

Interview with Meena Acharya

Meena Acharya is an economist – researcher, consultant and author. She is presently General Secretary of Tanka Prasad Acharya Memorial Foundation.

Her research focuses on poverty, gender, macro economy, political structures and policies for equitable development. She has written many books and articles on Nepalese economy and gender, in both English and Nepalese. She has worked on engendering the Tenth Plan of Nepal and the Population Census of 2001, and Gender Auditing the Budgetary Process in Nepal. She obtained a Ph.D. in Development Studies from

The University of Wisconsin, an MS in Economic Cybernetics from Moscow State University and a BA Honours in Economics from Delhi University. She has worked for many years in Nepal Rastra Bank (Central Bank) as Chief Economic Advisor and Chief Manager of the Development Finance Department (1966-1990) and for the World Bank from 1980-82. From 1990 to 1994 she headed the Institute for Integrated Development Studies. She has consulted for many U.N. organizations including UNIFEM, UNDP and FAO, the Asian Bank, and the World Bank.

She has received number of awards for her work including IDRC Research Scholarship in 1979, Gold Medals for distinction for her MA and Ph.D. and Fulbright New Century Scholar Award, 2004/2005.

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

I was born in Kathmandu in 1938 in a family of revolutionaries in the making. My father, the Late Mr Tanka Prasad Acharya, together with his five friends started the first ever organized Political Party, the Nepal Praja Parishad in 1936. This party focused on fighting for a constitutional monarchy and democratic rights in the country, which then was ruled by the autocratic Ranas, virtually holding the King a prisoner. My mother was a house wife with no knowledge of politics.

This party conducted the first ever pamphleting campaign in the country with demands for democratic rights in 1940, for which four martyrs were killed, and seventy two people were jailed for various periods. My father and three of his friends got life imprisonment. They were spared their

lives because whilst their four friends were executed because, they happened to be Brahmins, and Rana considered killing Brahmins an unpardonable crime against religion. For ten years I did not see my father. Our property was confiscated together with the house and land and we had nowhere to live. After the political movements of 1950 and overthrow of the Rana Regime, my father and his friends came out of prison. He became Prime Minister in 1956. He continued his political activities throughout his life, until he became physically incapable of continuing.

My father and mother both did not have any formal education. But my father educated himself in Nepali Hindi and English and he was widely read. My father attended Durbar High School till grade five. After then he had continued his self-education at home. He was versatile in the democratic/socialist/Marxist classics, from Laski to Marx. My mother could read Nepali well by nine years of age, when she was married. She was born in a Sanskrit educated Brahmin family. She learned to read primary English with my father. So I was brought up in a very political family, with strict standards of simplicity, honesty, and a sense of commitment to the nation and the people.

I spent my childhood mostly with my grandfather and my mother. After my father was imprisoned all of our property was confiscated and auctioned by the autocratic Rana government of that time. So we had nothing in terms of property and my mother went to her parents taking my sister and I was left in the care of my paternal grandfather, who lived in Sirsiya with his concubine near Janakpur at that time. We moved with my grandfather to Banaras, India for two years and then we came back to Sirsiya where I started my education in the village dirt school. When my grandfather passed away I came to Kathmandu in 1948 where I lived with my mother at a rented home and started my formal education in a government school, at Gausala School, Kathmandu. So you could say I passed my childhood full of struggles. After my father was freed from prison he sent me to Gandhi Ashram School in Rajasthan with Tulsi Meher, India. After one and half years of study, I came back to Nepal and started my education in P. K School in grade eight. I was taught some English by my mother but as I was growing up I mainly just played in the dust and mud. Even after my father came out of prison, in my school years in Kathmandu I had to ask others to borrow their books, because of economic hardships in my family. My whole childhood was affected by political circumstances with all the activities of my father and mother as they were actively participating in politics.

I was mainly inspired by my mother. She was my first teacher. She taught me English, even though she did not know much English herself. She always inspired me to be educated. She used to recite to me and my sister stories of great Indian and world personalities, Sarojini Naidu, Bijya Laxmi Pandit, the Russian siblings Joya and Sura, Helen Keller and others. She made me feel that I should do something for my nation. I feel that her inspiration helped me to attain my current status. I

didn't marry until relatively late in life as I had such a great interest in studying. My parents helped me for education by not compelling me to get married. My mother was the one who convinced my father to support my education. I had no opportunity when I was small to interact with my father because he was in jail.

