

Interview with Chini Maya Majhi

Chini Maya Majhi is the Secretary of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), Vice Chairperson of Majhi Upliftment Association and Former President of National Indigenous Women's Federation in Nepal (NIWF). Majhi are one of the 59 Indigenous Nationalities recognized by the Nepal government. The Majhis are still discriminated and excluded from mainstream development and politics in Nepal. Chini Maya has transcended threefold obstacles – of being a woman from a lower class family in a marginalized community – to become president of NIWF. She has been working for women's empowerment since 2000.



Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

My parents migrated in the Chitwan district from the Kavre district of central Nepal. My two brothers and three sisters were born in Kavre District, but I was born in Chitwan on 31 August 1970. My father, Ram Bahadur Majhi, never received any formal education in his life. He was a social worker and held the post of Gaurung (customary Vice Headmen) of the village. He could speak, read and write Nepali language well. He used to help villagers in writing official documents that they had to submit to government line agencies, as most of the villagers from our communities were illiterate at that time. He did this work as social service. My parents were subsistence farmers and used to work on their private land. My mother Mana Maya Majhi was completely illiterate. She was responsible for looking after us and managing all the cooking and household work. Like other villagers, our family also depended on agriculture for our livelihood, and we used to raise goats. We used to take our herds to graze in the nearby open land and forests. At that time infrastructure and modern facilities were not readily available. Majhi is a group of indigenous nationalities which are still discriminated against and excluded from mainstream development in Nepal. We belonged to the lower classes of the marginalized Majhi community of Nepal. The social-cultural context in Nepal meant that the privileged castes prevented the career development of an individual from any marginalized community, such as mine. More than that, though, as a female member of such a

lower class family from a marginalized community, I had to struggle really hard to transcend the threefold obstacle and to be here with you for this interview.

As I mentioned above, most of my childhood days were spent looking after the families' livestock. Only my brothers had the privilege of receiving education and they used to go to school. I had to nag hard with my parents for my education. I told them that I would not look after goats if they did not give me the opportunity to join school. Finally, my parents agreed with my idea and then I was able to join school to start my formal education. I had a very good record in my studies during the period of my school education. I was always at the top of my class from primary level to secondary level of school education. I was fortunate that a British citizen, Mr. A.D Smith from London, supported the cost of my education until I completed higher secondary level. For this support, I express my sincere thanks to him from the bottom of my heart. Without his financial and moral support I would not be in this leadership position now. I owe a debt of gratitude to him.

Who or what inspired you along your journey and are there any other challenges that you faced?

My brothers had the opportunity to go to school from an early age, and I used to show my desire to go to school by reading their books in the house. It was my own self-determination which led me to persuade my parents to support my formal education. When they saw how much of a keen interest I had in reading, my brothers also helped convince my parents to send me to school. So my primary sources of inspiration were my brothers, who created a good environment in our family for my formal education. It is unfortunate that Majhi society was against girls' education during those days. In addition to my brothers, Mr. A.D. Smith also inspired me with financial assistance for the tuition fees from grade four to higher secondary level. Likewise, my school teachers and people from the wider community also encouraged me to study hard by providing cash prizes several times.

I was the only girl student from Majhi community in my school. Many people in that locality were not familiar with the Majhi ethnic group. There was only one other family like ours who had migrated from the Kavre district and settled in Chitwan. By that time, I didn't have any concrete ambition; I simply wished to become a respected person - a great woman. That's all.

Can you tell us a little bit more about your educational journey?

Being a woman from an indigenous nationality and also from a poor Nepali family, it was difficult to

immediately continue my higher education. I completed my School Leaving Certificate from Shree Khairahani Higher Secondary School in 1988, but after that I struggled to find the resources needed for further study. I married in 1991, and after the marriage, the environment became even less conducive for higher study. However, regardless of this, I managed to join college for an Intermediate level course in Management, but I couldn't complete it. Nevertheless, despite my struggles in life, I have participated in different developmental and educational training programs, including Organizational Capacity Developmental Training, Leadership and Capacity Development Training provided by the National Foundation for Developmental Indigenous Nationalities, and Women Role in Peace Building Training and Gender Equality for Peace Building Training in 2005

How have your family supported you in your work?

In comparison to most of the Majhi women, I am fortunate to receive constructive support from my husband and other members of my family. My youngest daughter was just two months old when I had started to work for the National Indigenous Women Federation (NIWF). It is a voluntary service-oriented job. My exposure to working in the field of Gender started from there. When you work for a voluntary organization you have to face some financial and social security problems. I am lucky in that case. My husband is a businessman and his income funds all the expenditures for the Majhi Women Upliftment Association and also he supported the expenses such as office rent, equipment and stationary. His generosity has made my job easy and has also increased my confidence. As we are both so busy the housework for our family is being done by my mother in law. She has always treated me as her own daughter which has helped me to secure this position.

Can you tell us about your present position and work that you have been involved in?

As you know I am indigenous women from Majhi Community and in Nepal, they are still excluded from mainstream politics. They do not yet have access to state power and resources. Education has not been a priority in the Majhi community until now. The state has not addressed such problems of this group until recently.

I have been working for women's empowerment since 2000. My work is not only concerned with the Majhi community but also all the under-privileged indigenous communities; especially focusing on women's participation in decision-making and equitable sharing of the benefits of development.

