

# **My story by Fulmaya Tamang**

## **Introduction**

The Tamangs are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nepal. They trace their origin to Tibet and have their own distinct culture, language and religion.

Over 90% of them speak their native Tamang language, which belongs to Tibeto- Burman language group, but noway most of them also speak Nepali language.

According to several history books, Tamangs are the oldest tribe of Nepal. Nearly half of the mountain areas are inhabited by Tamangs, who have lived in these hills longer than any other group.

Being Buddhist, they do not practice et Hindu caste system, but they do have a number of different clans and family- sects. In the last two hundred years history, the Tamangs are the most discriminated and exploited community in the country. As a result, poverty still marks their villages.

Over the years Tamangs were used by the rulers as porters, servants and for other manual labour.

Although they were described as good soldiers, they were prevented from joining the British or Indian army. The central rulers felt threatened by the big numbers of Tamangs living in the circling hills of the Valley of Kathmandu. Still they were dependent on them for workforce and thus forcibly kept them down and exploited them enough to prevent them from rising- which they never did.

Today and overwhelmingly number of trafficked girls to brothels in India are from the Tamang community.

Tamangs often tell their stories through songs and poems, there is one poem written by Fulmaya included in this booklet. The poem is based on her own childhood story.

(Information about the Tamang community is taken from the websites Himal an Wikipedia)

## **Childhood**

The day seemed like all the other days in Bhattedanda, a small, poor Tamang village on the outskirts of Dhulikhel. And maybe it was, except for one thing: two small eyes opened up to get its first glimpses of this wonderful world. It was my birthday.

A bright, war sun welcomed me to the earth this special Wednesday morning. And the birds- were the also aware of the big wonder, where they singing of joy because of me? Even though it was the rainy season, this morning the rain paused and let the happy rays of sun through the clouds.

My mother noticed little of the beauty around her as increasing waves of pain raged through her body.

She was all alone out in the field with no one to comfort her in her pains or to help her take care of the little girl-child who made her way into the world. A new life was born, a wonder to most mothers.

My parents named me Adorable- but life would prove to be far from it.

I was well protected as long as my mother carried me inside, but after that, what happened?

Told you about the joys of my birth, but soon sorrows would shadow my childhood.

As I remember those days, my tears won't stop flowing from my eyes.

I was the only sister of three elder brothers. There was love and affection, even if they could not offer me much economic happiness. My family had to struggle hard even to have one proper meal a day. The poor condition of my family hurt me so much that I could hardly bear to see it.

When I was still small, my father fell sick for a long time, suffering from previous frostbites. He had been working as a porter in the high Himalayas since long before I was born. Walking barefoot on the snow-clad trails with heavy loads on their backs, the porters carried needed supplies to villages hidden behind steep hills and mountains to the north.

Coming into the small lodgings in the evenings, they would heat their frostbitten limbs by the fire, causing bad burns to cold toes. But pain or no pain, the next day they would be out on the trails again, aiming for the villages. There was no choice; no loads delivered meant to money for his family. As a result he lost all his toes over the years. Due to our poor economic situation, my father did not seek any treatment for his increasing problems.

Heavily burdened by all the difficulties in our family, my mother became so frustrated that she left us all.

Remaining along with me was my father and my three brothers, who were now facing even more problems- Although I was a small child, I joined my brothers in the family work. Somehow I wanted to help them.

We went to search for wood in the forest. Miles away from home. Returning back home late in the evenings, dead tired, I remember thinking, „I want to end it all, why live such a life, just full of miseries.“

We used to go in search of wood during the daytime and to the market to sell it in the morning. Sometimes when we fell sick, we did not even have a chance to get food. We would go to sleep with empty stomachs. I still remember the feeling when finally, after selling the bundles of wood, I got something to eat- Oh my God! I felt like being in a world of happiness where all my sorrows had gone. This was the joy being alive. Adding to my feeling of happiness would be when a shop owner gave us some of their used clothes, which would protect us from shivering in the pinching cold.

