



Dambar's Factory

Text & Photo By JULIA HORTON

Dambar's Factory – Child labor strictly prohibited. So states the sign outside Dambar Bishwakarma's silversmith factory in a surprisingly ostentatious house not far from the famous Swayambhunath 'monkey temple' in Kathmandu. What goes unwritten is that this thriving business is the only one of its kind in Nepal run entirely by Dalit people – and that neither Dambar nor his factory would be here today if it were not for a chance meeting with a good Samaritan.

It has been 20 years since doctors diagnosed Dambar with tuberculosis and told him to say his last goodbyes to his family. Medication was readily available, but as Dalits, his parents could not afford to pay for the treatment so the family accepted his fate. Fortunately, and not long after, Dambar found himself talking to a Dutch tourist, Jos Bus, at the jeweler's shop where he was working. Appalled by the situation, the visitor insisted on arranging lifesaving treatment.

After 18 months, Dambar recovered fully. Jos then offered to help him establish a fair trade silversmith shop so he could escape the traditional low paid blacksmith trade from which his family eked out a meager living. An old photograph shows just how delighted Dambar was to become a silversmith as he looks up from his work, grinning broadly into the camera.

Now 46, and still smiling, he employs around 20 other Dalit men who skillfully craft exquisite silver jewelry for high profile clients around the world. These include UNICEF, the international children's charity, which recently commissioned specially designed cufflinks from the factory. There is an air of quiet concentration about the place as the men tap away, painstakingly creating intricate designs in brilliant silver. In Dambar's office, a floor above the factory, a glass cabinet filled with rows of beautiful bracelets, pendants, rings and earrings takes up an entire wall while a few personal designs for his regular customers lie on the table ready for delivery.

Dressed smartly, Dambar welcomed me into the building, which is also his family home, and Jos' when he is in Nepal. Dambar tells me the story of his life again: "I never thought this would happen. It was like a blessing from god to meet Jos when he came to the silversmith's to buy some gifts. He wanted to use dollars, which is not legal in Nepal so I was sent with him to exchange the amount into rupees. He was very interested in the Dalit community and when he found out that I needed treatment, he said he would provide it. If I had not met him, I would not be here today."

Still appearing amazed by the turn his life took that day, Dambar is all too aware of the discrimination that still blights fellow Dalits,

including his own family in the village of Khadkabhanjyang, a four-hour drive from the capital. "My village is still the same. One of my brothers still lives there and works as a blacksmith, making iron tools for Brahmins. He still cannot touch the Brahmins, go into their houses or drink their water. I feel very sad about that." Thanks to his good fortune, talent and hardwork, Dambar was able to get a loan to send his son to train to be a pilot, meanwhile his daughter hopes to be a doctor. He also helped pay for chemotherapy for a nephew diagnosed with cancer. Although Dambar has made several business trips to Holland and America, he remains loyal to Nepal and to his caste.

"In my community people think I am a lucky man. I have my own power, my own business, my own home. Although I like visiting other countries for business and to see family and friends, I want to stay in Nepal. Here I can do something for myself and for others," says Dambar. Beaming enthusiastically yet again, he shows me a sparkling new pendant that he has just designed especially for Nepal Tourism Year 2011, hoping to market it here.

It would seem a fitting way for Dambar's Factory to finally break into the Nepali marketplace. ■

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