**Sumika**

(Preliminaries)

Amanda: Can you briefly tell me about yourself? Which are of Nepal you come from? Your family status. How many brothers and sisters do you have? How were you married? When you first met?

Sumika: I was born in Panchthar district. I met him first time in 1987 and married to him in 1989. The family home of my in-laws was in Lakhanpur, where we lived for some time and we moved here only six years ago.

Husband: My family had migrated from Panchthar earlier. As there was no school to continue education in her village, she came to Tarai (southern plains) for further studies.

Amanda: Was it arranged or love marriage?

Husband: It was love marriage.

Amanda: What did you fancy or like about each other?

Husband: We did not have very much known about what love is, but I was fascinated by her beautiful look. I was 20 years old when we got married.

Sumika: I was still a teenager, aged 17 years then, and I did not think much about marriage, but it happened. He is handsome at this age; you can imagine how he would have been when he was at the later-adolescence? We got together in many ways, we liked similar things and our hearts beat to the same tune. It’s the 32nd year of our marriage and nothing bad or mishap has occurred between us because we have good understanding and trust with each other. I think our pair is one of the best, a model couple.

Amanda: Were you already a Gurkha when you got married?

Husband: No, I joined the Gurkha after marriage and two children were born.

Amanda: Did you guys decide together that you should join Gurkha or did you just come home and say ‘Yes, I am going to be a Gurkha’?

Sumika: We decided together and I was the one who insisted him to be a Gurkha. We thought that we had married and had children early. So we need to earn not only to survive but also for future of our children. He wanted to join the British Gurkhas but unfortunately he could not. He was not interested to join the Indian Army, but they had two children and some sort of financial pressure, so she persisted him to go for it.

Amanda: This is the first case the wife forced the husband to join the Gurkhas; otherwise the husbands were telling their wives.

Did you know much about the Indian Gurkhas before becoming one? What that would mean to you as a family that you would be away a lot but also the benefits of being an Indian Gurkha?

Sumika: I only knew that a Gurkha has better income to solve financial problems. We have two children and we need to pave way for their better future by providing quality education in private or boarding school. I do not have good education; I’m literate only in Nepali. I lament for not getting better education and further studies, and I think that is a significant part I missed. I regret vey much when am unable to understand the subject or process when I make visits to public offices. Therefore, I want to make sure my children better educated and better in English. I think one can do anything if one knows English well. The reason we decided him to go to the India Gurkhas was to finance our children’s education.

Husband: Yes, the financial benefit was the main target for the decision to join the Indian Army.

Amanda: Tell me how you felt the first time you went to the military? You are leaving your young wife with two children. Were you excited on you beginning a new adventure or nervous?

Husband: I joined the Indian Gurkhas because of the financial problems. After I joined, I felt if I made a mistake by joining the army leaving my small children and young wife behind on their own. During the training of 11 months I was worried thinking on that line whenever I was free. I forgot all when I was engaged in different activities and exercises, but the thought of the children and my wife haunted and tormented as I was free. I felt a bit guilty and thought if I made a mistake. I had to be on duty for one year upon completion of the training, and visited home for two months on vacation. The two months were gone as if instantly in company with wife and children. I served in that way for 16 years and returned on voluntary pension.

Sumika: I did not think we made a mistake by deciding him to join the Indian Army. I was happy on thinking we will be able to provide good opportunities that we missed to our girls. However, I felt uneasy. I could not see him off and asked him to go and stay somewhere a day earlier. He had to leave merely 11 days after my second baby was born. The cultural norm also prohibited to organize events during post-partum and I was not in the condition to see him off face to face, so I sent him to stay overnight at a cousin’s home further away. I was happy on one hand but sad on the other. He sent a letter when he reached the training center. I was cooking lunch after laying my baby in a cot when the letter reached me. The content was disappointing. I’ll never forget these words he wrote, “I have joined the army but we are treated as animals here.” I was really hurt; I will never forget that day. There were no telephone and mobile facilities those days and we had to wait for 3-4 months for letter to arrive or reach. I still remember how painful the letter was and how sorely he had written.

Amanda: How did you respond to that letter then? Did you write back just to come home or remember this is for the future for the children and things might change for the better?

