

Sarswati Peace School

Building Hope for Nepalese Children

The Proposed Site: Arupokhari Village-4, Gorkha, Nepal

Mission: To provide world-class education to more than 250 war-affected children in Arupokhari, Nepal.

We believe that we can secure a more vibrant, open and promising future for Nepal by investing in the social and emotional recovery and development of the country's war-affected children. We propose to build the first of a number of Sarswati Peace Schools in Arupokhari village in Western Nepal, which will help children aged 4-12 years affected by the violence of civil war (1996-2006) reclaim their passion and joy while providing the academic and psychological support they require to lead whole and healed lives. Drawing on the resources of our rich cultural heritage and play-based curriculum from around the world, we will integrate visual arts, music, dance, story and sports as a way to facilitate reconciliation and trauma healing.

As young leaders who witnessed first-hand how violence denigrates the lives of children, we desire to cultivate an ethos of joy and creativity in response to the destruction that the aftermath of war brings. Establishing the school directly addresses the need for education of Nepalese children as referenced in UN reports seeks community peace building and adherence to universal values as presented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Proposed Organization: The Sarswati Foundation (<http://www.sarswatifoundation.org/>)

The foundation seeks to harness youth energy, passion and creativity in bringing about positive social change in communities around us. It provides resources and links to connect with people and places where there is greatest need for social improvement.

It has been proven, time and again, that the power of youths is incredible and the youth population is the greatest resource that a country can have which, if exploited properly, can bring about any kind of change. In a country like Nepal where the government is virtually absent and much of its population is ignorant, youth-led initiative is the best way to bring about social change.

Milton Friedman, the famous Nobel laureate, said that the true freedom consists of political, economic and social freedom. Free society is an epitome of human prosperity and civilization, and youths can certainly make positive contribution in creating such society. We, as responsible youths, face the daunting challenge of nurturing the country and help it give some vision in one way or the other. Silenced voices contain elements of truth and vigorous debate on such issues forces individuals to reexamine and reaffirm their beliefs. It is only the collision of ideas that can ultimately bring out the truth.

The foundation brings together the youths who have the courage to dream big and strive for positive changes in education, health, democracy and human rights. Although the foundation's focus is on Nepal, we hope to cooperate and collaborate on projects that aim to bring positive social change in any corner of the world.

Background/Context of the Project Site

During the ten years of civil war (1996-06) between Nepalese government forces and Maoist rebels, more than 13,000 innocent Nepalese lost their lives. Thousands of children were among the victims and, of those children who did survive, many lost their parents.

Arupokhari is one the most deeply affected villages. The physical inaccessibility of Arupokhari, coupled with deep-seated casteism, has hindered the overall development of the community. About 65% of 7,600 people are *Sudras*, i.e. untouchables, the lower caste. The *Sudras* are at the very bottom of Nepalese caste hierarchy, which consists of: *Brahmins*, *Chhetris*, *Vaisyas*, and *Sudras*. Though caste discrimination has been illegal since 1990, *Sudras* are still banned from temples, water taps, and have to use separate utensils at homes and tea-shops.

The village is more than a day's walk from the district headquarters. However, the project to build a road has already started. The process of electrification is also underway. We project to have electricity and dirt road by the summer of 2010.

The Peace School as a Role Model

We believe lasting social change will only come to Nepal when we cultivate peace through everyday education. Our experience in creating a peace camp in Arupokhari in 2009, where more than 500 children have been directly affected by war, convinced us that the children of Nepal deserved an academic and social experience developed with their unique emotional and developmental needs in mind. In addition to managing a 16-member team and 42 children during a successful six-week camp, we created a scholarship fund, established a library with 1,600 books, and launched the Sarswati Foundation to support youth movements. If we could have such an impact in one summer, imagine what we can do with your support!

Overwhelming support from local people encouraged us to create a multi-caste, secular center that is a model for development and reconciliation. Education can help save a child's life and break a nation's cycle of hatred and poverty. To help move the country towards embracing the ideals of freedom and justice, we seek to build peace by educating young minds and creating an environment for a just and fair society.

