

The Twenty Nation Essay and Short Story Program

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It has given me much pleasure to work with this international anthology of short stories and essays. Authors from 20 countries, aged mostly in their teens, share with us sixty short stories and essays. Based on issues related to mountain life and environments, the heartbeats of these stories and essays flow from the Australian continent through the deserts of the Middle East to the high Himalayas. They represent rich cultures and generations of learning.

I have enjoyed reading and selecting these creations from around the world. I feel the flow of their energy and spontaneity: the creations are refreshingly fun, delightful, and informative. I wanted to encourage and involve children from many different nations to share their thoughts and feelings with us. Some of the stories are above the standards of excellence that I had envisioned, most of them are admirable, there are some which stand for the active participation of young people from different parts of the world.

I feel the program has generated awareness among participants from diverse cultures and traditions. It has emphasized the need for them to care for their environment. Some of them have expressed curiosity in knowing about other participants and being able to access and read the creations of their "friends". I think the program has been able to nurture values in the participants: values that make them appreciate new cultures and their own national and local identities.

The response from these young people has been infectious. Just two days ago, Ibragimov Odil from Kazakhstan wrote to me asking for information on the book and related photographs for publication in their class newsletter. He wondered if he and his friends could send in more stories! Many of them feel "honored" in being able to participate in this program and look forward to seeing their work published in print for the first time.

I remember the time I received the first submission from Russia. I excitedly read it aloud to my colleagues. Maria Barannikova had written "They [mountains] look like the steps to heaven." I knew that instance that this project could be nothing less than inspirational. Many of the stories and essays in this book borrow from local religions, legends, or cultures. They talk about the beginning of creation long before humans existed and remind us of our deep connection with



mythologies. Some of the stories – especially those from Kazakhstan, Japan, and Bangladesh – have been put together through research and study. Among them, Sri Lanka's Rasika Akalanka Akuramboda describes the Khumbu region so explicitly that one believes she has already been to Nepal! Stories like "Mountain of Sleeping Giants" by Atish Kumar from Fiji or "Poor Man and the Beetle" retold by Nek Bano, Ashima, and Rahat from Pakistan introduce us to local folklore. Some of the stories take us far into the realms of celestial imagination: as Massalina Madina from Kazakhstan writes, "Mountains are the abode of gods".

Participants have also come up with refreshing characters: they are as memorable as they are genuine. It is easy to shape these characters in my mind. I instantly fell in love with Ploddy the Panda in Lauren Taylor's "Black and White." Then there is Mizanoff from Ananna Madhury's "The Birds." I also like Nusrat's conceptualization of the "Autobiography of Mont Blanc". The fun and adventure in "The Mountain of Dreams", the comic twist in "Gold on the Mountain", and the surprise ending in "The Challenge" are other elements I especially enjoyed.

It has taken me two years to come up with this book. Let me describe to you how this book and products related to this multi-national project came about. In the beginning of 2000, Spiny Babbler received some support from the Asia Pacific Mountain Network for this project. I gladly accepted the responsibility entrusted in me to carry it out. I started out by sending out invitations to various organizations and individuals to participate in the project. In my effort to reach out to countries from varying topographical and climatic regions, I had to cross many cultural and geographical boundaries, albeit through letters, faxes, and emails. The project was originally supposed to concentrate on countries of the Asia Pacific region. Gradually, over the months, it began to gain a larger coverage.

It was easy to access data on schools in territories like Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore through the internet. I was able to send invitations to many educational institutions of these countries and anticipated an influx of contributions. Some of them required stringent follow-up and help from key individuals.





With non-English speaking countries, there was an obvious problem: participants had to write in a language that was not their own. Zohra Khanum went out of her way to coordinate with the young people of Nasirabad and Hassanabad in Northern Pakistan, the effort resulted in distinctive stories such as "Eat Spoon". A teacher who was teaching basic writing skills to second year English-major students in China explained, "We do not have a writing course in the first year although I have been suggesting it for at least six years... I had to get permission from my 'boss' to tell the students about the contest." The response from some of these countries was most unexpected. Beautifully written stories came from Kazakhstan, Russia, Japan, and Iran. I think that the help that many teachers, especially English teachers, gave their students in writing these stories and essays was crucial.

