Book review

Book Review: *Close Encounters: Stories from the Frontline of Human Rights Work in Nepal.* **Himal Books, Lalitpur (Nepal). Barbara Weyermann (editor)**
ISBN: 9789937826617

'*This book will be an expression of our history. When my children grow older they can read it, and when I grow older I can also read – and remember*.' This book is a collection of personal experiences of 10 human rights lawyers from a Nepali NGO, Advocacy Forum. Edited by Barbara Weyermann, the book sheds light on the psychological and social upheaval that a 10-year conflict wrought, not only to the primary victims of the war, but also to these frontline human rights defenders who stood witness to the atrocities.

Despite the conviction in their work, these lawyers had grown numb to their own feelings and needs, and the needs of those near them. Weyermann writes in her introduction;

'*They clearly found it difficult to talk about their personal reactions to the violations inflicted on their clients and the risks they, as lawyers, had to navigate. They were not ready to talk about what they thought to be a weakness—their fears and their vulnerability.*'

This numbness was damaging to their own psyches, as well as to their relationships with family and friends.

Upon noticing symptoms of burnout among the lawyers, Weyermann, inspired by *Photo-Voice*[1], created a forum for the lawyers to start looking inwards. She was trying to utilise the methods that the lawyers were familiar with, in a way that would help them to work through their experiences and reconnect to their emotions. Weyermann initially explored with drawings, then moved on to what the human rights defenders were accustomed to for their documentation: photography and writing. The result has been a powerful collection of pictures and personal stories that are testimonies of the distress these human rights defenders witnessed and experienced in their personal lives.

The stories are organised into three sections: Fear, Trauma, and Grief. The section on Fear is a collection of stories of the fear that the human rights defenders experienced. These range from going into hiding, to receiving threats, to being shot at. The section on Trauma has several subsections. It focuses on illegal detention and rearrest, torture, enforced disappearance, rape, extrajudicial killing and murder, and disability. It describes what it was like for these lawyers to witness and, in some cases, to suffer from a personal trauma. The section ends with a story of how, despite everything that the lawyers tried to do for the victims, the continuation of impunity, lack of results, and continued suffering frustrate and anger them, even though the lawyers themselves are often at the brunt of the anger of the very people they are trying to assist. Grief, the final section of the book, explores their feelings of helplessness and the loss experienced in their lives as the cost of this work. For example, Kopila Adhikari, swaying between her passion for her work and the remorse of how absent she has been as a mother and a wife, says, '*I wonder if I have lost myself somewhere along the way.*'

Each section is bracketed by commentary from Weyermann that is psycho educational in nature. She elaborates on the given topic and educates the reader on the psychosocial impact of each issue.

The reviewer, who has been working with human rights defenders and psychosocial workers in disasters for 15 years, finds the focus of interest of Weyermann, relevent. Service providers, including psychosocial workers, find it very difficult to talk about their personal emotions, whether it's in relation to the client they are helping, or stressors from their personal lives. The *Photo-Voice* group Weyermann designed is creative, and seems like a very relevant psychosocial intervention when working with human rights defenders.

Forming the personal stories into a book was a courageous venture, because these human rights defenders in Nepal, who are supposed to be '*strong*' and '*unflinching*', are writing about their vulnerabilities within a cultural context that does not promote such openness.

A participant's comment; '*earlier, I just heard facts when I worked on a case. Now I notice feelings. It comes by itself. I notice the feelings and I feel good about it*' shows that the intervention was a success. People were getting connected to their emotions, which was the objective of the endeavor.

However, the reviewer feels some of the stories should have touched on the positive coping mechanisms and resilience of the human rights defenders, beyond the driving force of ideology and the sense of clients' trusts and hope on them, as mentioned a few times in the book. Readers could then have been exposed to another dimension of the lives of the human rights defenders, which showed how people coped with difficulties and the resilience of people living under dire circumstances.

It was to be expected that most of the stories would feature around human rights atrocities, and vicarious traumatisation, given the title and the context. Most leading international humanitarian organisations have also realised that management does highly contribute to burnout of their staff, and are starting to take corrective measures. It was surprising however, that no stories focused on organisational management issues as a burnout instigator.

The book does conclude with a chapter on how human rights organisations can better support their staff, bringing consolidated recommendations from contemporary literature on the subject, which should be helpful for these organisations to think of as a guideline and serious considerations for actions in the care of their invaluable staff.

It is a must read for people working with survivors of human rights violations and excellent insightful reading for others who want to understand what it can be like to work in this field.

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[1] *PhotoVoice's* mission is to build skills within disadvantaged and marginalised communities using innovative participatory photography and digital storytelling methods so that they have the opportunity to represent themselves and create tools for advocacy and communications to achieve positive social change. See: www.photovoice.org

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Review of Daya Somasundaram, Collective trauma in the Vanni (*International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 4:22, 2010)

Nine years ago, the very first issue of this journal opened with an article by the Sri Lankan psychiatrist Daya Somasundaram on collective trauma in Sri Lanka (Somasundaram, 2003). The author developed his thoughts on this subject through various other publications.[1] He recently published a research report that again explores the issues around collective trauma, this time in the Vanni, a region in northern Sri Lanka. (Somasundaram, 2010) The insights are relevant for our readers and therefore, some highlights of the article are provided in this review.

