and misconceptions surrounding menstruation are so widespread that many women mistakenly believe that there is something wrong with them and their bodies because they menstruate. Saraswati Adhikari's story highlights the power of theatre for social change and conflict transformation in fostering civic dialogue and collective healing.





# Bookstores as Ambassadors of Peace

Since 2021, I have been working as a book curator and founded “Coffee at Anu Books”, a creative readership space in the city of Lalitpur, Nepal. This work also led me to become a content creator, as I had to use digital marketing via social media posts to promote my book café. I would also engage with students in person and on social media by organising storytelling and reading sessions. As a result, many teachers and parents started approaching me to discuss the impact of storytelling. I was very grateful to these teachers for allowing me to also visit their schools and conduct related educational activities.

As I engaged in more in-depth conversations with teachers and parents, I discovered that many of them had concerns about insensitive content found on online platforms or in books. In some instances, they expressed concerns about words, illustrations, graphics, and the overall concept of the books themselves. This piqued my interest and I came to realise that selecting books or taking on the role as a storyteller – something I had done passionately at my book café – was not as easy as I had initially thought. Their concerns revealed to me that they were at odds with insensitive content. They feared that their children would be exposed to such content and suffer harm as a result.

One afternoon, while scrolling through social media posts, I came across “CSMpro”, a training course on conflict-sensitive media work offered by CPS of GIZ in Kathmandu. I jumped at the idea and applied right away. The course was primarily aimed at journalists and social media influencers, but I was admitted in my capacity as a book curator. On the day of the kick-off event, my enthusiasm grew even more when I learned that the other participants came from all walks of life, representing different provinces, districts and organisations in Nepal. I was hooked right away because, through the course, I was able to delve deeper into the theories of peace and conflict studies. This made the course very appealing and valuable to me to brush up on my knowledge about conflict.





Many of us who create content are unaware of conflict sensitivity. Most of us Nepalese voice their opinions digitally in one way or another, producing clips and reels on social media or expressing our views on political, social, or religious issues via these platforms. However, we often do not consider the impact such content may have on others. As members of society, we must do our part to maintain peace and harmony in our communities. It is therefore important to be conflict-sensitive when expressing one's views or producing content. Our creativity and imagination should convey positive stories and messages to society. Ill-considered opinions, statements and portrayals can lead to disharmony and conflict.

As we Nepalese strongly value non-violence and integrity, we must also learn to preserve this culture to maintain peace and harmony. As book curators, journalists, writers and videographers, the “CSMpro” course taught us how to become contributing members of a civil peace society.

It only needs a spark to start a fire and this fire could destroy an entire forest. On the contrary, if our ideas and opinions could ignite a breeze of positivity and unite our neighbours, friends, fellow citizens and people across the globe with the spirit of harmony, then we would sense only love, peace and integrity among humans, making this planet a better place.

The “CSMpro” course has thus taught me to carry the torch of peace forward and to contribute, through creative expression and ideas in my professional and private life, to the lighting of many more such torches of peace. Regardless of whether I work in the field of media or not, I must be sensitive, thoughtful, and empathetic towards others. Understanding such feelings of empathy helped me to become a conflict-sensitive media producer. Furthermore, it has helped me to become more attentive and considerate towards others. We learned to appreciate different perspectives and find a balanced way of expressing ourselves without harming others. For me, this was the key takeaway from the “CSMpro” course.

After the training, I became particularly thorough and cautious when selecting stories for children at my bookshop. I also gained a deeper understanding of why parents complain about the content of certain books. I was able to pass on information about such conflicts to publishers and authors and help them mediate between parents and authors. I swore to never again express myself arbitrarily or impulsively on social media platforms. This course has helped me to take a step back, think thoroughly, research, analyse and then develop a constructive methodology and approach even while tackling difficult, emotionally charged topics. This kind of thought process consistently helps me to focus on the positive aspects of stories rather than the negative ones.



