

Dr. Stacy Leigh Pigg

Near Nepal's border with China, a small village sits, island-like, on a tip of land formed by precipitous slopes cross-cut by tumbling Himalayan streams on three sides. The people who live there call this place "a corner." A corner, however, is not a dead-end. It may not be a hub, but it can be a place where things turn around. This is the message of Kesang Tseten's decidedly non-preachy documentary about building a suspension bridge in this remote community. The film can be read as a tale of participatory development or as one of rural subsistence; in either case, it is the story of this village and these people.

This subtle, multi-dimensional film tells the story of the bridge, not as a monumental or heroic achievement of development, but as an event that occurs within a local social history. The suspension bridge is an engineering technology that clearly solves well-articulated local problems: the rivers are dangerous, a woman has recently died in a flash flood, children can't get to school, and access to the nearest small trading center requires an arduous all-day journey. In documenting both the building of the bridge and villagers' reflections on their lives, Tseten eschews pat story lines. Instead, he uses a mix of interviews and on-scene action to reverse the Eurocentric charity tale of providing the technology to the needy by showing how an opportunity for a bridge is seen through villagers' eyes. The portrait is holistic, in the best anthropological sense, for it shows how deeply the building of the bridge is embedded in wider economic, political, ecological, domestic, and spiritual dimensions of everyday life of the villagers who will use it. The film is a story of "participatory development," told entirely without romance, false egalitarianism, or teleological overtones.

As the bridge is under construction, the seasons change. Work starts in the dry winter season of slack agricultural labor. An international non-governmental organization (Helvetas) works in liaison with a bridge users' committee representing the locals. (How this connection is set up, how Helvetas chose the site or how someone at the site found Helvetas we are not told, nor do we learn at what stage of the engineering and budgeting planning the villagers became involved.) Firewood is collected and hauled back home, corn is planted, wheat begins to ripen, the hills get greener – these things happen every year. Yet this year there is the sharp clang of metal parts delivered by truck to the road head. A team of men from the village bargain hard for their porter's wages. The bridge may be for the community but they know what it means to sell their labor to carry a load. The thick, heavy, plied lengths of steel cable require a closely coordinated line of men, spaced every meter or so, to haul them up and down the steep and narrow paths. We see that a suspension bridge requires not just engineering know-how, but another kind of skill. These knowledgeable bodily investments are shown in all the immediacy of physical labor, from breaking rocks into gravel with hammers for the foundation to the hand-twisting of the wire fencing for the sides of the bridge. The community participates, indeed. Yet these nimble hands, surefooted limbs, and strong backs belong to reflecting subjects. Some of them wonder whether others are profiting unduly from the cash inflow the bridge offers: who audits community participation? Who is expected to volunteer, and who is paid? Any influx of development money raises questions about distribution, veiled accusations of insider profiteering, and issues of rights and responsibilities that come with participation. Community mobilization is composed of these sorts of discussions. The film does not ask viewers to adjudicate, rather it asks us to notice how various positions articulate themselves and come to an agreement. Debate and acknowledged differences of interest and position are the norm, not the exception.

To the villagers of this particular "corner" of Nepal, a suspension bridge over a tumbling mountain river represents many possibilities. To be remote is, increasingly, to be cut off from education, markets, and employment. But how cut off? Without the short cut of the bridge, younger villagers nonetheless manage to have manufactured clothing, some connect with labor brokers who send them to Kuwait for employment, some are reached by Christian missionaries, and one man, in particular, nurtures visions of advancing the village first by the bridge, then by enlarging the small local school. Perhaps there could be a market in medicinal plants. Perhaps the traditional practice of weaving bamboo baskets for the market could be expanded. Few if any families can sustain themselves solely by farming. They may grow some maize and wheat but they also must eat nettles and fiddleheads, the ultimate food of the poor.

A river is not just an obstacle to economic integration, however. A young, recently married woman was swept away by a flash flood while she was grinding flour from grain at the mill near the river. Her friend was spared to tell us the tale of her loss. Rivers are home to spirits: were they offended by

impure acts committed by some, retaliating with a flash flood? The river and its moods is part of a larger set of existential questions about death and suffering. Although the Tamang people of this village are traditionally Buddhist, with reliance on shamanic healers, some have converted to Christianity recently as a way to free themselves from onerous material obligations to shamans and deities. We see that even in such a small and isolated place, people respond differently to the economic, spiritual, and political challenges of their times.

For teaching, this film is probably best suited for modules on development. It could be very provocative if students view the film more than once. Asked to carefully observe the various social interactions, among and between both villagers and outsiders, students could begin to perceive signs, such as body language and clothing, that provide clues to the communication of socio-economic and status differences among speakers. In scenes of community activities, including both disputes and celebrations, close observation of gestures and speech styles reveals tacit dimensions of the process of “community participation” touted in development literature. Because the film refuses a heavy-handed narrative line, introductory anthropology students may not “get” the film at first go, but likely they will be engaged by the genuine people they encounter and can be led to see in and through the film.