In the first months of 2009, the (predominantly Tamil) population of this region, numbering 300,000, underwent multiple displacements, deaths, injuries, deprivation of water, food, medical care and other basic needs. This happened while people were caught between the shelling and bombings of the state forces and a militant group. This group, the LTTE, forcefully recruited men, women and children to fight on the frontlines and held the rest hostage. The report explores the long term psychosocial and mental health consequences of exposure to massive, existential trauma. It includes a lot of case material that illustrates, not only the suffering of the people and their families, but also the destruction of their communities. The stories describe what happened to the people as family, or in some cases, to the community.

Somasundaram concludes that, in collectivistic, cooperative societies, there is a need to go beyond the individual to the family, group, village, community and social levels to more fully understand what is going on in the individual. In order to be effective, interventions should not only be aimed at the affected individuals, but also their families and community. Family and social support, networks, relationships and the sense of community appear to be a vital protective factor for the individual and their families, as well as important in their recovery. This broader, holistic perspective becomes paramount in nonwestern, 'collectivist' or cooperative cultures that have traditionally been family and community oriented, and where the individual tends to become submerged within the wider concerns.

Tamil families have close, strong bonds and cohesiveness; they tend to function and respond to external threat or trauma as a unit, rather than as individual members. They share the experience and perceive the event in a particular way. During times of traumatic experiences, the family will come together in solidarity to face the threat as a whole and provide mutual support and protection. In time, the family will act to define and interpret the traumatic event, give it structure and assign a common meaning, as well as evolve strategies to cope with the stress. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to talk in terms of family dynamics rather than of individual personalities.

Similarly, in the Tamil communities, the village and its people, their way of life and environment, provide organic roots; a sustaining support system, nourishing environment and network of relationships. The village traditions, structures and institutions are the foundations and framework for their daily life. In the Tamil culture, a person's identity is defined, to a large extent, by their village or *uur* of origin. Their *uur* more or less placed a person in a particular sociocultural matrix. The social institution of a traditional *uur* has also

undergone tremendous breakdown as a result of the chronic war and displacements, as well as modernity.

The narratives cited in Somasundarams' report clearly show the impact of the war on the family and community. The exclusively individual perspective, that is so characteristic of western narratives, is completely lacking here. There are hardly any spontaneous complaints of individual symptoms or suffering. Even when a person speaks of his or her personal agony, it is framed within more general terms, reflecting what has happened to the family or community. The stories usually begin with the family described metaphorically as living happily in their village. It is significant that the happiness or wellbeing is perceived and experienced in terms of the family and community, rather than the individual. The war is seen as an imposition coming from outside, disturbing this atmosphere of contentment, where the family and community was progressing and simply getting on with life.

As the narrative unfolds, it is the family that is the focus. The shelling and fighting approaching their homes and their village, impels them to start the displacement process. People describe how they leave as a family, as a community – whole villages, taking whatever they can load onto vehicles, hoping to return in a day to two. The dispersion begins. Initially they are separated from the supportive context of their community, extended family and village. How the new conditions affect the family, how each member suffers, the deaths and injuries, how the separations impact those who are injured, having to bury the dead without the customary rites, the guilt of leaving relations behind, and the strong yearning to know what has happened to other members of the family. The impact of the disaster is felt acutely within this living fabric of the family and community; the utter hopelessness, helplessness and devastation when the fabric is torn.

In these circumstances, Somasundaram concludes, the best approach to restore the psychosocial and mental health of the internally displaced people (IDP) would have been to reunify the family, and give information on their fate and whereabouts. The main effort of community level workers would be directed towards strengthening and uniting families: rebuilding and regenerating community structures and institutions; encouraging leaders; facilitating self-support groups; village and traditional resources; using creative arts; cultural and ritualistic practices; as well as linking up with other service sectors like education, social service, local and regional government.

However, the Sri Lankan state does not recognise the concept of psychosocial needs, nor support. For example, the knowledge, that apart from other physical and socioeconomic needs, it will take considerable time and psychosocial support for the people to get over their trauma, is not accepted. The Vanni IDPs will have to be given an opportunity to mourn for the dead, grieve for their losses, and practice the cultural rituals for collective consolation. What happened cannot simply be erased from collective memory. If healing and psychosocial restitution is not done properly, or if they are pushed into activities too quickly, they may not benefit fully from the resettlement, rehabilitation and development efforts. They will lack the motivation and wellbeing to participate fully in their recovery, and rebuild their homes, lives and the region.

Nevertheless, in the long term, Somasundaram expects *'the Tamil community to eventually recover despite the malfeasance'* and that,

although the sociopolitical situation is complex and chronic, *'the community's resilience that lies in its strong identity, culture, social and spiritual practices will help heal the wounds'*.

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[1] See e.g. Somasundaram (2007); Somasundaram and Jamunanantha (2002).

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