

Short Summary of the Project

Nepal's prisons are poorly run nightmares, characterized by neglect and indifference. This treatment causes undue suffering above and beyond what may be intended by imprisonment. As a result, after serving their sentences, prisoners do not emerge rehabilitated or equipped to re-enter society; instead, they most often revert back to a life of crime. Indira Ranamagar is working to change the penal system so that it treats the prisoner as a person and considers their future lives, including preparation for employment and caring for their families. Indira is currently working in 8 prisons and has visited more than 60 of the 73 active prisons in Nepal.

PA Nepal stellt Kindern ein Heim zur Verfügung, die sonst mit ihren inhaftierten Eltern im Gefängnis leben müssten. Derzeit leben 22 Kinder in diesem Heim.

PA Nepal unterstützt auch aktiv diejenigen Kinder, die im Gefängnis leben (i.d.R. Kinder bis zum 5. Lebensjahr), sowie die Gefangenen selbst, insbesondere Gefangene des zentralen Frauengefängnisses in Kathmandu. Die Organisation führt in enger Zusammenarbeit mit der Dänischen Botschaft in den Gefängnissen Ausbildungsprogramme durch, die es den Frauen ermöglichen, später einmal selbst für ihren Unterhalt zu sorgen.¹

The Idea

In Nepal, little thought is given to the treatment of prisoners—or to how that treatment ultimately ends up hurting society. Indira is helping released prisoners re-integrate into mainstream society. First, she is working to improve the conditions inside prisons, in hopes that eliminating the conditions associated with prison life will lessen its characteristic “hardening” influence. Prisoners are seen as rejects of society, a label from which it is difficult to rebound in close-knit, traditional Nepali communities.

Second, she is working with the local community to try to reduce the common prejudice that Nepalese people feel against ex-cons that hinders sincerely reformed

¹ <http://panepal.de/Infos.htm>; <http://www.panepal.org/>

ex-prisoners from finding employment. This ensures that released prisoners are accepted back into their families and can make a new beginning as contributing members of the society. This is where her work, unlike many others, takes into account the children of the prisoners: often the unintended victims of their parents' crimes.

Finally, she brings prisoners opportunities for education, so that when they are released they will have some practical skills to fall back on rather than simply returning to crime.

The Problem

In Nepal, a family can be left in dire straits if the family bread-winner is sent to prison. Denied the chance to earn money while he's in prison, the prisoner can't provide for his family outside. The typical Nepalese prisoner has little education and no professional training. With no regular income, he has no way to ensure that his children receive the proper care while he's incarcerated. Thus a prison sentence means punishment not only for the convicted person but also for his family, in particular the children.

Conditions in Nepal's over-crowded, under-funded prisons are appalling. Many house more inmates than there are beds available; some are so short of space that inmates will be kept in temporary sheds. Even at the relatively well-managed Central Prison in Katmandu, up to 20 men can share a room which couldn't even hold twenty mattresses. Another major problem in Nepal's prisons is that innocent children are often thrown into jail with their parents and forced to grow up in violent, brutal conditions, deprived of education and stigmatized by their jail time. When parents are incarcerated, the only way many kids can remain with a caring guardian is to go to prison with them.

After this experience, ex-prisoners may have served their debts to society, but they still face constant prejudice. They are looked upon with suspicion and are always the police's first target when any crime is committed. In most cases, social stigma and constant police harassment force ex-inmates to hide their identity to try to live a normal life.

Long separation from loved ones and from society in general, abysmal prison conditions and a lasting stigma attached to serving jail time combine to make many ex-prisoners unruly and hardened. Because it is so difficult to fit into honest society after serving prison time, many ex-prisoners find that their only option for survival is to continue a life of crime. According to a study by Nepal Police, nearly one in every five former inmates continues to commit crimes after their release. This reflects a penal system that is not designed to rehabilitate the inmates but rather simply to punish them. The government does not have any interest in helping inmates find alternatives to a life of crime, so it is little wonder that so many fall back on their familiar ways upon release.

Although some concerned officials have long advocated transforming prisons into reform houses, it is telling that not a single prison official or staff member has yet been trained for this purpose. Nepalese jails remain geared to a punitive model that does nothing to reduce crime or help prisoners transition back into society.

The Person²

Indira Ranamagar comes from a poor landless family, so she knows firsthand the hardships of poverty. She faced gender discrimination while young; her brothers were sent to school but she was only expected to stay home and help with the house work.

