

WOMAN OF THE YEAR 2006



Photo courtesy of EVA KASELL

Founder of the nonprofit EDWON, 30-year-old Pariyar is seeking to expand her horizons with a master's degree in international development at Clark University.



Photo by EVA KASELL

Pariyar makes a trip to Nepal to meet with women in different villages and speak with them about health, education and their rights.

Untiring spirit wins Pariyar award

Founder of Nepal-based nonprofit selected 2006 Woman of the Year

By **MEERA RAJAGOPALAN**
INDIA New England Staff

WORCESTER, Mass. — When Bishnu Maya Pariyar, was growing up in the Gorkha district of Nepal, discrimination and injustice was part of her everyday life.

At home, she saw her neighbor being beaten by her husband everyday. At school, she was taunted by her classmates for being a "Dalit" (lower caste) and would walk two hours each way to school with her friends. Being a Dalit, she could not even drink water in her friends' houses.

Pariyar, now 30, decided she would not bear the injustice, and decided to act on her own. Ten years ago, she founded the nonprofit organization Association for Dalit Women's Advancement of Nepal, which offered the Dalit women a unique opportunity to become financially secure.

ADWAN, and its sister organization in the United States, Empowerment of Dalit Women of Nepal, has since benefited more than 1,700 women in five districts of Nepal, and has provided scholarships to around 1,000 Dalit children to attend school, 12 girls are on their way to college. "Earlier, the Dalits did not have any confidence or hope for their children," says Pariyar, now a student at Clark University. "They used to be teased because they could not even afford the five dollars for a school uniform."

Pariyar has received numerous awards and recognition for her work, including an \$11,000 grant from the Margaret McNamara Memorial Fund, part of the World Bank Group Family Network, which supports projects for the education of women from developing countries. She was also honored with the Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government's Bridge Builder's Award for 2006.

What Pariyar does in the United States for EDWON is a com-

bination of building awareness and raising funds.

Pariyar has given speeches at plenary meetings of the United States Agency for International Development and The World Bank, and organizes craft fairs to support EDWON.

"I realized that education was the key," she says. Pariyar finished high school in an environment where most girls did not even attend school, and worked with a program called Self Help Development Program in Kathmandu, Nepal.

While at the program, Pariyar saw a system in disrepair. She observed that Dalit women did not get the help they needed, as they did not have any collateral in the first place.

"The women used to cry and come to me for help. I can never forget those tears," says Pariyar. "It gave me direction as to what I could do."

She left the program and started her own organization aimed at helping Dalit women find their place in society. The result was ADWAN, which will soon be renamed EDWON Nepal. ADWAN works on a modified credit scheme. Women band together in groups of 15 to 25, and with \$50 as seed money, they

'The women used to cry and come to me for help. I can never forget those tears. It gave me direction as to what to do.'

Bishnu Maya Pariyar
Founder EDWON

Pariyar spreads awareness, raises funds for nonprofit

PARIYAR, continued from page 12

start a small business venture.

The uniqueness of the scheme is that there is no bank or central body governing them — after they receive the seed money, the women are on their own.

The women decide the rate of interest and keep the money in their own “bank” — a special room in the village where the money is kept. They then start their small businesses — typical ones being buying and selling livestock and opening a vegetable shop.

They then return the money taken from the system back to the general fund, to be used by other groups in the collective. Groups take turns in using the pool of money, and currently, EDWON serves 55 groups of women.

The organization is inclusive and, in fact, encourages women of all castes to participate. Several groups are mixed groups, with both Dalits and upper caste women in them, encouraging interaction and communication between the castes.

Pariyar had started to see tremendous growth in ADWAN, when she was invited by Eva Kasell to study in the United States.

Kasell had visited Nepal when her son Jacob, who was with the United States Peace Corps, was stationed in Kathmandu.

“I got to know Bishnu through my son, and I decided she was a special person and we sponsored her to come here for her education,” says Kasell, who heads operations in the United States.

Kasell says she was inspired by Pariyar and got involved in the organization. “When I went back to visit her (Pariyar’s) village and visited some of her groups, I was just really moved by what I saw,” she says. “I felt I could not go on

living my life as I had been living before.”

EDWON now operates in Nepal, the United States and Denmark, and employs one full-time staff member in Nepal. “Since we have transferred the power to the women, we do not need that many people,” says Pariyar.

The organization has visibly affected the lives of scores of women, says Pariyar.

Husbands who used to beat their wives now routinely defer to them on important issues. In fact, if they gamble or drink, they are told they will be put in “jail”— jail being a room set aside for the purpose.

She remembers her last trip to Nepal, where she saw men plead with their wives for permission to play cards for one day. “The men now support the women, as they see the positive change,” says Pariyar. “Women will [usually] spend on the house and their children’s education.”

Part of Pariyar’s current work involves spreading awareness about the problem in Nepal. She travels around the New England area giving speeches about her work and the situation in her home country.

“People don’t know where Nepal is, even,” she says, “and people say ‘I thought Dalits were only in India.’”

Along with creating awareness in others, Pariyar is also striving to understand the problem on a global scale. As a student of the international development and social change program at Clark University, Pariyar is trying to gain from the experience of students from other countries. “I had worked only on the field, and now I am learning about the theory,” says Pariyar, adding that students in her classes come from 20 countries.

Says William Fisher, Pariyar’s advisor at Clark and the director of the program, “As a stu-



Photo by EVA KASELL

Sanani, a Dalit villager, received literacy training for six months through Pariyar’s nonprofit organization. EDWON seeks to improve the overall status of women in society.

dent, Pariyar brings remarkable presence into the graduate program because of her own experience.”

He adds that Pariyar is very earnest and enthusiastic in class, and that she has grown as a student and an individual since she first joined the program. “Most people who come here have already done some work. It’s good to learn about the situation in Africa, in Vietnam, to see what is [state of] the empowerment of women there,” says Pariyar.

Pariyar visits Nepal every year, and wants to eventually move there. She credits her parents,

Rup Bahadur and Kanmaya Pariyar for being supportive of her education in spite of having to raise nine children. “My father was so unique,” says Pariyar. “He always encouraged me to go to school, even when there wasn’t enough money.”

Pariyar’s next goal is to make the Dalit women more confident, and is working on after-school programs on public speaking for the women. “Whenever I visit Nepal, people tell me I’m the same person they knew earlier,” says Pariyar. “I tell them, ‘I will always be the same, I hope you change, and become better.’”



This summer... at the Peabody Essex Museum

See the landmark exhibition *Painting Summer in New England*, then engage in exciting programs for all ages.

- Artist demonstrations, classes and workshops
- Hands-on activities for children and families
- Outdoor activities ... and much more!

For details, go to pem.org/events.

P | E | M Peabody
Essex
Museum

Salem, MA | 978-745-9500 | pem.org

You're invited...



... to work with the area's best.

Experienced Nursing Open House

Wednesday, June 7th • 3 pm – 7 pm
The Ledge, 1 Brigham Circle, Boston, MA

Bring your *nursing expertise* to another level.

We are offering the following Nursing Opportunities:

- Critical Care • Operating Room • Cath Lab • Emergency Department
- Hematology/Oncology/BMT • Women's Health

Visit our Open House to learn more about these opportunities and meet with managers and HR representatives. If you are unable to attend, visit our website at: www.brighamandwomens.org/nursing or email: bwhnursingcareers@partners.org. Fax: 617-954-9870. For more information, visit: www.brighamandwomens.org/nursing. EOE

A member of the **Partners HealthCare** Health System