I also came to understand that conflict sensitivity is a vital culture that we need to foster in countries like Nepal, which find themselves in a post-conflict context. Integrating conflict sensitivity into our lives and daily routines contributes to maintaining peace. Many of the participants in the “CSMpro” course came from different parts of the country and some of them and their families had been victims of Nepal's civil war. Throughout the course, I could sense their emotional turmoil. There were tears, anguish, and recounts of the struggles of many of my peers, particularly those hailing from remote districts of the country. Despite this, the course instilled in them a sense of healing and aided them in understanding the importance of building a hopeful narrative to promote and maintain peace both within themselves and towards others. Their healing process showed us that non-violence is our way of life and that it's everyone's shared responsibility to unite humankind. Our differences make us unique, and we must respect them in the pursuit of unity within our diversity.

In retrospect, the final activity of the course had a particularly profound effect on me, as we were all asked to bring a personal item to share with the other participants that symbolised our spiritual sensitivity to conflict as a core aspect of our lives. The candle I received now not only decorates my book café but also helps me to convey messages of peace and conflict sensitivity. Since completing the course, participants have been meeting occasionally at my bookshop, forming a community of practice named “Peace Bhumi of Conflict Sensitive Media Production”.

Our “Peace Bhumi” network has already facilitated several interactions, dialogues and storytelling sessions on various social issues. Thereby, we have contributed towards crafting a positive narrative towards community cohesion.

These activities and the support provided by CPS of GIZ have enabled communities in Nepal to establish peace as an integral part of their lives. Personally, it has inspired me to develop a vision of transforming bookshops into so-called peace zones. Bookshops around the world should raise awareness on the topic of conflict sensitivity and contribute to spreading peace through positive content. I imagine my bookshop collaborating with other bookshops, sharing and collecting stories and helping our audiences and the wider community understand the importance of conflict sensitivity. My vision is that organisations such as CPS of GIZ, governments and other stakeholders could help us establish contact with other bookshops around the world. Hereby, we could jointly develop innovative peace activities and present these as examples of solidarity to a wide range of other peace actors worldwide. It is my hope that bookstores worldwide become recognised as zones and brand ambassadors of peace.





# **AUTHOR**



**Amir Raj Thapa**  
**Curator**  
**Coffee at Anu Books**





# Breaking Stigmas through Theatre

As a keen art lover, theatre has been a central part of my life for over a decade. I began my journey on stage as an actress, later stepping into the role of theatre program coordinator and exploring the world of scriptwriting. With each step, I learned and grew, eventually gathering the courage to establish my own theatre group, named “Drishya Sadrishya”. Being a woman and a leader in Nepal, I faced some challenges. There were many ups and downs — moments when I struggled with my identity as I followed my passion and I had days when I was feeling so low. Yet, none of it stopped me from showing up and giving my best every single day.

The theatre workshop on “Breaking Menstrual Stigma” by CPS of GIZ was such a powerful experience to me. The day I decided to participate I thought it would simply enhance my skills and expand my approach as a practitioner. But it turned out to be much more — a celebration of selfhood.