Despite this, she was determined to become literate. She convinced her brothers to teach her what they learned in school. When she wasn't doing housework, she was listening to her brothers' lessons. Indira's dedication eventually paid off when she was admitted to Grade 5 in her village school. Her high marks in class convinced her parents to allow her to continue her studies in university. She even worked as domestic help while studying in college to pay for her tuition fees.

She later became a teacher and moved to Katmandu, where she was inspired by the renowned Nepalese writer and human rights activist Parijaat. In the early 1990s, Indira joined an organization working in Nepal's prisons. At that time most activists were focused on the plight of political prisoners, but Indira was drawn more toward the less glamorous cause of ordinary inmates—the poor, the vulnerable, and the

² S. also <http://www.facebook.com/people/Indira-Ranamagar/609306997>

forgotten. Although she made a good salary as a teacher, she gave it up to pursue her work with prisoners.

The same fire that compelled her to education now compelled her to help these people. She believed that these poor, anonymous prisoners and their suffering families were the worst victims of Nepal's penal system. In 2000, Indira set up an organization to work with prisoners and their family, Prisoners Assistance (PA) Nepal.

Indira Ranamagar has been selected as a member of the National Project Consultant Committee of the Department of Prison Management. She is an active member of the Network for Children, Prisoners and Dependants.

The Strategy

Indira has introduced reform, rehabilitation, and welfare programs into Nepal's troubled prisons. Indira's approach is to address the issue in a holistic way, working not only with prisoners but also with their children, families, and home communities. True reintegration can only be achieved if prisoners increase their education, training, and sense of self during incarceration. This includes not losing their identity as a parent.

Indira has won the confidence and full cooperation of both prison authorities and prisoners. Instead of being confrontational, she presents herself as a concerned ally, trying to find a system that's best for everyone, both inmates and guards. Her proposed system benefits not only prisoners, but also guards and administrators by creating a less harsh, less stressful work environment. She shows that she understands prison authorities with their limitations and constraints, to gain their trust.

Indira started Prisoners Assistance Nepal (PA Nepal) in 1990. PA Nepal works with the Department of Prison and prison officials in collecting information on inmates and managing the visits of the inmates' family members.

For the children of prisoners, who suffer unnecessarily for their parent's crimes, Indira is reconnecting the children with the outside community, with relatives and foster parents, and pioneering novel concepts like half-way homes for children just coming out of a prison environment. In the last 3 years, she has "rescued" over 70 children

from prison. Indira's organization facilitates removing children from prison and housing them in her organization's children home, where they are educated and raised in a loving environment. The children still regularly visit their parents in jail to preserve the family bond. These visits give prisoners something positive to look forward to after their time in prison, motivating them to more quickly reform and live law-abiding lives.

After the success of the children's program, prison officials have been more receptive to Indira's other ideas as well. Thus Indira's organization has been able to introduce vocational education and counseling inside the prisons. Specific job skills are taught as well as basic elementary education, literacy, and art classes. Indira employs fellow prisoners as teachers in her programs whenever possible. This prisoner-to-prisoner strategy helps both sides: The 'students' are more likely to respect and listen to "one of their own," and the 'teachers' gain renewed feelings of self-confidence and accomplishment. The model seems to be working; literacy classes are now continuously conducted by the inmates themselves with Indira only providing logistical support.

In addition, Indira works with local communities to ensure that reintegration and rehabilitation of the newly released prisoners is complete. This usually involves setting up of a local support network of families and neighbors. Indira leads discussions that help locals understand the plight of ex-prisoners, as well as stress ex-prisoners' right to live as contributing members of the community. This helps to remove the stigma attached to imprisonment.

Upon release, ex-prisoners often find themselves homeless; their houses have often been resold or stolen during their internment and their relatives want nothing to do with them. Indira's organization provides temporary shelter until they can move on with their lives. PA Nepal plans to expand its children's home to include more managed training facilities and transitional shelter for released prisoners from destitute families.

Indira is currently working in 8 prisons in Nepal and has visited more than 60 of the 73 active prisons in Nepal. In a country where jail officials are normally secretive and suspicious, Indira's earnestness has gained their confidence. She now has permission to visit all jails in Nepal. Her program has recently begun operating in

eastern Nepal, with immense support from the community, prison staff, chief district officials, and prisoners.