Sumika: I couldn’t reply. I felt what should I write? He has just started to do something. His parents and all the neighbors were happy on his becoming a Gurkha. I feared he might return if I wrote acutely or emotionally. Others, except his mother, were not able to see and feel the agonies we were suffering. I was in a dilemma, and I was not able to pick up a pen and write back. He was already in a stress and I did not want to increase it. I could neither ask him to return nor remain there.

Amanda: So your letter just went unreplied.

In those low moments who did you draw on for support, when both of you were separated, you were unaccustomed to military life, you were lonely with the children, and the emotional disturbances you were experiencing, Were they other military men for you and for you other Gurkha wives, relatives and friends, who shared their experience and provided solace?

Sumika: Pain is felt by the person bearing it; others could not feel the burnt. The Gurkha wife’s bottleneck could be understood only by Gurkha wives, and there are none close by. Therefore, I did not share or not express my suffering with anybody else. I kept it to myself and that was very hard.

Husband: We, the sons, have to go somewhere and do something for livelihood. It happens to all. Army sector is difficult and demanding. Discipline is very strict. Not all army men are daunting; some are encouraging and supporting, too. The seniors also inspired and cheered us. However, the sharp needles of feelings pricked the heart time and again. We shared our sorrows and experiences with fellow soldiers in our barrack, which comforted each-other. We all reached the same conclusion that we were there to do something better for our families; that acceptance of the called for constraint gave us energy to bear the pains. The busy schedule of the army, e.g. activities, training, exercises, games/sports, recreational events and parties help change serious mood into fun and romance. We internalized that we separated with our families and were undergoing the difficulties for our families’ and own sake. These also facilitated to lessen the agonies.

Amanda: Did you have any Gurkha in your family? How did you know about the Gurkha army?

Husband: The ‘gullawala’ or army recruiters visited the villages and selected the potential recruits, who were strong, physically fit and healthy. Then, they took the selected aspiring candidates to training.

Amanda: As a young boy did you know what a Gurkha was?

Husband: Yes, of course I did know about Gurkha soldier.

Amanda: Was there anything about Gurkha surprised you? About what that meant in your everyday life you didn’t realize before becoming a Gurkha? Did something unexpected surprise you upon joining Gurkha army?

Husband: Yes, it happens. Because, outlook or the uniformed and armed smart soldiers look very good in photographs and movies, but I felt it was not a job for a human being when I was involved in and exposed to it. Because in the army you are trained to kill enemy, a human being, you get punished when you fall short during training, new recruits fall victim to multiple punishments, etc. So, I realized that was not a decent career. Then only the internal things of army are understood. But we have to digest all those. It must be carried out once an order is given in the army, no one can deny it; the discipline is strict. That also is difficult to swallow. These were the surprises. Gradually, they accept those pains because that is the army.

Amanda: Did it surprise you on becoming a Gurkha wife? You didn’t think about it before and became ‘Wow, I never thought to be a Gurkha wife!’

Sumika: I had heard stories about Gurkhas and was not totally surprising. There was a Gurkha in my maternal and husband’s families, too. I realized there were more pains than happiness in the Gurkhas when my husband shared about his experiences. Our marriage crossed 32 years but we have not been together for even five years. There are losses and sacrifices. We have grown older, our love also has increased and we have matured. Therefore, there is nothing to boast and be arrogant on being a Gurkha wife.

Amanda: What else do you think between being a Gurkha wife and a common civilian wife?

Sumika: A Gurkha wife is only a bit different to the common Nepali farmer’s wife in terms of financial capacities. Because they tend to have problems of sustenance, even to feed their families and support children’s education. Gurkha families have no problem to eat and clothe, and pay school fees of children. More free and happier than the normal Nepali wife. That is the only difference. However, Gurkha wives of the Indian army can not save much after spending for daily necessities.

Amanda: So, they do not have to worry about hand to mouth.

Research on Gurkha families suggest that in comparison to other Nepali women the Gurkha women have particularly lot of autonomy to manage finances of the home not just because the husband’s away but also they are more empowered through managing the money for household as well as other capacities are increased compared to the civilian wives. Do you feel that is accurate in your own life? Do you feel a kind of more empowered or higher status? Or that does not reason with you?