My greatest dream was to go to school, which was unthinkable. I kept the dream in my heart, not telling anyone. People would just laugh at me, telling me to be satisfied and not search for the impossible. But my dreams stayed with me.

Time went by and my brothers got married. Sharing the love of my brothers with their wives was a new challenge. I found myself expecting the same love and care from them as before, and was deeply hurt finding out that this was not the case any longer.

Instead of showing love and affection, they started to be rude to me. I tried to make them happy by working hard, but nothing was good enough. At the times I felt sick they would shout at me: „Why are you sleeping, you lazy girl!“ All they wanted from me was work, nobody cared about my health.

I missed my mum, dreamed about her warm arms and loving, caring words. My heart cried again and again: „Mummy, please come back home!“ No one saw the pain or heard the silent cries from the longing heart of the little girl. My mother did not come back and I started to feel the frustration and pain of being neglected. No love, no care, -God- what life is this?

## **Married life in Panauti**

After some of the struggle, I finally got married at the age of 16. This happened in 2045BS (1988 AD).

Everybody had told me that marriage would be the start of a happy life, but reality was certainly different. This was the start of an even harder life. Neither my husband nor I had any job and my mother in law kept nagging about the constant lack of money. For six months there was hardly anything but yelling and rude words. Finally we could not stand it any longer and we went to Panauti in search of work. With the help of money, borrowed from a friend, we managed to rent a small room. We owned almost nothing, only one plate, a pan a stove.

After one month of hard labour in a small teashop that we set up, we started to earn enough to eat our daily meals. Half of the month's salary was for food, the other half to pay back the loan. With the loan cleared, we bought the required materials for making alcohol. Five months after moving to Panauti, we were able to make some income from alcohol production, just enough for us to eat and pay the rent.

Some months later I experienced the happy moment of giving birth to my first child. Unfortunately she was a girl, born into a society where sons were a lot more important than daughters. I was so happy to see the face of my child; little did I know of the difficulties ahead of me. The labour had been hard and I was too weak to work or take care of my baby. My husband had to look after both of us, which meant no business. The rent had to be paid, but there was no money and no food either.

The house owner wanted his money, but we were unable to come up with anything, as we were hardly surviving ourselves. In anger he threw the little clothes I had for my baby into the street and told us to pay the rent or get out of the house. We had no money and nowhere to go. Since our baby was a girl, there was no support from our relatives either.

I cried in agony in front of the landlord, begging him to let me do household work until I was strong enough to start our business again.

My husband and I were of the same age. We were both young and had no idea about how to solve our problems. I was weak but still worked hard for the landlord. My husband saw my struggle and used to cry a lot about our situation, seeing no way to escape the misery.

Winter season came with freezing cold nights. I had no warm clothes for my baby, just a blanket from the landlord to cover the three of us on the thin straw mat.

For three years we stayed in Panauti, surviving by selling tea from a small tea-shop along with the alcohol we produced. It was hard work and little extras.

The landlord then decided to raise the house rent, which we could not afford to pay. This led us to move nearby Banepa. We continued with the only skill we had, making alcohol. Because of not being able to find a room near the market area, customers were few and

the daily income poor.

To survive i started working in the fields, moving to wherever someone would hire me. When there was no work, there would also be no food.

### **Back to Bhattedanda**

Having tried hard for several years to survive on the little we earned, we finally decided to make our way back to Bhattedanda.

My heart was longing for support and love from my family, and full of hopes we returned home. The disappointment was hard to bear.

They met us with high expectations of money. „Where is it? How much can you give us?“ Understanding that after years of hard work we had nothing, they turned against both my husband and me.

After a long time they finally gave us a small room of our own where we could stay together. My husband, the baby and me. Being a Tamang village wife meant hard work. Water had to be carried from a mile away, the fields had to be worked on, no matter rain or sun, alcohol brewed, the baby fed. There was no end to it. No one cared about my second child growing in me, making it harder for me to manage all my duties. How would i manage to feed another mouth?

Bringing water to the house is the wife's duty, no matter what. As the time of birth came close, i still had to carry the water-filled jug back to the house every day.

