



# The Wonder of Mud: Reflections from Nepal

by Bishnu Bhatta

Development of a child has always been correlated with Mother Nature and as an individual we have to make them acquainted with nature. Soil is

home to all creatures. It might come to you as a big surprise to hear that mud can also be used as cloth. Yes! That is what they wear in Malawi where clothes are made of mud and organic matter. Mud in the Bahamas is also popular for medicinal activity — against cancer! Even though research is being done in massive amounts, it always seems there is some more left. Thus there is a saying by a famous Nepali writer, Tara Nath Sharma, who stated “To beat nature is the glory of life.”

A program was organized in the small village of Panchkhal, a little outside of town (approximately 45kms from the capital of Kathmandu), carrying a new concept towards making a better world: people come taking a step closer to Mother Nature. The day was called Mud Day and it targeted a small group of 58 orphaned children to acquaint them with the environment. All the adult spectators felt the pang! Inside them, what a lovely idea to make child come close to the environment and make them love nature!

Participants were children from 8 to 13 years of age — 48 boys from Panchkhal Orphanage Home and 10 girls from Kathmandu Orphanage Home. A total of 10 children were suffering from cerebral palsy: 1 boy and 9 girls. All of them have mild palsy, and 3 of them regularly attend school; the rest were kept at home. The pitch was prepared in Samaj Kalyan Parisad compound of Panchkhal, mixing topsoil with water in an area of about 8,214 sq ft. Water to make the pitch was made available from a distant top hill and thanks for God, the previous night it rained heavily making the pitch perfect for games. The reflection of sun rays in the mud struck the thin layer of water, inviting it in. Once the whistle was blown, all the 57

participants (except a handicapped small boy who was devoid of both legs and got scared of the mud pitch) queued and looked eagerly to know what is happening next. The rest seemed unable to capture the scene in mind when explained the day before. A lovely spectacular scene was there on the spot; boys dressed up all in new game clothes, red or black, while girls in white and blue — all of them watching everything keenly as if trying to capture every small moment with their little eyes. Some of them were seen in a dilemma of whether to keep the dress clean or to jump in the mud.

Children were to play football, volleyball, running, splashing, etc., which they did. Girls seemed not as much prepared as the boys. Again the whistle blew and it was time to jump! Nobody jumped! Then the organizer himself had to jump to assure them. It was amazing how they became confident and started diving one by one. The process was followed by other slow children; then only did the girls dare to enter the mud. Guess what? Boys seemed carefree, but girls were still hesitant inside the pitch. A boy was watching closely and making a face like he does not dare to go there, and some of them were making a face clearly expressing “Oh! This is disgusting; how are they managing to play in it?” But as time passed by, slowly one of them stepped in. He had a broad smile, which changed into a bad face as he dipped his one leg in mud; he seemed still not so sure whether to put another foot inside. Then suddenly his expression changed, he made a funny face, and he dived and twisted his legs in the air. It made one of the best, spectacular moments. That was when all of them followed one by one; soon they were splashing, pushing, and playing happily.

When a girl named Sujata was asked why she did not play hide and seek she explained, “What if someone steps on my chest, I will be covered in mud.” Similarly when Sonam, a 9-year-old girl, explained that at first she didn’t dare to enter mud due to earthworms, but later she said she felt okay and she even stepped on some. After explaining about the importance of earthworms in soil, she complained, “Then why did that earthworm come where I was playing?” The ground was full of those little talks which were never ending, far beyond writing.

The children got tired playing and thus some of them started to wash their faces and decline, but we saw the enthusiasm in boys who seemed energized and were still playing. Slowly they started backing off from the ground and started to the bathroom for a bath. Children started coming out of the bath one by one with clean dress, ruffled wet hair, with towels around the neck. They were provided with new towels and with happy faces they were now waiting for lunch. All of them were enjoying each and every bit of food and the closeness between each other. Soon after they ate, the laziness came around their faces and finally some of them retired to their TV room while a small group of them were seen busy in the bathroom washing their new game clothes; the attachment with the new cloth was already there within them.

There is a saying “Children are like clay, it is only on the maker’s hand to give it a proper shape.” This was just a first attempt for those vulnerable, yet neglected group members of society to make them foresee the importance as well as joy of nature, and an attempt to make a better world

tomorrow. The program left a very good impression, not only for the children, but also to the locals and visitors. Children never stopped asking questions about soil, mud, water, earthworms, etc.; they seemed interactive. To conclude, we have to say that the program was a big success and lived up to its objective.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BISHNU BHATTA

# The Wonder of Mud: Reflections from Australia by Gillian McAuliffe

Bishnu's reflections on the Mud Day in Nepal articulates the amazing connection we all have to the Earth. This story of 'Mud Day' is a story of how the Earth connected a group of children in Nepal, but also how it connected two groups of children from different continents and cultures.

In Belfast at the World Forum, Bishnu had shared with the NACC Leadership Team that in Nepal some children could not play in mud because they did not have a change of clothes and they had no money for soap. On returning to Australia, and while planning the building of a mud hut with a group of six and seven year olds, I mentioned this discussion.

"Imagine if you could not play in mud?"

"Imagine if you could not have fun."

They were horrified that any child, anywhere, would not be able to play in mud due to a lack of a change of clothes.

"I can send them some of my clothes."

"My mum can sew; she can make them clothes."

The project became a focus of the class when the children decided that the best way to help some children in Nepal would be to send money to them so they could buy clothes in their own city. During the weeks that followed, a sponsorship plan raised \$1,000AUS for the project, which grew to include not only clothes, but also a meal for the children in Nepal who had not had a meat meal for four months.

The project also became about Bold Park in Australia having a 'Mud Day' at the

same time as Nepal. Somehow the concept of children choosing to play in mud on the same day emphasized that we are all connected to the Earth and, therefore, to each other. Our journey to provide mud was hard for us, and somewhat ironic. We had to truck in the clay soil to make mud as in our context we can

To begin with, the staff and parents looked on and reflected on their experiences with mud, but for most the temptation was just too much and they joined in playing joyfully with the mud and the children. Throughout the afternoon all the school classes came to play in the mud. Children, parents, and staff left the day richer from the experience, connected to the Earth, and satisfied that they had helped to bring joy into the lives of others.

We have another challenge at Bold Park. After looking at the photos from Nepal, the children at Bold Park have looked at designing the very best 'Mud Playground' they can imagine. They have reflected that not only "Imagine if you could not play in mud" but "Imagine if we had mud like the children in Nepal to play in!"

For Bishnu and me, the experience brought the possibilities of the NACC to another place. The Nature Action Collaborative for Children provided the opportunity for us to share stories, to identify possible collaboration, and to connect children, not only to nature, but also to each other. Thank you, Bishnu, and the children in Nepal for sharing 'Mud Day' with us. I know that at Bold Park we are keen to engage in this collaboration again in 2010.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GILLIAN McAULIFFE

make wet sand, but any attempt at mud yields pathetic results. The children had to gather the soil and the water to mix up their mud in small plastic wading pools.

It was fascinating to note that the children at Bold Park had the same hesitation as the children from Nepal. They approached the mud cautiously, first with the feet, and then perhaps a finger. After some hesitation they would pick the mud up and smear it over their arms, legs, faces, and body. Finally we saw children sitting, lying, and immersing themselves as much as they could, given the shallow nature of the wading pools.



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*The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.*