Sumika: Yes, Gurkha wives are empowered and capacitated ate to some extent. I do not feel to be that much empowered, maybe due to my lower level of education. I not only work in the house but have to go and do different things outside to. The deed for this house and any asset we buy are in my name. In his absence I have to go to the school and offices of land revenue, drinking water supply, telephone and electricity authority to pay the bills. I also participate in meetings of different groups and committees on his behalf. These all have made me a bit forward, autonomous and empowered.

Amanda: Did you also experience pressure with that? Family or community members asking you for money, because they assume you have a lot of money for your husband is a Gurkha.

Sumika: Yes, they do come asking for loan. I am running the household with difficulty and I cannot comply to give them loan. His father, mother, and siblings also expect ‘something’ because their son or sibling is a Gurkha. However, we cannot fulfill all their expectations because our income is not that huge. We have to be strong first in order to support them. We have it in mind to help them but our condition is at the level of just maintaining the household. We want to help them all but our income is not enough to spare. I often hear much tittle-tattle in the community because I could not comply with their demands or requests. They comment that my husband would have provided us with loan or supported us but his wife is denying in this or that pretext. I feel hurt and sad to hear such things because that is not true.

Amanda: Do you largely make financial decisions as a couple or do you leave all those to your wife to make decision - like school fees, buying land, lending money to family members etc. ?

Husband: I let her decide on all financial matters, because I can do nothing from abroad. We have been doing that way when I was working overseas and I allow her to continue those when I am here on leave, because I will be at home only for a few days and she has to tackle everything later on. It all started since I was in the India army, because there was no other communication medium except letter and we had to wait for 5/6 months for reply. So it was futile to wait for that long to make decisions and he gave her the authority. But nowadays as we can communicate each day, she consults with me when she is making financial decisions and sometimes we discuss, however she is the one who makes the final decisions.

Amanda: How did you teach your children to know who their father was and love him when he was physically absent?

Sumika: It was very difficult. I had to teach them about their father as well as do all the household chores including taking care of the water buffalo and paddy field. It was a bit easier when I was with the in-laws because they took care of the children as I worked in the field. Sometimes, my father also came and took care of the babies. Once, when he was at home on leave, the children did not identify him and said that some elder uncle is sleeping in the bed room.

Amanda: Here lies the crux of it. You have to go overseas; it is a sacrifice in order to provide for your family. The real cost is then your children do not know who you are. How did you cope with that? How you do mentally or emotionally worked through that? You come home and your children don’t know who you are. How does that make sense?

Husband: At that moment we felt very bad. We forgot all those twinges when they played, laughed and merrily mixed with us later on.

Amanda: So tried to focus on the positive.

My father was also worked at an oil and gas rig. He was away from home for long periods. He was home on leave with oil over his smelly body and long beards. He tried to hold his two year old son who ran away crying thinking him a stranger. My brother and I are adults now. I know my father also carries a lot of guilt with him. On the one hand he had to provide for the family and on the other he carries a guilt he wishes he was there at the same time. I wonder if there is some sort of guilt you carry with you as well? It’s silly because it’s not your fault and not the children’s fault. Do you carry guilt with you or its okay?

Husband: I think it was normal for the children not to recognize me when they were young and not to come near me when I tried to hold them, because we were physically living apart. The children are afraid of strangers and run away thinking their father an outsider. It’s neither their nor his fault. It’s almost universal; everyone away from the home for long time experiences such phenomenon. Of course, it hurt me when they ran away. But after a couple of days they understood that I was one of their family members as I was living in their house and then they mingle with me. Then the clouds of hesitation disappeared; everybody forgot the fuss and became happy by forgiving. However, it’s okay with me and I do not feel guilty.

Amanda: I mean there was the first coming home. When you first come home, there is the initial ‘who is this guy?’ Then that dissolves and cuddling and what not. But what about leaving again? My brother used to hide father’s shoes and every time he had to leave, the day before father and mother had to look every corner of the house to look for the shoes. He would not tell them where he hid the shoes. Although it has a funny side, it conveyed that my brother did not want father to leave. Do you have similar experience? Or, they were well behaved and my brother was bad?

Husband: My children did neither do such things nor cried and cling onto me saying ‘do not go’. But faces express a lot of feelings while departing with loved one. They did not shed tears and weep but their facial expressions depicted their overcast sentiment. And I also become sad seeing them dejected but I have to bear it considering their and family’s future; as a normal behavior, as a compromise.