The day of delivery came and i just managed to get back to our little mud hut, before pain jerked my body. The baby! Alone on the cold, mud floor, I gave birth to a second little life. To my big despair I realized that it was yet another girl. With eyes full of tears, my body aching with a deep feeling of loneliness, I started to clean the small body with the little water I had. My throat was burning with thirst and I cried out all my anguish and sorrow. I still remember the heavy rein that night, how I struggled to collect raindrops to quench my thirst.

Lying there alone on the floor, looking into those small, innocent eyes of my little baby girl, I wished I were dead. What kind of life could I offer her? She was born into a society where a girl's life had no future. She would be dominated by others, forced to work hard and to carry her dreams hidden deep inside like I had done. Memories of my own miserable childhood flashed through my mind. The absence of my own mother still hurt deeply and i thought: „I must live for her, I must live for my child. She should not be without a mother like I was.“

Although I barely made it through that night, I met the new day with a will inside to survive, not for myself but for my child.

### **The dog-chain**

Some time later as I went to work one day, I saw something lying on the side of the road. It was like a chain- a dog chain, except it was yellow. I picked t up and gave it to my daughter to play with. She put it around her small toys and pulled it behind her. After some time she got tired and just threw it near the toilet. My husband picked it up and after cleaning it, offered it to a neighbouring lady to wear. She put it on, but came back some

days later, saying she did not want to look like a chained dog. My husband rolled the chain around his wrist, thinking he could wear a bracelet, like the lamas did. Walking through the village, a shopkeeper called him, saying: „Where did you get such a gold chain?“ „Gold? What gold- this is just a dog´s chain.“ But the shopkeeper was persistent.

Coming home that evening, he told me what had happened. „Let's go and check it“ he said. „Don't bother, i have work to do“ I answered uninterested. My husband put the chain in the fireplace to see what happened. Looking at the chain getting black as soot, he thought I was right. It could not be gold.

But at last, 6 months after I found the chain, I agreed to go to Banepa to have it checked. The goldsmith looked at us and asked where we had found the chain. „We just got it“ was the answer. „It is certainly gold,“ he said. „ Not the best type but class 2 quality.“ We wondered how much it was worth. „18.000 Rs,“ he said.

In my mind I already saw the needed bricks for our house lying in front of me. I felt like a fling bird. I had spend so much time asking our family to help with some bricks for the house, but no one cared. Here I was with 18.000 Rs. We bought 4 truckloads of bricks with that money and built ourselves a small, much longed for, house. Thinking back, I see that this was God's provision for us. He blessed our life through this chain on the roadside.

### **Happier days?**

Finally I allowed myself to think that life would be good. This inspired me to continue my hard work for the sake of my family. Both, my husband and I, worked hard and we were happy to finally see some results from our struggles. Our third daughter arrived and as usual I took no time to rest from work. In the daytime I went to the rented field, carrying the baby on my back, and at night-time I brewed the local alcohol made from maize and beaten rice. Some extra income was made by raising hens and selling eggs. I saved some money and happily my husband and me could see two extra stories being slowly added to our house.

Three years went by and my fourth child was born- another baby girl. My relatives did not welcome her with joy, as they also had not done with others. Instead they started shouting at me and tried to force my husband, saying „Bring another wife, this one cannot give you a son!“

### **Failing health**

Without any support from relatives, I felt frozen inside. There was no point in being alive in this world or in this community.

Slowly my body was starting to give up. There was only condemnation from this community and the family. I had no strengths to look after my four girls. If they cried, I cried too. No one around me, let alone myself, had an idea about depression.

For three years I struggled, getting angry at the slightest thing, feeling immensely sad and just wanting to die. My husband was worried and understood that all the problems had made my body unable to go on. He was afraid I might die.

He wanted to take me to hospital, but we had no money so I refused for a long time. Finally he convinced me and by borrowing some money from helpful friends, we went to hospital in Kathmandu. Having examined me, the doctor called my husband and said: „We

can give her medicine, but that alone will not help your wife. Along with medicine she needs lots of love and care. Without that she will not be better.“

My husband understood the doctor's words and knew what he had to do. He wanted his wife to live.