The Nepalese school curricula have never focused on peace and peaceful living in communities. In a war-racked nation, it is crucial for children to understand why peace is so important individually, socially and nationally. The school will house a library with books on peace education. They will be shown movies and documentaries that inspire, motivate and help them overcome their traumas. The school will also have a garden where children plant their own saplings and nurture them. This helps overcome negativism and develop feelings of love and affection. In addition, the school will have a child psychology department and will treat the war affected children with an individualistic approach. The parents- children counseling sessions will focus on the dire need of love and affection to the children.

The Peace School will be a secular temple of knowledge, peace and reconciliation. Moreover, the teachers would be trained periodically so that the children get the best education and support during their growth and development. The Sarswati Foundation will review and make changes, if necessary, to meet the needs of children and encourage their progress.

What's the root cause of this problem? How does your idea tackle this root cause?

Arupokhari was one of the hardest hit areas during the war. People in remote villages have still not been able to experience peace and relief. Amnesty International estimates that more than 10,000 Nepalese children were in the Maoist army and countless injured, traumatized and impaired. The root cause of the problem is the trauma of the war, compounded by a lack of access to information and education that can help this generation recover and lead productive lives.

The school will use activities such as drama, storytelling, music and dance, arts and crafts, and sports and as children play together, it will provide an opportunity for them to heal, open up, communicate, and grow. Many studies have suggested that group oriented games and creative activities are vital for children's mental, psychological and social development. "Creating bonds to laugh and play healthily leads to social inclusion" (Chase and Bush 2001). They found that positive and hopeful attitudes offer a sanctuary – a zone of peace - for children. This project would play a vital role in re-establishing a sense of normalcy in the lives of children that is fundamental to their healing and reintegration process.

Prospects for Future

We believe the idea of social equality begins at grass root level, and the project will help foster community reconciliation through the children's positive experiences. We are confident that the school has a real possibility of becoming the model school in the nation, and a source of community hope and pride. With newfound friends and a welcoming school environment, the young children will be motivated to go to school, think freely, and not worry about being segregated. We are aware that changing a culture is difficult and requires a lot of time; however, someone has to make the first move.

The project would symbolize a major contribution towards the exhausting process of galvanizing and healing a community battered by war for more than a decade.

Long-term desired outcome and measuring progress

We intend to provide a model of education that can be replicated throughout Nepal and any other world region where children's emotional and physical well-being has been compromised by war. Our goal is to educate 250 of the 500 children most deeply affected by war in Arupokhari. We'll measure our progress in terms of children serviced and skills acquired--our teachers, supported by a robust arts and play curriculum, will individually evaluate our students for academic mastery as well as increased emotional intelligence. We'll further gauge our progress by our ability to implement programs such as the Butterfly Garden--a creative play based program that addresses the need for ethnic reconciliation and trauma healing through art based processes.

Strengthening a culture of care and love within the framework of traditional values provides an opportunity for children to look into their lives and connect with others. The school environment will enable each child to develop a non-violent character and practice using techniques embedded in local culture to creatively resolve conflict. Finalizing our plans for the school by June 2010 and breaking ground in August 2010.

Why is it Urgent to Start the Peace School?

Many children attending our camp saw their parents murdered during the war. Witnessing violence and insecurity in their communities leaves children with psychological and emotional challenges, and with less attention and energy for their studies. A report published by WATCH LIST in January 2005 states that more than 30,000 children were orphaned during the war and recommends that the war-affected children get access to psychosocial support, education and other long-lasting support. Without education, support and counseling, these children likely will grow up to be violent or depressed. Educational intervention and counseling can improve their chances of leading normal lives. During our summer camp experience, we saw children change. They began to open up, playing with new friends of different backgrounds. They no longer sketched guns; instead, they drew books and birds. Contact with teachers, therapists and artists helped them change. Not a single existing school incorporates the components we tried in the camp and envision in our school.

This community-based endeavor may help create a nationwide youth movement at a grassroots level.

Is the project innovative?