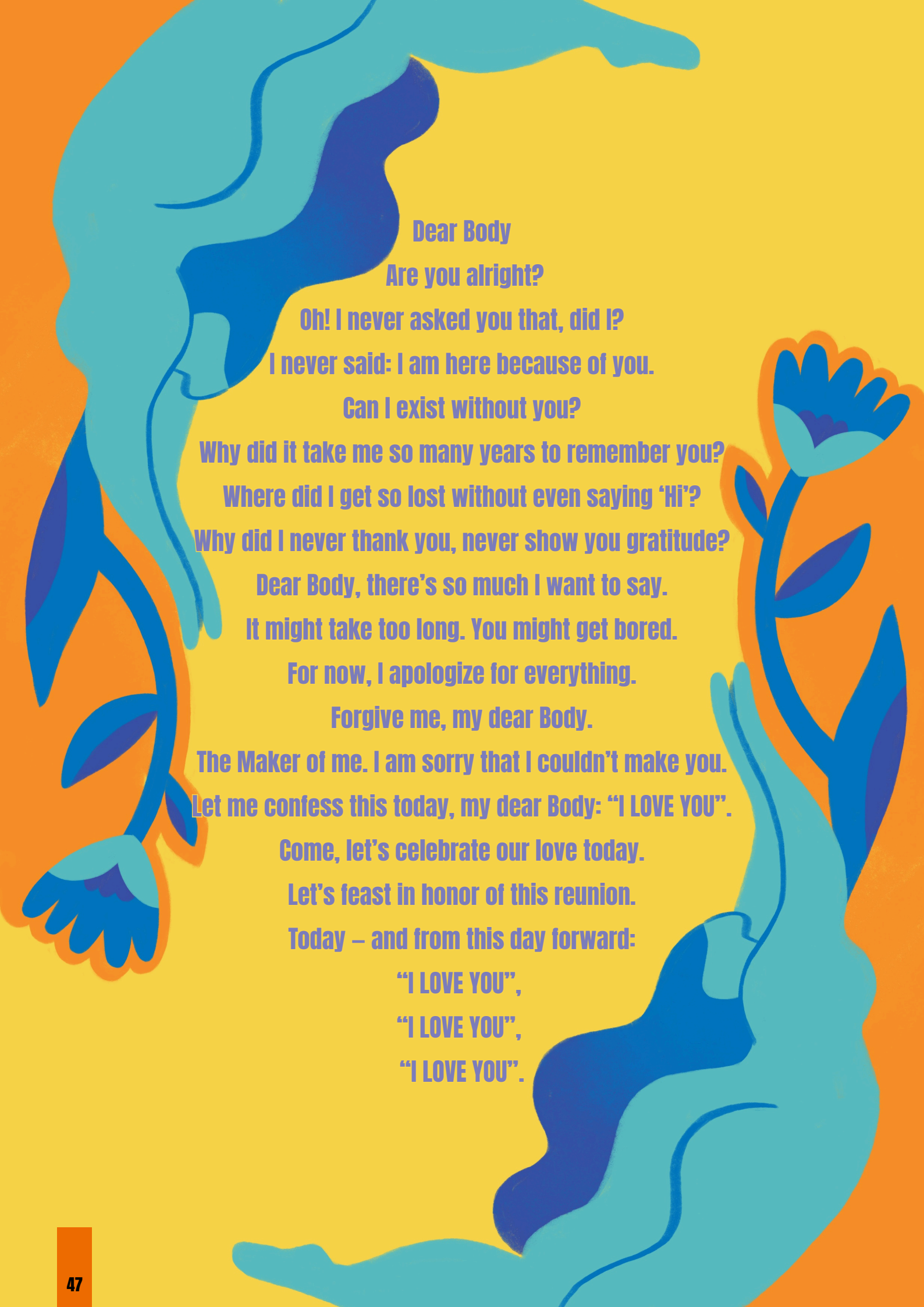
Collaborating with others who share the complex experience of womanhood and celebrating it together resonated deeply with my own lived experience. I realized: this is the kind of work I want to devote my life to. I want to tell my story. I want to celebrate my body. In this way, the workshop created a bridge between where I am now and where I hope to go. I had never loved or celebrated my body in this way before.

The workshop helped me to reimagine the cultural practices and their consequences around menstruation in Nepal. It was refreshing and so magical at the same time. The experience was intimate and alive. We shared our fears, our hopes, and reflected together. Through our reflection and joint exploration of how patterns could be changed, the final performance became the result of true teamwork, of collective creation.

Looking back, I can say with confidence that I am not the same woman who first walked into that workshop. Raising my voice, creating space for myself with pride and dignity — that was a beautiful transformation. The full impact is still unfolding, but I can already feel the difference. Though I had long been aware of the issues we discussed, I'd often felt hesitant to speak openly about them. But this workshop changed that. It gave me a gateway to open up and made me realize just how powerful theatre can be as a tool for social transformation.

For the final performance at the close of the three-day workshop, I wrote and performed a poem for an international audience at the “Nepal International Theatre Festival”. I believe sharing it below will speak more powerfully than anything I've said so far.





Dear Body  
Are you alright?

Oh! I never asked you that, did I?  
I never said: I am here because of you.

Can I exist without you?

Why did it take me so many years to remember you?

Where did I get so lost without even saying 'Hi'?

Why did I never thank you, never show you gratitude?

Dear Body, there's so much I want to say.  
It might take too long. You might get bored.