I was just 28 years old, but from that day my life changed. My husband did a lot, looked after the children, helped me in any way he could as well as showing me that he loved me. In addition to the prescribed medicine, this was a life-changing cure. Although the society around me was not caring in any way, my mental health slowly recovered, due to good medicine and my husband's persistent care. After one year I felt a lot better, but was still physically weak. I was not able to work hard, like before. Being myself a daughter, born into a society where girls had so little value, I feared that my four beautiful children would face the same trials as I had.

Some way or other, I had to prevent this.

### **Women's cooperative**

One day on my way back from hospital with one of my daughters, I passed by a house where there was an agricultural program on TV. A lot of women were working together to make their lives better. „How can it be that they are able to do this together and why am I so alone? Many questions were running through my head and I dared to ask one of the educated people what the women were doing, and why they were getting together. He answered that they had formed an agricultural cooperative and that they were working together for their own benefit, solving their problems on their own.

As I returned home I could not stop thinking about what I had seen and heard. I could not sleep for three nights. I kept thinking, „If they can do this, why not me?“

In my village there was a man named Suman. He worked with agricultural issues so I thought he might be able to help me with some ideas on what I could do. He listened to me and was quite shocked when he understood that I actually asked him about how to start a cooperative. What was I thinking about? Was I mad? Was I really thinking that I would be able to change a community like this through a cooperative? It was only the big agents who had the power to make changes in a society like ours.

Still, he told me that if I really wanted to go ahead, I needed a minimum of 20 members, along with a minute book. That was easy, I thought. 20 members- there were a lot of women with problems in our village; it could not only be me longing for a change. Of course I would be able to gather 20 of them! And so I did.

But what next? I had no idea that we had to save money for the cooperative, so again I went to Suman. He told me how we should set up a saving scheme and that all had to be written in our minute book. As I had never gone to school, I had no idea how to write minutes, neither did any of the other women. What to do? My husband, having studied up to grade 4, could help us! As I approached him with my question, he refused at first. Who would be interested in such a boring job, was his answer. I was not in a mood to give up. „We have four daughters, I do not want them to have the same problems and struggle as hard as I have done. My only wish is to keep my family happy,“ I cried in front of him. Finally he gave in and agreed to support us.

I did not know much about what to do and where to go from there, but every month on the 27<sup>th</sup> we managed to get together and started saving 50 Rs a month. None of the other women had any support from their families either, so it was difficult for them to get free time for the cooperative. It was even hard for them to make it to the meeting for ½ an hour once a month to gather our savings.

The lack of support for the cooperative was not only from the families, but also from the rest of the community. The villagers came to the women scolding them, saying: „Why are you depositing your money over there? Do you have so much of it that you need to waste it like that? Look now what that Fulmaya will do, she will run away with all your money- rightly deserved for you all!“ They also came to my house to beat me up. My husband pleaded with me to leave the whole business, as it was only causing trouble for the whole family.

I was determined not to give up and managed to convince him and also the women, to stand up against the threads. „We are treated like domestic animals, we have to raise our voice if there is ever going to be a change,“ I told them.

In spite of all we even managed to register our cooperative during these difficult time,- and got five new members!

Due to political instability, it took some time for the registration, but eventually we had a paper saying that Bhattedanda Women Cooperative existed.

Amazing things started to happen. For the first time the Agricultural head office provided special hybrid seeds for improving our agriculture. The women were so happy!

Various agricultural trainings were held, and as a result more women came to join us. A German professor heard about our cooperative and wanted to support us. He used to stay with us once a week to give trainings. The result was a goat-project.

This was the boost we needed, The women saw the amazing results and slowly they dared to join our cooperative, which now reached 75 members.

The goat-project helped us increase the monthly savings to 100 Rs each. Slowly there was a change for the better in people's economy as they started working together to improve their life situation. The villagers realized that the cooperative was not only for me, but also for the welfare of the whole community.