I completed my Intermediate in Arts, which is equivalent to Higher Secondary education, from Padma Kanya College, Kathmandu, Nepal in 1958. I went to Delhi, India to study for the Bachelor in Economics which I completed in 1960. After that I went to the Soviet Union for my further studies. I completed my Masters in Economic Cybernetics with a distinction from Moscow State University in 1966. The topic of my thesis was the Use of Economic Models in Developing Countries.

I joined Nepal Rastra Bank Research Department after my return in 1966. It was not very difficult to get a job at that time for people with good educational qualifications, because there were few people with such qualifications. During my higher education in the Soviet Union I married a Russian boy. He too supported me in my studies and career development. In 1966 I came back to Nepal with my husband and four year daughter, who was born in 1962. After about 10 years in Nepal, my husband wanted to go back and to settle in Russia. But I was only interested in staying in Nepal. So we got divorced in 1977, and I started my single life in Nepal.

I only began my Ph.D. after working in the Nepal Rastra Bank's Research Department for fifteen years, and two years in the World Bank in 1983. I came back to Nepal and re-joined the Bank in 1985, heading the Development Finance Department and completed my PhD in Development Studies from University of Wisconsin in 1987. My thesis was on Issues of Labour Market Development in Nepal. I left my Nepal Rastra job in 1992.

During the twenty six years of my career, 1966-1992, with the Nepal Rastra Bank, I was first promoted to Economic Advisor in 1972. From 1978-1980 I worked as the Acting Chief Economic Advisor heading the Research Department. In 1980 I took leave to join the World Bank for a short period. I worked as an Economist, in the Economic Department of the World Bank, Washington DC from 1981 to 1982. I felt it was time to do my Ph.D. and took leave from 1983 to 1985 to complete my Ph.D. After leaving the Nepal Rastra Bank, I worked in the position of Executive Director for the Institute for Integrated Development Studies for three years. During my long years with the Nepal Rastra Bank, with World Bank, and IIDS I did much research work on poverty and gender. The first major work completed on women during 1977-1981, was under the Status of Women in Nepal, a series outputs from which were published under the same title by the Center of Development and Administration, Tribhuvan University during 1979-1981. This work was done with occasional leave

from the Bank and weekends or other off days, evenings and mornings. After 1992 I have been engaged in different social works and voluntary work.

Can you tell us about your present position and any support you have had?

I have worked for numerous consultancies since the mid-eighties to various national and international agencies including UN agencies and the Planning Commission in Nepal. I have written various research papers, articles, reports and other publications on different topics related to Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women, Economic Development and more. I was helped by Mr. Vesh Bahadur Thapa, the Governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, who gave me my first job in 1966 in the Nepal Rastra Bank. I was also helped by Tulsi Meher, who took a group of us to the Gandhi Ashram-school in Ajmer during my formative years, in 1951-52 for 18 months. I think that experience really helped me to develop and strengthen my commitment to living a simple life and to supporting this nation.

Now I have grown older but to keep my mind active, I continue my research work. If we become idle our brains will get rusty. Nowadays, I am more choosy about what to take up and what not to. I have no obligations of any kind. Thus, I am working on my own terms. Recently I have been elected to the Executive Board of the International Feminist Economic Association. I am Founder General Secretary of Tanka Prasad Acharya Memorial Foundation established in 1992 and still holding the same position of foundation. It is my voluntary work here. I am a Resource Person to Women's Studies Programme in Padma Kanya College in Nepal which I took up in 1997 and continue to do today as voluntary work. I am also Senior Advisor and founder Chairperson of Sahavagi, and founder advisor to WOREC, both NGOs working in Nepal on important issues. I am also a member of the National Development Council, a government advisory body, and the Tribhubhan University Senate.

What are your main achievements and what challenges have you faced?