From 2000-2005, I served as the General Secretary of the Majhi Women Upliftment Association,

where I had to develop, plan and implement several programs for various levels. Similarly from 2004-2006, I worked as the Secretary of National Indigenous Women Federation (NIWF). I had the responsibility of organizing trainings, meetings, workshops and maintaining contacts with agency officials and professionals. Through NIWF, we regularly launch programs aimed at increasing people's levels of awareness of their rights. I am Former Chairperson of Majhi Women Upliftment Association and was responsible for strategic decision-making as well as monitoring and reporting program accomplishments to the authorities concerned. And also, as the Chairperson, I had to manage and organize the programs at the national level. Similarly, I also had to manage and organize programs or the development of women in leadership. In addition to this, I have also been the Treasurer of the Nepal Red Cross Society Chabhill Sub-branch since 2007, where I had the responsibility of fund management and the preparation of financial reports. I am a life member of this society. Despite the busy schedules of these several organizations, I use my spare time for Majhi-Development and Research Council-Nepal in which, I was selected as vice chairperson from 2001 till now. Through this council, we advocate the rights of Majhi communities in river management and control over fishery as they are likely to be replaced from their ancestral land and traditional professions.

I deeply appreciate my husband's moral and financial support for my social work. Similarly, I got strong support and help from my mother-in-law in housework which again enables me to continue my social work. I also admire and appreciate the support given to me by the late Surya Bahadur Majhi, founder Chairperson of Nepal Majhi Upliftment Association; and to Mr Dhan Bahadur Majhi, the acting Chairperson of Majhi Association who always encourages me for my social activities.

What do you feel are your main achievements and challenges?

I do not have a long list of achievements, but I think I have done something for the upliftment of the Mahji community. In my experience people from within this community have great potential and talent. We have been trying to sensitize the Majhi community to raise the awareness of the importance of education and social development for almost a decade. It seems that the Majhi community is still in a traditional stage and working with them can be very challenging. There have not yet been discernible changes in Majhi society. However, we have succeeded in establishing a strong network to raise common concerns on Majhi issues and concerns. I feel that this is my great achievement.

After almost half a decade of struggle, the Majhi community has been able to establish its identity at the national level. Consequently, the representatives of this community are able to raise their voices

in front of mainstream decision-makers. I feel that I can claim that I have made a significant contribution to helping the Majhi community become more outspoken to some extent. This community has started to revolt for equal rights to state power and resources.

I was honoured to be able to visit the Philippines representing NIWF at the Second World Indigenous Women Conference. That was the first time I had been abroad in my life and it was an important event to me. Similarly, I was awarded with the Everest Foundation Nepal Award in 2006 which was the next major achievement in my life.

I had very bad experiences during the period of the Maoist civil war (armed conflict between government of Nepal and Maoists) and it was very challenging to work in the field. Also, during the Second People's Movement II (Janna Andolan II) of April 2006, and I was arrested by the Nepalese Army and charged with being a Maoist and I was subjected to serious mental torture. I was imprisoned in the Army camp, Bhairab Nathgan, Kathmandu, for a week, but thankfully I was freed due to the efforts of UN agencies, human rights agencies and other organizations, including the Nepal Majhi Upliftment Association. I was neither a cadre of any political group, nor the leader of such political forces at that time. I believe that I would have been killed by the army if I was not noticed by those agencies. So I feel that the rest of my life is a second opportunity for me you could say I feel I have been reborn.

That is the most important achievement for me. I have been arrested twice before: once, during the conflict between Gorkha land and the Indian central administration and also, in Chitwan during the mass movement of 1990 in Nepal.

You see, working for the excluded indigenous community is always a challenging task. Financial scarcity is a constant obstacle; just meeting the costs of running the office on a daily basis is a challenge. People of these communities are often illiterate and poor. Raising their awareness of the different issues is always a lengthy and frustrating job. We need to go to remote places, because they cannot afford to come to city or urban centers for receiving training. They mostly live in the remote villages of Sindhuli, Morang, Ramechhap, Dhankuta, Sarlahi, Sindhupalchowk, Jhapa, Sunsari, Makwanpur, and Kavre districts, only a small number live in Chitwan district.

I find that Majhi communities are traditionally and culturally disoriented and I am often met with barriers when I try to intervene and promote positive change. For example, many people feel that drinking alcohol is part of their culture and don't challenge it. I have found many regular alcohol drinkers in some remote villages. The culture of drinking alcohol daily has become a major obstacle in promoting development and prosperity within the Majhi community. Increasing awareness of the negative consequences of alcohol-drinking has become a big challenge for a person like me in promoting social development among Majhi communities.

What are your future plans?

Currently a new constitution is being drafted in Nepal by the Constituent Assembly. So I will be focusing on lobbying and advocating for the rights of the Majhi community and indigenous women to participate as equals and access to state resources as well as decision making positions to be incorporated in the new constitution. As you know, Nepal has already been declared a Republic, so we are putting forward our issues to ensure equal rights in natural resources and in state power. We also should lobby and advocacy to enact laws for equal rights to water, land and forest use for the Majhi community too.

What will be the position of Majhis in the new republic state of Nepal? How does central government address the rights and equal participation of Majhis in different sectors of Nepal are the current concerns for us. And we are now engaged in a mass campaign to get the issues of the Majhi community addressed by the new constitution.

Finally, do you have any suggestions or advice for women in Nepal?

Firstly, I want to urge the concerned authorities to minimize violence against women by addressing the issue in the law and also pressure Nepal government to implement Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention ILO 169 and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Women from indigenous nationalities should also be treated and recognized as having equal status to the mainstream castes.

Participation in decision-making and sharing the benefits of state resources needs to be made proportional.

The oppression and negative attitudes and insults against women from indigenous nationalities should be stopped by all concerned parties and authorities.

I want to advise all women to raise their issues at all levels from local to national to ensure equal participation of women in decision-making positions through the new constitution.

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