At the end of eight months, supposed to be the original project phase, I seemed only part way through. The summer break, final exams, and winter holidays in schools and colleges impeded progress. As there were still many tasks left to be done and more places to reach out to, I requested for time extension and got down to identifying other communication sources. By this time, I felt it was important to reach out to countries at the national level. I mailed invitations to government bodies. At first, I was skeptical as to whether any of them would acknowledge my enquiry let alone respond to it. It came as a nice surprise when I received letters from Turkey, Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Fiji, and Thailand. Some of them forwarded my invitation to their colleagues and most expressed interest in not only this but similar intercultural projects if they were to be held in the future. They genuinely hoped that the work of their young people would come up to the project's expectations and be included in the products brought out by the project.

Mid-way through the project, I was struck by an idea – what better way than to reach out to young people than through the young people themselves. Through the help of a friend, I was able to contact different youth leaders ranging from Australia to Vanuatu. The response from them was very encouraging. Rieko Kubota from Sophia University, Japan, remarked that it was more interesting to write a short story than watch a documentary regarding environmental issues. Joyce Koh from Singapore expressed interest in continuing to be in touch with an organization like Spiny Babbler. And Charith Pelpola from Sri Lanka commented that the programme qualified to be publicized internationally and helped the process. Being the editor of *Pen and Ink*, a publication of PEN International's Nepal Chapter, also helped: the organization has 120 chapters in seventy-four countries. Among them, the Taiwanese, Australian, and New Zealand Pen Centers agreed to disseminate information regarding the project and gave wholehearted support.

I tried to see whether countries like Laos, Myanmar, Afghanistan, or Iraq could be involved as well. I contacted Voices in the Wilderness. I learned that schools in the country lacked basic infrastructure and most probably would not be in a position to participate properly. Though I feel the more inaccessible and politically remote nations are, the more necessary it is for them to become part of intercultural exchange processes like *Mountains Forever*. However, time had come, sadly, to start wrapping things up.

I also feel the young people participating in this project have been patient with me and the project. I remember myself the impatience of youth. The project that started two years back and its visible outputs are coming up now. Some of the children needed certificates of merit, supposed to be sent out with the contributors' copies, for university and college applications a year back. As they mailed information for the contributors' section, I began to know more about them personally.

Now came the difficulty in selecting stories. Due to the constraints placed by the publication team, I had to select and choose. In many ways dropping a story was a difficult process. Even though some stories did not make it into this book, in my heart I appreciate the effort and contribution of these young people to this project.

Once the stories were put together, Spiny Babbler prepared the publication *Young Minds of Twenty Nations*. Upon discussion with Greta Rana, Head of Communication and Outreach at ICIMOD, another book, *Mountains Forever*, with color paintings to enhance the stories was suggested and the centre's publication unit proposed to support such an endeavor. Four months of full-time work by Param Meyangbo at Spiny Babbler resulted in the production of sixty-one vibrant paintings. I feel that these paintings back-up the children's creations artistically and effectively. A website was prepared within www.spinybabbler.org. Neil Walton at Helvetas Swiss Development Agency also agreed to support the publication of this new color book. I am thankful for their support.

Looking back on the project, I realize that it was a remarkable process for me. I was able to initiate a conscious effort for multi-national awareness-building and outreach. Government bodies, youth and environmental organizations, educational institutions, and individuals contributed much to this effort. The program reached out to some children living in remote areas.

I believe that coordination and encouragement from many individuals and organizations, including my colleagues at Spiny Babbler, and, especially, young women and men, have made *Mountains Forever* and this multi-nation project possible. I have rejoiced in being a part of such a creative and stimulating experience and I am glad that, through this book, we can share and delve into a fantastic world created by the youth of twenty nations.