Sumika: Therefore I arranged his departure when the children were not present.

Husband: I also went out when the children could not see me going.

Amanda: In terms of the family life based on the physical separation, what do you think makes a good Gurkha wife? What are some attributes of behavior a Gurkha wife needs to do to be a good wife and a good mother, specifically with the husband being away?

Sumika: I did not tell our worries and troubles or risks, e.g. when he was in the Indian army or Gulf, to the children fearing their young mind would be stressed. I also held back some bad habits of children from their father fearing he might beat them. I had to play a role balancing both the parties. I tried my best to manage the household, lo look after the children, take care of the in-laws when they were in the joint family, manage finances, use the money sparingly and pray for his well-being. I performed that way as I felt it knowingly or unknowingly, because I am a mother as well as a wife.

Amanda: Would you like to add about what you expected of your wife when you were overseas?

Husband: It’s okay. She is doing well and I hope she will continue it.

Amanda: What do you expect of your husband when he is overseas? What are your expectations of him as a good husband and also a good father besides sending money home?

Sumika: I am confident that he has not failed to comply with our expectations. He was concerned about the children’s health, studies and happiness as I wished from him. He even inquired and cared about small things of them like how they were eating or playing and if they were sick. He never objected when I bought something for them. I used to ask him for advice before I took any decision except the regular expenses. He is honest, kind and loving. He has never botched to perform as a good husband and a good father; he is the ultimate promising husband to me and father to our children.

Amanda: Would you add something to that list on what makes a good Gurkha husband and a father?

Husband: A good Gurkha husband and father needs to continue doing such good things. I have to think and understand what roles I have to play to win the children’s and my wife’s hearts. I have to understand their needs and feelings including respect and trust each other. These are the issues of self realization, insight. These won’t happen if I don’t cogitate about myself and carry out accordingly. All these need to be followed to be a good Gurkha husband and a father.

Amanda: You hear different attributes of Gurkhas as brave, fierce fighters and attend to your wife’s emotions is a different parallel that is similar to military family, what is demanded in the professional life of a soldier and what is expected of him as a father and a husband. Often it seems as nights and days. Do you find sometimes difficult juggling that especially with the army, a military soldier facing violence and then being an empathetic caring and loving father or husband?

Husband: When we are tense and engaged in army tasks, we can’t abruptly change our mood to care and love of our family, wife or children. There is no place for emotions in army’s work. We have to be determined to fight the enemy any moment. It’s very hard when we hear something unexpected our family. However, we learned to balance and manage the emotions.

Amanda: I think some people do better than others. Am I right?

Husband: Yes.

Amanda: Divorce rates tend to be high in militaries and police forces than the national average. It’s demanding to ask the military and police to be a certain type of person and sometimes different at home. But then also there is their physical separation with their families –wives and children. These are the suggested factors for the high divorce rates. Do you find within the Gurkha community is divorce an issue or have you heard members of the community going through divorces?

Husband: Such incidences were not common and widespread in Nepal, but gradually, in recent years with the new generation it is observed. It depicts the change in attitudes and perceptions of persons. The tendency to see one’s wife as an unattractive woman and perceive other women beautiful is growing. There are laws pertaining to divorce and marriage, however people are violating the laws and carrying out adulterations without any restraint these days.

Amanda: What about you? Have you heard about divorce?

Sumika: Yes, I have heard about such things but such incidences are basically happening among the young people. We never have had misunderstanding, fighting and not even shouting to each other. We feel our love and care for each other grow deeper as we are physically absent. Our separation is making us more closer.

Amanda: Yes, they have a great marriage.

Have you heard about domestic violence in new Gurkha generation? It is actually large in the US and UK military families. It is ascribed to the post traumatic stress when they come home after long absence or from violent battles but also a part of the military culture itself. Does that also plague the Gurkha community? Or do you think that is not vied for the Gurkha community.

Husband: I do not believe only the military personnel carry out domestic violence, and it is not widespread in Nepali culture too. The western culture is different to ours and it could be intense there. Of course we come from military background but we leave behind what happened in the army when we return to home and live happily with our family. There could be some cases of domestic violence in some families, but not prevalent. The culture of the west is different to ours. Individuals are allowed to own and carry personal weapons in the west and the movies they watch are filled with violence including gambling and alcoholism. So, their minds could be affected by such things.

