

MEET SUNITA GURUNG

Director of the Himalaya Education Center



My name is Sunita Gurung. I was born April 12th, 1988 in Hatiya Village Development Community, ward no. 7, in Lingam. My village of Lingam is a small and pretty village from where we can see green forest, the Arun River and mountains. It lies near the Tibet border. It takes four days to walk to my village from the town of Khandbari. We don't have the facilities of roads... we have to walk there by narrow paths. In Lingam there are nearly 40 houses and about 700 hundred people live there. My parents' and most of the villagers' main occupation is farming, growing cardamom and rearing cattle. We have lived there for the last seven generations. I love my village so much.

I have a big family. I have my parents, three brothers and two sisters. Including me we have eight members in my family. My parents' main occupation is farming and keeping cattle. My father's name is Singha Bahadur Gurung. He is 61 years old. He hasn't ever gone to school in his life. My mother's name is Mana Maya Gurung and she is 62 years old. She is also uneducated. They married when they were just seven years old. My parents

grow rice, maize, millet, potato etc. My first brother's name is Tikaram Gurung. He is 37 years old and he has passed the plus two level (12th grade) and works in a trekking office in Kathmandu. My second brother's name is Bhabin Gurung and he is 33 years old. He has passed the School Leaving Certificate (10th grade) and now he is doing business in a village, where he has a small shop and hotel. My younger brother's name is Bikash Gurung and he is 18 years old. Now he is studying in 11 class in Manebhanjyang. My elder sister's name is Juna Gurung. She is 26 years old. She is married and she has a small shop and two babies. She has passed the 8th class. I am the second daughter of my parents. Now I am 22 years old and am almost 23. I work at the Himalaya Education Center in Khandbari as the manager (and secretary). I am pursuing my master's degree in sociology, and this is my first year. My younger sister is Sirjana Gurung. She is 20 Years old. She has passed the School Leaving Certificate in second division. She is also married.

I spent most of my childhood in the jungle caring for and grazing cattle. I used to live in a cow shed with my father.

When I was six years old I started to go to school in Lingam. My primary school's name is Shree Krishna primary school. Here I started my studies. When we were children, my parents didn't have enough land for farming. At that time my parents' main occupation was rearing cattle in the jungle. My father had 66 cows and 360 sheep. I spent most of my childhood in the jungle caring for and grazing cattle. I used to live in a cow shed with my father.

Also I used to go school everyday from the shed and had to return there after school. When I was a student in primary and lower secondary, I didn't have enough books, notebooks, a pen or uniform dress for my study. I didn't have a lamp by which to do my homework. Each night I did my homework with the light of a burning stalk of maize.

There was a lack of time to read and to do my homework. In the morning and in the evening I had to clean the shed, cut grass and firewood and had to prepare the meal by myself for me and my father. At that time everyday I had to walk three hours to school and back from school to the shed. I didn't have any time for play. I didn't have any friends around my shed but I did have school friends. They lived at home. I wanted to go school everyday to meet my friends but most days I had to help my father in the jungle. And sometimes my father didn't want to send me to school. But, oftentimes I used to escape from him to go to school. I didn't have any dolls and toys. For play, instead of those things I played with grass, firewood and what we call a woman knife. Sometimes I had to go to the village to sell butter or ghee, either selling those things or mostly trading those for rice. In this way within five years I had finished my primary level studies.

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After finishing primary level I had to go Gola for my lower secondary study. It was so far from our cow shed but I didn't give up my studies. I walked five hours shed to school and school to shed. At that time I didn't have shoes for my feet. Within two years I had finished my six and seven class study. After seventh class I had to move to the next school for secondary level study. That created a great problem at my home. I wanted to continue my study but my parents told me, "Sunu, you have to leave your studies. We can't send you to Khandbari for secondary school because we didn't have enough money for your school and if you went to Khandbari, who will help your father at the shed and who will care for your younger brother and sister?" I didn't have any idea how to convince them, as at that time I was just 13 years old. I was just waiting for the results of my seven class tests. After many days, the result was published, and I passed in first position.

They told me, "You have been selected for the Education Center Hostel."

Hearing that news I became wordless and speechless. There was not any limitation of my happiness.

One day there was a farewell program at my school for the seventh class. There I saw three new people. They were talking with our school's head teacher. I was eager to learn about them. After the program finished, I went to the office, and all the teachers were talking about the visitors. I asked the head teacher about them. There was a foreign man among the three people. According to the teachers they were from the Bhotiya Education Center in Khandbari and they were in search of smart, poor and talented girl students. The next day, my teachers called me in school. They told me, "You have been selected for the Education Center hostel. Do you want to go or not?" Hearing that news I became wordless and speechless. There was not any limitation of my happiness. That day I didn't go to the shed directly. But I went home and I told my mom about that news. At that time my mother told me, touching my forehead, "My daughter you are so lucky." Every time I remember this moment my eyes become full of tears. This is my unforgettable moment in my life.