Our integrated approach of immersing students in the best of fine arts and traditional community values can serve as a model for such war-ravaged nations as Congo and Sudan. The tenets of peace are infused directly into every aspect of curriculum; not just as extra-curriculars. This immersion program helps overall child development.

Although the major focus of the school will be children and their overall development, we believe the components of library resources and computer training can truly bring about all round improvement in relations and unity among people in the community.

Moreover, the government has initiated no programs or projects to address post-war problems. Most organizations working in Nepal tend to focus on a single aspect of the problem and it is hard to see improvement in people's life in that fashion.

We could not find any program that is using the approach we are envisioning. Our project aims not only at peace but recovery and it deserves a chance to be piloted. It has the potential to be global model to provide a path for future conflict healing.

Are we ready to carry out the project?

We ran our summer camp in a remote setting when no other organization was able to do anything like this. Working in Nepal requires the ability to navigate political intricacies and complexities. We had to talk to several top political leaders to not disrupt our summer camp. Moreover, starting a foundation and running it successfully requires a lot of passion and courage where corruption and stereotypes are pervasive. We have found ourselves being called too naïve. Yet our hard work, passion and ability to make people understand the needs of children resulted into raising 8,500 USD in Nepal in less than two months.

Most of Nepal's youth are moving out from the country in search of better opportunities and futures. It is rare to see young minds coming together to help our society when it is needed the most. We hope that our action inspires others to take action. We have been able to survive mockery and naysayers and navigate the intricate political system without getting involved in it. The country came out of ten years of war and as political breakthroughs occur, it's the time to focus on healing and rebuilding communities. The familiarity with local socio-political and cultural issues in Arupokhari makes us uniquely qualified to carry out this project.

Nepal is in a state of flux; socio-politically and economically. Educated youth, like us, are in a unique situation to understand both the people in the power as well as the people at the lower level. We have the tremendous opportunity to make use of the youths in the country to shape its future for the better. Nepal's fluid situation has also created opportunities for taking appropriate actions to remedy problems and to some extent, walk in the direction of changing the system. We believe that this is the right time to make the much needed start from the youths.

Is the project sustainable?

Yes. The Sarswati Foundation is working on starting Teach for Nepal project; similar to Teach for America. The school will be provided with teachers trained specifically for the peace school. Moreover, the school will be using solar power reducing the cost of energy substantially.

There are families in the village who can afford to pay small amount of fee to send their children to school. The 60% of the children will be given scholarships while 40% of them will be paying for school.

Moreover, the school will initiate permaculture project in the village and train the farmers about it. The school will also run computer trainings and provide resources to village people for which they will have to pay a small fee.

We believe that with all the ideas combined, the school can function and sustain itself within 2 years of initiation.

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TABLE 1: Projected Budget

	Description	Unit Price	Total	Remarks
1	Land Acquisition	\$10 000	\$10 000	The land will be bought keeping in mind the future expansion prospects.
2	School Building/s	\$ 25 000 x 2	\$50 000	Two school buildings with 4 rooms each.
3	Children books and manuals, art and crafts, stationery, balls and other game equipment	\$5,000	\$5,000	Includes related books and materials for students and teachers. Also other games materials for school. Mostly one time purchases.
4	Transportation and communication	\$2000	\$2 000	Transportation of goods and materials to the project site
5	Paying teachers	\$150 x 5x12 + \$100 x2x12	\$11 400	Salary for 4 teachers, one librarian and IT expert, one helper, a child psychologist and a nurse.
6	Scholarships	\$15 x12 x 150	\$27 000	Scholarships for 150 children for a year.
7	Computers and solar power	\$10 000	\$10 000	5-6 computers and solar power. Microsoft Nepal might help us. In conversation with Microsoft Nepal.
8	Clinic + First aid kits	\$2500	\$2 500	Seed money for setting up a clinic with some basic medicine and equipment.
	Grand Total		\$117 900	

All calculations are based upon the exchange rate of 1 USD = 73 Nepali Rupees as of November 5, 2009. The rate is subject to change and calculations are made in such a way that we would be able to make necessary adjustments.

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