Amanda: For you too, being married 35 years, what is the key to successful marriage specifically because of the physical distance?

Husband: The main thing is mutual understanding and trust. The second is the money I earned abroad facilitated my family to meet their basic needs and manage household. The third is the feeling of accomplishment on being able to bring happiness in my wife and children’s’ lives. These made peace in my house. I feel proud to support my community or some villagers in need. I believe my successful marriage is underpinned by the financial support to my family by working overseas; it would have been difficult to succeed if I could not earn and/or I had squandered my earning there.

Amanda: When did you retire from the Indian army?

Husband: In 2004.

Amanda: Did you have any gap leaving the army and joining private security? When did you join private security?

Husband: I joined the private security one and a half year after retirement from the Indian army. In the between I was offered a job by a broker.

Amanda: Did you pay money to the broker?

Husband: I paid NRs. 350,000.

Amanda: Where did they send you? Which country did you go to?

Husband: In Afghanistan.

Amanda: Which company were you working for?

Husband: I did not get job that time; I just lost my money.

Amanda: Did not you end up in Afghanistan? Or you were one of the guys who were in Afghanistan with wrong visa trying to find work?

Husband: Yes, I reached Afghanistan and signed the contract with the company. But the contract manager died in a helicopter crash with his entire family and there was no one to take us ahead. So, my money simply vanished and I had to return.

Amanda: So you never actually got that work and your money back?

Husband: No, I did neither get a job nor get my money back.

Amanda: When did you try and get the job again after that horrible experience?

Husband: I went to Iraq nine months after that mishap. At the Baghdad airport. I had a five years’ contract. There were 4-5 hundred Gurkhas there at that time. But not all ex-Gurkhas were able to speak English. We had to work with the US and British military. They had problem working with us because of our poor English. Therefore they cancelled the contract.

Amanda: Which was the company?

Husband: I forgot the name of the company; I think I was ‘New Global’.

Amanda: Did you pay manpower again to get that job or did you get recruited directly?

Husband: I didn’t pay for that time.

Amanda: Was the decision to work in the private security joint or your own? Did you come home to your wife and said ‘I just want to work as a private security’?

Husband: We discussed, planned and made all those decisions jointly. Such mishaps occurred three times with me.

Amanda: What was the main motivation for you to go overseas? Was finance or money the main motivation? Or there were other motivations for you to do private security work?

Husband: At that time I needed a lot of money for my family and so the main motivation for me was finance. That’s why it became most expensive.

Amanda: Did you have any fears or concerns as your husband was working in private security or the same in the Indian army?

Sumika: It’s a bit different. We are happier nowadays because he is earning more than he was in the Indian army. I feel our financial status has increased, the children are going to better schools and our quality of life also has improved. However, fear or concern is also high in his present job. I was terrified when the 13 Nepali migrant workers were killed last year. I worry about him a lot, more than he was in India, because he is working amidst high risk for the sake of us all at present. Indian army is safer and secure in compared to the private security.

Amanda : You are currently working with FSI. Is there anything FSI or private security companies can do better, e.g., support the family at home and then support your experience overseas?

Husband: I don’t know what criteria they have for those things or to what extent they can do such things. We have no idea on what basis they have acquired the contract. We are told only about the salary and facilities on vacations per year, accommodation, free ticket for travel to and fro, and benefits. Then a contract is signed with us. It would be better if all information is transparent. It would be nice also if all the provisions relating to facilities in the contract is fulfilled, but I have heard it does not happen in many companies and the workers are cheated. We should be treated well and honestly.

Amanda: Would you add anything?

Sumika: It would be nice if the vacations were for a month in each half a year to the private security contractor. It would help manage their households and them to be with their family. Another thing I feel is that the security workers would work more effectively and efficiently if they get their salary as allocated/stipulated and we also would be happier.

Amanda: How much longer do you want to work overseas in the security industry? Do you guys have talked about that? And do you have a financial plan in place for investing in something local here or just savings that will help you when you are no longer working overseas?

Husband: Yes, we are continually consulting each other about our future work. We have made many plans to work for about 2-3 years but not been able to succeed in our any plan yet. This time also we have planned that I will work at most for two years and start up a small enterprise or business here and living together. We still do no know how it will go.

Thank you.