For now, I apologize for everything.

Forgive me, my dear Body.

The Maker of me. I am sorry that I couldn't make you.  
Let me confess this today, my dear Body: "I LOVE YOU".

Come, let's celebrate our love today.

Let's feast in honor of this reunion.

Today – and from this day forward:

"I LOVE YOU",

"I LOVE YOU",

"I LOVE YOU".



# AUTHOR



**Saraswati Adhikari**  
**Chairperson, Actor, Writer, Director**  
**Drishya Sadrishya**

# Epilogue

Voice over silence. This is the path that all six authors of this book have embarked upon, each in their own distinctive way. The re-conquest of voice and agency is precisely what constitutes the essence of peacebuilding. Peace can only last if all sections of society move from silence to voice.

The six authors' voices now offer support and advocacy for those who are still searching for or are prevented from using their own. From Surendra Khatri, chairperson of Nepal's first national network for disabled conflict victims (NNDCV), to Ram Kumari Das, one of the very few elected female Dalit ward representatives mediating conflicts in her own community, it is their voices that are now building bridges of peace. From Amir Thapa's bookstore "Coffee at Anu Books" to Saraswati Adhikari's theatre group "Drishya Sadrishya", it is their voices that create safe spaces to break with stigmas and foster connections. From Preeti Tharu to Durga Bahadur Khadka, it is their voices that convey the lessons of past conflicts to the new generation and inspire them to take a different, peaceful path into the future.

In our new world (dis)order, in which might is once again propagated as reigning supreme, it is their voices that invite reflection. Viewing security solely from a defence and military perspective does neither prevent conflicts nor their escalation. It keeps us trapped in a culture of reaction rather than prevention and transformation. Peacebuilding does the opposite: it addresses the root causes of conflict, changing the conditions that allow violence to take hold in the first place. To borrow the words of Kofi Annan, "Preventing conflict is not a luxury, it is a necessity." As the six authors' stories show, conflict transformation can be a long and painstaking task — but without it, there can be neither stability nor peace.

At CPS of GIZ Nepal, we draw strength and motivation for our peacebuilding mission from this conviction. We collaborate with local partners to strengthen structures for dialogue and work to create safe spaces where parties of conflict can meet. These partners, with whom all authors of this book are either affiliated or have worked with, are our strongest pillars. Together with them, we shall continue to support many more lives in their quest of voice over silence.





# Notes on Contributors



## **Surendra Khatri**

Whether I'm commanding the stage through acting, dancing, or emceeing, I find my greatest rhythm in championing inclusion and equality for all. I am driven by the powerful belief that "we are not alone", turning every performance into a celebration of community and shared confidence.



## **Preeti Tharu**

I believe in helping people in need. Even if I don't have the money, I still have the heart and the will to do so. I love making TikTok videos when I'm feeling sad, because it helps me forget my pain.



## **Ram Kumari Das**

In my work as a social activist, the development of my community is my top priority. I am dedicated to giving a voice to those who are voiceless, because only when everyone is heard we can take meaningful steps towards justice, co-existence and social cohesion.



## **Durga Bahadur Khadka**

Besides teaching, my other passion is poetry. Through these poems, I can put my feelings into words and create paths of empathy and compassion that form the basis for all meaningful dialogues.

# Notes on Contributors



## Amir Raj Thapa

I am passionate about bringing people together around my bookshop, creating a global community hub where people can rediscover themselves through interactions, storytelling and human connection. Ultimately, I want to foster a spirit of togetherness, making the world feel like one big family.



## Saraswati Adhikari

I am striving simply to be human. In this journey of becoming, every effort I make and every challenge I face often leaves me overwhelmed, yet deeply embraced — like being gently welcomed with each step I take forward. It is a process of unfolding, where even the smallest progress feels meaningful and transformative.



## Manjil Rijal

I'm an illustrator and designer whose practice is rooted in storytelling, mood and thoughtful visual worldbuilding.



## Elias Marini Schäfer

I am a passionate writer who calls South Asia his home since 2021, drawing inspiration from the region's ever-changing socio-political and cultural landscape. My work explores the intersections between communication, digital innovation and peacebuilding.







