



Manoj Gautam (right) and volunteers work to stop the traditional animal sacrifice at Nepal's Gadhimai Festival.

CHALLENGING TRADITION

ONE ADVOCATE'S QUEST TO CHANGE AN ANIMAL SACRIFICE INTO A CULTURAL CELEBRATION // BY EMILY SMITH

IT TOOK ONLY A MOMENT for Manoj Gautam to realize how naive he had been. He knew hundreds of thousands of animals are sacrificed every five years at the Gadhimai Festival in Nepal. He knew the scene would be horrific.

But as he stood on the high wall surrounding the sacrificial ground, looking down on the sea of animals about to be massacred—he lost his breath.

All of that suffering. Right before his eyes.

“And that’s when I actually decided that I have to give my best to stop this,” Gautam says. “Next time, it’s not happening. It’s not happening anymore after this.”

As a founding member of the Animal Welfare Network Nepal—he now serves as president—Gautam had been at the 2009 event to try to stop the slaughter. Since then, he’s continued the efforts with other animal advocates—including Humane Society International staff—lobbying polit-

ical leaders, attracting supporters on social media and building rapport with festival organizers at the Gadhimai temple.

There was a moment about a month before the November festival when the temple seemed on the verge of canceling the sacrifice. It didn’t. Despite death threats, Gautam pushed on. He trained more than 100 volunteers how to respectfully encourage people bringing in animals to spare their lives, how to respond if the situation grew volatile and how to—at the very least—mark the animal to help count the lives lost.

There have been signs, however, that the barbaric tradition is nearing an end. The Indian court banned the transport of animals from India into Nepal, which helped reduce the number slaughtered. And the temple agreed to not kill any animals offered for sacrifice after the festival. Instead, officials have been confiscating the animals (around 80, as of early February) and caring

for them until rescuers can place them.

This gives Gautam hope. Confidence radiates from his voice as he talks about the festival in 2019. “It will be bloodless,” he says. “This was the last one.”

In this edited interview with deputy editorial director Emily Smith, he talks about why he continues to fight for the animals.

What do you think has helped advance the cause to end the sacrifices?

Our aggressive move to work directly with the temple committee, which was criticized by many people, actually—not many people believed that approach would work. But I think that approach is the key that changed the whole face of the campaign and is the reason for the achievement we have now.

How do you approach the difficult task of persuading people to end such a long-standing tradition?

The thing is that those hosting the sacrifice aren’t only temple committee people. Some are local political activists. These people are also fathers, mothers. They have that “normal people” side of being a human being. I would say that showing respect is my fundamental way of doing things.

Do you ever get discouraged?

You can’t get mad because it’s not personal. As long as you’re focused toward achieving what you want to achieve, you don’t mind how one particular section of discussion went, even if it went really, really bad. You can’t give up.

What was your message to the temple?

We were persistent; we were really consistent. We kept talking about how things could change locally, how the face of the local area—not just the village but the whole area—could change if they could give up sacrifice. We could help them promote Gadhimai as a peaceful, powerful deity and promote tourism, because for now there’s literally nothing. It’s just a once-every-five-year deal where a few people make loads of money. We gave them all the prospects, and we gave them the idea of how it could be once they bring us on

board on one condition—that they give up the sacrifice.

What other prospects did you propose?

One thing I proposed that they liked is to set up a museum where we can put everything that is documented about Gadhimai as a sacrifice, a tradition, as a part of culture. Visitors can come and see, they can talk about their traditions and culture, but it remains in a non-violent way, as a reminder of what Gadhimai was and all the transformation we were able to achieve. The building of a school is part of the deal; I'm in negotiations with the Indian embassy about it. We're taking very careful steps, but there are certain things that I believe we can do and we must do.

What can people in the U.S. do to help?

Once we have reached an agreement that we see as viable and reasonable, we plan to share it with the world, and we will need fundraising. It will be a fixed amount and properly audited, to set an example, so everyone sees how a global partnership can result in a wonderful end to a disaster.

What other issues are you facing in Nepal?

The issue that worries me most is the commercialization of meat products. Poultry farming is getting really, really scary. Pig farming is on the rise—it's because of the exposure to commercialized animal products. Nepal's economy depends on people going abroad for work, which is where they

get that kind of exposure. People who didn't have any idea about what sausage was 10 years ago, now they know about sausage, ham, salami and all of those kinds of things. We still have a long way to go before we amass anything like factory farming, but it's growing and that's a genuine concern. In the U.S. and in Europe, people are more focused on phasing out what's already there. We are trying to stop it from happening.

What inspired you to care about animals?

I really don't know. I was 7 years old when I first learned about Jane Goodall and since then I've been following it. I was unknowingly an animal tormentor, actually, because I wanted all different kinds of animals close to me. I was 9 years old when I captured my first snake; I was 11 when I caught my first cobra. It's amazing I'm still alive, actually [laughs]. It took some time before I realized that it was wrong, and with some parental guidance, my vision is what it is now.

With the other animal welfare issues in your country, what drives you to continue to work to stop the sacrifice at Gadhimai?

As long as this keeps happening, anything else you do [as an animal advocate] doesn't make any sense. Any person who is concerned about humanity, any person who is concerned about animals—if that person had stood like I stood in 2009 at Gadhimai, you could not have worked any way but the way I've worked.

IN GOOD FAITH

THE HSUS DHARMIC LEADERSHIP COUNCIL LEADS BY EXAMPLE

WITH THEIR SHARED principles of compassion and nonviolence, The HSUS and the Dharmic religions make a perfect match.

"There are just so many natural synergies with this community," says Christine Gutleben, HSUS senior director of faith outreach. "We're all sort of wondering why we didn't do this sooner."

The HSUS Dharmic Leadership Council, which launched last year as an affiliate of the organization's Faith Advisory Council, has 12 members who represent Dharmic religions such as Hinduism and Jainism.

Members of the council and Hindu American Seva Communities met with leaders from the U.S. government in October at the White House to discuss the Humane Cosmetics Act. The council also encourages meat reduction by reminding the Dharmic community of its dietary traditions, spreads word about the achievements of The HSUS and helps advance the work of Humane Society International's office in India.

Gutleben says the council's prestigious credentials—members include doctors, scholars and corporate and religious leaders—give The HSUS insight into how to strengthen its relationships in the medical, faith and business communities, and ultimately help more animals.

"It's wonderful for us," she says. "They provide really strategic and invaluable guidance."

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In one of the nonviolent traditions of the Gadhimai Festival, people ring bells to call worshippers to pray.