

# Utam Sapkota

(0:00 - 1:57)

Namaste, my name is Utam Sapkota and I'm 18 years old. I study in Sydney at UNSW and I'm studying mathematics and I was two years old when I came to Australia. I don't have that many memories from Nepal.

I can recall some memories but most of it's gone. I can recall things like being in the middle of an earthquake in Nepal because I was with my family, I remember, and the whole ground started shaking and the building started tilting and everybody, I remember, they were screaming. I remember trying to run away from it and I think, yeah, there were two earthquakes.

One of them, I was right in the middle. The other one was when we were on a train and we slept through it and I think that one was the more extreme earthquake.

I think as far back as I can recall is actually in this house and I was sitting next to grandma next to that fireplace right there.

I think we were eating beaten rice with yogurt and sugar and yeah. And also another memory I have is from our old house that we were living in rent and I remember being in the kitchen with the family and having food with them. I think because I don't remember as much, I think the influence comes from my family because I didn't have the experience of living in Nepal and the culture there.

I only have the culture that my family brought with them. I think when I went back to Nepal, I could really see the culture there and I think that was as much influence as I could have gotten from my family. It was, I think, five or six years ago so I would have been around.

Can I think for a moment? Yeah. It was 20... 15 or 16? 2015. So I was quite young.

(1:57 - 10:11)

Going back to when my family was, I think it was quite humbling seeing the houses. They were made from dirt and they were all close together and I think being close together, it made the community close together and I don't think you can see that really in Australia because even the road outside, it's a lot further apart than what you'd see in Nepal. Also, where people live.

If I wanted to go to my uncle's house, I'd have to travel a lot further than if I wanted to go to my uncle's house in Nepal. I was quite young so I don't have many memories apart from being in an earthquake. I also have memories of going to the local shops there and I remember going with my family and yeah, it was like an old shopkeeper and he gave me a piece of candy.

I was in my family and I think that really stuck with me and also going to the temples when I visited Nepal again and also seeing all the animals there. I remember we were on a road trip in a car going up the mountain and I would pray to every monkey I saw because I was little and I thought they were incarnations of gods and that and I remember my family laughing about it and that was a memory that I have of it. When I went to Nepal, I was able to immerse more in my culture because I remember when I came back and I went to the school, the classroom, I'd talk about what I'd experienced.

In Nepal, I went to see my guru and then when I talked about that with my friends, they were like, oh that's not real. They didn't believe me so yeah, I can't recall much. I think I've been very lucky because the people at the schools I've went to, they've been really friendly for the most part towards my culture and so I've been able to practice it inside of schools as well and they've been understanding of it.

So I think balancing it, it's been a lot easier thanks to them understanding, I guess. I think it's just become a routine for me because I've been doing it since I was very little, wearing silintila and saying mantras and that, practicing reciting scripture as well and also teaching other kids about scripture and that and yeah, I think it's very important because just to preserve it as well because we've come from a place with very rich culture to a place where you can't see much of it. I think preserving it's very important.

We hold Sanskrit classes. It's run by gurus to teach younger kids how to read and recite Sanskrit literature and sometimes I'd help out with teaching the little kids and also my brother, he does a lot of that. Yeah, it runs every Sunday and Saturday so it's been easy to like balance it with school life and we run the Sanskrit classes on Zoom and yeah, there'll just be like a guru sitting there with a book open and the little kids will have their books as well.

We'd all have our cameras on and so the guru would say like a slok first and then the little kids would recite it after them. Yeah, that's how it'd go about. Yeah, my brother especially does a lot of that.

When I was little, I didn't enjoy it that much. Now, it's kind of grown on me. I think when I was little, I didn't have any of these notions about preserving heritage and all that.

I think it's definitely grown on me. Preserving heritage is keeping the traditions that we had in Nepal and being able to practice them in our own homes. I think it's like being able to act on those traditions as a community as well, like running events, running English, preserving heritages, being able to practice festivals like traditional festivals, keep on doing what's been done for thousands of years.

In a community festival, we'd have lots of families gather and we'd have a couple of gurus and they'd run the event, pretty much run the festival. There are many different types. There's like dosai, there's yeah, there's also tiyaar as well, dipawali, teej as well.

We'd come together as a family and they'd be like a guru. They'd sit at the front and then they'd tell us how to do the pujas and then we'd follow them and yeah, that's pretty much what we did. Again, I think I've been very lucky because the schools I've been to have been very welcoming, so adapting to them have been much easier, I think, because they were so welcoming and also thanks to the teachers and that, they've been very understanding.

I've been able to practice my religion as well inside of schools, so I think I've been very lucky. Reflecting on what my parents had to go through, that at times you have to be resilient, you have to be strong for your family and so I think hearing about what they had to go through, it's been humbling, I think. My cultural heritage will always be a part of me.

It'll always be a part of my personal life and I think I've learned to integrate it into my professional life as well. Yeah, I've been lucky coming to Australia to be able to practice it in more professional ways than just personal as well. My aspirations would be to become a mathematician, but I also think it's important to keep my roots as well because obviously I've

grown up with practicing my religion all my life, so it's always going to be part of me and I think I aspire to keep that going as well.

After I finish uni, I'm thinking of searching for internships in that, quantitative research, and through those I think I could seize opportunities and also if I enjoy it, I could get into teaching as well. Yeah, so mainly in research and that. Everything's been moving really quickly, especially because I'd only finished high school last year and I'd moved up to Sydney just January, so it's been pretty sudden change, but I think living there has taught me to value my family more.

Yeah, the people I've been staying with have been nice to me as well, but I do miss my family sometimes as well, so it's taught me to treasure that. Just the way people behave in the city compared to here. I think everyone has their own lives in the city, but here I think people are more friendly.

I don't know if that's the right word, but they're more open, I think. In the city, everybody is minding their own business and stuff and I think that's been something that I've noticed that's different. I stay connected through, again, the Zoom meetings we have, where we practice reciting literature and also festivals and community-run festivals especially, where we all get together.

Because we had a festival when I was in Sydney and I think that really showed me how tightly connected we can be, because that experience has shown me the community is more connected than everyday life, because I think you just don't see it. I think we're all just more isolated and then when we had the festival, you could see how closely connected the community actually was. People who hear my story and all our stories should take away that family and heritage is important.

We should keep traditions going that have been going for thousands of years and we should stay connected to our roots, I think. Maybe in the future, I'd go back to Nepal. I definitely do want to go back sometime to visit the temples again.

(10:11 - 11:07)

And also in the future, to go for Sraddha as well, on pilgrimages, because that was the reason we went to Nepal in the first place, for our pilgrimage. I think I definitely want to go back there to do that again. In a pilgrimage, we'd go and pay respects to our ancestors and we'd visit several temples.

It's mainly to just visit the temples and pay respects to our ancestors. We call it Tilak and it represents the god Vishnu and then the red represents Lakshmi. We wear it on our head like this and I'm not as well versed in the meanings as my dad.

Since I was young, I've been wearing Sri and Tilak and I think it's just become part of my life.