Talking about achievements, mainly I have worked towards highlighting the issues of gender discrimination and promoting women's rights and gender equality. I started to publish about gender issues in the mid-1970s. My first book was published in 1979 this was the 'Statistical Profile of Nepalese Women: A Critical Review' published as Vol. one, Part 1 of the Status of Women in Nepal series. 'The Maithili Women a Case Study' was my second book published in this series. Finally, this series was closed by publication of the "The Rural Women of Nepal: An Aggregate Analysis and Summary of Eight Village Case Studies (jointly authored with Lynn Bennet) published in 1982, as Vol. 2, Part 9 of Status of Women in Nepal. From there on, my writings and publications

have continued on this topic. The last ones were "Promoting Women in Nepal" (2003), Gender Budget Audit in Nepal, (2003, published by UNIFEM) and "The New Constitution and Women's Empowerment" (2006). Several of my articles have been published in internationally edited collections such as "Women and Politics World-Wide" (Editors Barbara Nelson and Nazma Chaudhari, 1994), "Beyond States and Markets" (Editors Isabella Bakker and Rachel Silvey, 2008) and I have also contributed at the international level on developing methodologies on the measurement of women's work and contributions to GDP, through various INSTRAW and UN publications.

Furthermore, I think I have contributed something to Nepal's development policies. My economic papers and publications present a different view on Nepal's development. In this connection, I can mention particularly two books, published in early 2000s, besides several earlier articles on monetary and banking policies, trade relations, public finance etc; the 'Labor Market Development and Poverty in Nepal (2000), published by the Tanka Prasad Acharya Memorial Foundation) and the co-authored book "Structural Adjustment and Poverty in Nepal" (IIDS, 2003).

I am glad to inform you that being a Nepali woman I have been successful in serving different institutions especially the Nepal Rastra Bank in a leading position. My work and contribution to the economic sector of Nepal and for the promotion of Nepalese women's standard always makes me feel satisfied.

Certainly there are challenges to work. I myself am not fully satisfied for all that I have done. In Nepal, there is not a good environment for study and research. It saddens me to say that we often have to look overseas to read the new publications. Few of the new generation of youth in Nepal have shown serious attitude towards studying and research, we need to develop our research capacity and publications from within Nepal. It is especially challenging getting women political leaders to study and to develop informed opinions on various gender issues. This is also true of the men leaders as well, getting men politicians to change their gender biased attitude is a bigger challenge.

Talking about my personal challenges, I would like to complete all the different work that I have started, like making the Tanka Prasad Acharya Foundation sustainable and able to fulfil the objectives it has set to "promote clean politics in Nepal" and protecting Nepal's sovereignty and promoting democracy in the country.

What are your plans for the future?

I am already seventy-three year old so how can I plan for a longer future?

My first aim is to establish the Tanka Prasad Acharya Memorial Foundation by constructing its own building and to hand it over to a capable team. Completing the school building in my parents' name that we are currently constructing outside of Kathmandu in Nawal Parasi is also important to me. My next plan is to write and publish a book about my life experience. I hope to write about myself and discuss what I have done in my life for the economic sector as well as for the promotion of women in Nepal. In a sense I grew up with the women's movement in Nepal, I helped to develop the first economic research department in Nepal, in Nepal Rastra Bank. To publish a collection of all my published and unpublished articles is my next task.

Do you have any suggestions or advice for women in Nepal?

Nepalese women should not always go along with international slogans. They should study and analyse their relevance and operational possibilities in the Nepalese context. I would like to share my saying with them "first stand in Nepalese land and then view the international initiatives". Women activists in Nepal, particularly at the national level, should put more time on studying the various international Conventions and Covenants and learn to relate them to our realities and come up with actionable plans. For both national level and the grassroots level activists, my advice is "always fight for your rights but respect other people's rights as without that you cannot enjoy your rights". Apply the standards of rights you demand for yourself, to others as well. One does not achieve fundamental social changes in one go, we cannot give up our responsibilities concerning family and society. But we must progress, not stand still. We have to learn to discern what is most important at the moment and what can wait. This advice is especially important for the young people in our society both men and women.

Qualitative Analysis in Action

Qualitative Analysis in Action provides open access to interviews undertaken with inspirational women of Nepal. In doing so it creates an environment where these women experiences can be explored, examining the gendered experiences of meanings of inspiration.