### **Buffalo and school project**

Later I had the opportunity to meet the director of Sanga charitable Trust, Mrs Janice Lee. Meeting her meant a remarkable change to our society. She got to know about the poor condition of the women in our community, and that most of the children were not going to school. From the trust, she gave donation of 360.000 Rs through the Rotary club in Thamel. K.M. Ranjitkar from the club kindly helped us in every way we needed.

That money was the start of our buffalo-project.

Ten buffaloes were bought and distributed to poor women who could not afford, or gave little priority to sending their children to school. Instead of paying interest for the money invested in the buffalo, they had to send their children to local school.

The women were divided into groups according to need and ability to care for a buffalo.

After three years they would have paid back the cost of the buffalo and the animal was rightfully theirs.

Money raised through instalments, was used to redistribute buffaloes to the community.

This project made an immense impact on the situation for the families who participated.

Up to 2070 BS (2013) we have been able to distribute 48 buffaloes and 48 children have been admitted to school. As an additional benefit from this project, the cooperative members were able to increase their savings to 200 Rs per month.

During this time VSO (Dutch Voluntary Service Overseas) sent some volunteers to stay in the village. One of them was Alan. He stayed with us for a week to do social work. He was very happy to see our saving schemes and wanted to contribute. Through him and his wife, Viv, we were able to buy some land for a cooperative building. This inspired us to plan for a health clinic and also take in orphan children for education- if possible.

### **Homestay program**

Another person, Ragnhild's sister, also came to our village during this time. She helped us to introduce a homestay programme. She contributed with knowledge and ideas and also a website that was designed by her son, Arne. We got a lot of love and affection from both, her and her husband.

### **Surya Nepal Asha Social Entrepreneurship Award**

Through the homestay, I met Luna Thakur Shresta who showed interest in what I had achieved in Bhattedanda village. She was the main instrument for me being awarded the Surya Nepal Asha Social Entrepreneurship Award in 2014. The price of Rs 75,000 I want to use for a goat project within the women's cooperative.

### **Present**

Over the past years I have worked hard along with my family, to help my community get out of poverty. When I look back, there is one thing bothering me though. I could not provide enough for my daughters. I have been so worried that they would end up in the same situation as myself.

My eldest daughter left school after class 7, as I could not afford to educate her any longer. She and her husband are now living with us together with their son.

Maili, my second daughter, wanted to study nursing. When I told her that there were no provisions for that, she cried and cried. I really did not want to give trouble to others, but I just could not keep this to myself. I shared my problems with Janice and she told me not to cry. She understood my situation and wanted to help Maili. She is now in her second year of nursing. My gratitude to Janice is more than I can express.

Saili, my third daughter, almost finished class 12 before she married nearby Banepa in 2014. Her dream is also to go for further studies.



For Kanchi, my youngest daughter, and my grandson, i have only one big aim: to run my homestay in a way that will generate enough money for them to have good education. Kanchi has finished her SLC exam (School Leaving Certificate) and I do not know if her future ambitions will ever come true.

I wish to see the dreams of my children and grandchild being fulfilled, only then will i be truly happy.

When I am not here any longer, I hope that my family will continue to work for the welfare of this society.

## **Thanks**

I want to thank all the persons who have supported and walked with me through all the challenges and difficulties, given me opportunities and inspired me: Dhawa Lama, Sumang Tamang, Norman Roda, Janice Lee, K.M. Ranjitkar, Alan and Viv, Ragnhild and Tore Skeie, Arne Skeie for creating our website, Luna Thakur Shresta and all the women of Bhattedanda who have cooperated with me.

## **Poem written by Fulmaya Tamang**

You, who gave birth to a daughter, let her step forward. Not dowry you father and mother, she needs education.

From forefathers time the money was scarce.  
From childhood this life has been struggle and pain.

Oh mother, oh father, the string and the doko they never left. Youth went by, but my mind is still burning for knowledge.

My friends went to school, happily laughing.  
I headed for jungle, heavily crying with sickle in hand.

Small or big, rich or poor, they say were equal.  
Then don't push them down, the ones who are troubled.

I've been tied to the basket the whole of my life.  
But I'm not loosing courage, being daughter of Nepal.