I received this opportunity in 2001 when I was almost 13 years old. According to the agreement I came down to Khandbari with my father. I was so excited to see the hostel and meet new friends in Khandbari. But, my parents were a little bit worried about me because I had never been away from my home or village. That was the first time being far from my family. Within three days we arrived at the hostel in Khandbari where we met Chhongduk Bhotu, the coordinator of the institution, and Josh Brody. He was an American founder of the program. There we talked about my study, home and village.

There were other 10 new students from different villages but they were all Bhotia persons.

There I was the only one Gurung student among 11 students. They used to speak in their own mother language (Bhotia language) but I could not

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understand even a word. The next day my father returned back to our home. He left me at the hostel. Everything was new for me: the hostel, friends, teachers, leaders, and the cooking system; I felt so much sadness and gloominess, like home sickness. The other new 10 friends they never spoke in Nepali so it became so difficult to adjust at the hostel. I used to miss my parents and school friends so much. But slowly we became friends and familiar with each other and I started to learn their language. That was not my will or wish but that was my obligation. In this way I learned Bhotiya Language.

Within 3 years, in 2003 I passed SLC. I was first girl who had passed the first time from the hostel. Then slowly I started to help the hostel leader with her work. I learned many things from her. At that time the hostel leader was a Bhotiya girl. Her name was Chhiring Kippa Bhotia. But day by day the hostel economic problems were increasing and going down. The hostel coordinator also left. At that time there were only four students.

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All the students left the hostel after passing SLC. At last all the goals aim and promises were broken down. We didn't have any money for tuition fees, food, school supplies, uniforms and house rent. Since we were four we searched for and moved to another house where we paid everything ourselves. During that period I was hostel leader

and I convinced my friends and inwardly promised myself saying "I will do something for girls and for the village." But without help that was impossible.

We applied with a proposal to the organization Educate The Children. They accepted our proposal and we called previous students again to return. We also added some new students from the Himalaya region. I sent a message to Josh Brody in America. In 2008 in the summer Josh Brody came to Nepal. I asked him for help and I told him about my goals, aims and my promise and he told me "I will try to find a donor for you." At that time I was conducting the hostel with the cooperation of Educate the Children from Kathmandu.

In July of 2008 Josh met some of the group Ten Friends and he brought a foreigner to the hostel. He was Rand Runco from Oregon in the USA. He asked me some questions. At that time I was a student of 13 class, even though I could not speak in English. He promised me he would return in the winter season. I started to learn English within 6 months on my own, reading books, writing in a copy book, etc. In 2009 in January, Rand Runco came to Nepal. I brought him to my village and to the mountain area to visit and I told him everything. He taught me many things about how to organize and conduct a program. We visited 19 days village to village and went to schools to see their conditions.

Why don't we establish libraries in each school?

One day Rand showed me a book and asked "Have you ever read a non fiction book? I laughed at him saying what is a non fiction book? I have never read a book like this. He gave me a book, **Three Cups Of Tea**. That was my first non text book I'd read in my life. I read that book, written in English. After reading that book I told him about a library idea and I asked him "Why don't we establish libraries in each school." He liked my idea. After 19 days we returned back to Khandbari. We talked about many things: the program, budget and future program plans etc. That year we added two

more new students. We moved into a new house with more facilities and all the students were happy.

The next summer we established a library in Lingam. The first library was in my own school. I was so happy, My villagers and my teachers told me, "Suni, you did great work for our village." I was really happy because that was the first step when I was doing something for my region. Now my parents, family, relatives, villagers and teachers are so happy seeing my study and work. They use my name as an example for all girls.

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Now I am leader of the Himalaya Education Center. I am leading and teaching 11 students. Five students are teaching in their own village after finishing their studies. Now three students are doing bachelor degrees and three students are doing plus two. Two students are going to take the exam for SLC and one student is studying in class nine. Two young girls are studying in class six.

Last summer we have established five more libraries in different village schools. Also we built one toilet bathroom and one solar light in a library. This year we are going to establish more libraries in five schools in the mountain area.

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The main goal of the hostel establishment is to build a civilized society by promoting education for a positive social change in the mountain region and to mobilize and empower the underprivileged, deprived and sincere female students of the

mountain regions for their higher education so that they may contribute to the academic promotion of their own localities.

The main dream of establishing libraries is that if students get the chance to study about technical ideas, about our world, health, sanitation, agriculture and more then they will learn more things by books and they can utilize their knowledge in their own villages. In this way they can develop their village themselves.

In the future I want to do more than this but I need your support, advice, suggestions and help. Really we want to change people's thoughts and like to prove women also can do everything as men can do. There is no domination and discrimination between male and female.

In the future I want to do more than this but I need your support...

I had never thought a cow shed girl will be at this stage. I am one lucky girl among those who are not getting a chance and who are deprived from higher education and opportunity like this. I want to say many many thanks to all of the people who helped me and who are helping me to fulfill my dreams and to reach in my destination. I hope Ten Friends, all volunteers, all supporters, all well-wishers will help continue to change our region.



The young women of the Himalaya Education Center