

EPISODE 1 - Solidarity networks

Thomas Unger (host)

Ram Bhandari

Voiceover 00:06

Hi, this is *To the Righthouse*. A new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights, from skepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy. We discuss human rights, riding waves but also signaling where the light is. This podcast we recorded in Venice, Italy on the island of Lido, at the Global Campus headquarters.

Thomas Unger 00:31

Hello and welcome to *Survivor Moments for Justice*, a new podcast series of the Global Campus of Human Rights. My name is Thomas Unger, and in this first episode, I have the big pleasure to talk with Ram Bhandari about solidarity networks. Ram has decades of experience really working with survivor networks in Nepal and elsewhere, particularly with the families of the disappeared and victims of conflict with whom he developed strategies to advance just telling and justice. Ram, who is also a friend of mine, is also the founder of the international network of victims and survivors of serious human rights violations called Inovas. Ram, it's a real pleasure to be with you here today.

Ram Bhandari 01:18

Thank you, Thomas. It's my pleasure too.

Thomas Unger 01:21

So, I think really, it's important and key to lead conversations these days to promote human rights and rule of law. So, a bit conversation against the current backlash. And I think we will come back to this global backlash against human rights and human rights in a minute. But let me start a bit more personal, and I hope you forgive me for that Ram. You know, you have been a victim, also of human rights violations in your in your home country, in Nepal, and what would be interesting for me and maybe also for the listeners, is what was the moment when you got active? And why did you get active? What inspired you, what, who supported you? If you could contextualize a little bit the moment of agency for us? Yeah, that would be nice.

Ram Bhandari 02:14

Thank you, Thomas. So, I would introduce myself also as a victim, survivor and activist. You know, in the victims movement, and as a leader of a victim movement and activist, I can tell you, the fight for justice is hard and it is too long. And then, in my personal case, Nepal, went through 10 years civil war between 1996 and 2006 and during the conflict period, I was myself became victim. And my father was a school teacher, he was forcibly taken away and disappeared by the State forces in 2001 and after that, I became involved in the, I mean, truth seeking and human rights advocacy, and gradually, I became an activist and a visible leader in the victims moment. That's my very brief history from my past, and then it's very well connected with the Nepal's conflict and post conflict victims

movement that I mean where I stand today as a leader of the victims movement and practitioners in the grassroot activism, and also involved in international activism. And the motivation is often a personal and emotional and then, and as I mentioned earlier, that it's an emotional attachment to the cause, as well as inspiration from the continued fight led by victims and their collective action in different places, we need the long term support and solidarity of others to advance the movement and sustain victims agenda for justice, I mean. And also in the long process of the Justice struggle, of course, victim and survivors, they seek for support and solidarity from like minded individuals, organizations, network and international agencies in the movement, those I mean, who are and working in human rights and the and the peace, and the peace activism.

Thomas Unger 04:29

Yeah, no, I think that's, I mean, that's also, how I got to know you, I mean, we also did both, I think the master here in in Venice now of the global, Global Human Rights campus. So, we share that, that experience also, and I think both of us have worked for so many years on human rights. And what really strikes me is what you said about the importance of movement, so I mean to that victims survivors have this kind of like internal need to connect, to share, to be, to be together, no, and I think that is always that gave me a lot of inspiration. But I always, in conversations we had, I know that you are also really part of doing something about, you, you basically have set up movements, you worked with movements. I think that was always key to your work. Could you say a few words, maybe, about what the contributions of these movements are? Why are they so important? Why are they so relevant? Also today.

Ram Bhandari 05:37

I think this is important, you know, to raise, I mean support, and also to gain momentum and, as seen, in the movement, and the victims and survivor are, I mean associated within each other, and the associate victim groups turn collective resistance has helped transform victims into social leaders and political actors in many context and gain, as seen, in their collective advocacy and victim movements have contributed to extend in the fight against impunity through formal and informal initiatives, through policy reforms, institutional set of, I mean, public saying and social intervention, kind of modality, also in their in their activism. I think, you know, my daily work is usually driven by the motivation to create a justice atmosphere and to help others. I am emotionally, you know, I'm involved in the rights of the people, and there is struggle for justice at local context and international situations, it comes from our own act that produces the power of love, compassion, solidarity and helping. I mean helping other human beings through connecting with their cause, which is larger. I mean healing power for everyone around us that I think so I mean, I mean we need to link with, I mean different actors in activism, in in policy making and also in academia. So, these are important to link all actors and to gain solidarity and then strengthen solidarity discourse in the process.

Thomas Unger 07:19

And I think you said something so crucial is that, you know, we often see victims as this helpless individual we need to help, you know, we need to take care of, but what the story you are telling is one of a very, of agency. Is a story of making a difference to contributing to change. Can you give a

specific example? Maybe also from your own country? What you have done, what showed this agency just as a source of inspiration, maybe?

Ram Bhandari 07:53

Yes. I mean, we have plenty of examples. You know, in this questions, you know, there have been some specific achievements of the victims movement. For example, in Nepal, victims and survivors advocacy has resulted in changes to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, the exposure of and then disbanding of politicized commission in our context and the legal fight has been positive and held victim advocacy; the political activism transform victims becoming visible political actors in the policy lobbying. The local governments in Nepal have been very supportive to the local victims, both formal and informal actions led by survivor groups, the effective and local political power of victims movements have gained political agency, and he repowered them as important actors in the field for victims movements, theory, theory of change. You know, these are some of the examples. And also however, in the long battle of justice, we do not yet have full accountability the government's attempt to forget and to provide amnesty to the perpetrators has created new conflicts and tensions in different context. On the other hand, various community have produced leaders the victims and survivors transformed by action to impact and questioning the issue of accountability.

Thomas Unger 09:23

What, what I always valued, thank you, Ram, I think that that was very illustrative. And what, what I always valued in working with victims movements, in different in different contexts, is that, like victims movements, are able to juggle so many different needs and demands, you know, when the higher you go up internationally, we start to siloing, you know?

We start to say, look, I mean only criminal justice is important or only reparation is important. But I always found that victims have this ability to kind of have this very holistic, broad agenda around justice. And I mean in particular, also when you look at at an organization like Inovas, the one you have been founding, the different needs, the different experiences, and they can all be connected in a way, no. And I think that is very inspiring. I think from victims movements, I have seen that you can overcome this silos, and you kind of get to the real needs victims, victims have. But let me move now, I mean Ram, I mean we are also, we live in a changing world, I mean, you just need to look at the news and you see that impunity is normalized today, again, the global legal structure is disappearing, this was a structure victims put a lot of emphasis in, you know, to be recognized and to fight for, but it's dismantled in front of our eyes.

How do you see this, do you is the class half empty, now? Do we need to be pessimistic? How do you see the global changes and shifts from your perspective?

Ram Bhandari 11:12

I think it's very disappointing. I mean, when we see and examine the role of powerful states and there, I mean in action, you know, in implementing international law and human rights standards, it's very disappointing. But on the other side the very marginalized populations, victim and survivor led movements, they are rising. You know, they are creating their own spaces and momentum. They are intervening and contributing in policy reforms and also making some justice environment. These are, these are, I mean, exciting. And also how have victim movements, you know, in Nepal and

outside Nepal, contributed to fight against impunity. I mean, for example, you know that the Syrian victims movements has raised global attention, you know, and become crucial to set up independent inquiry commission both at local level and the international level, and they are playing important role, you know, even outside Syria. And also, it's very inspiring to learn from the Latin American you know, family led, survivor led movement, they have contributed to change global policies and then create international mechanism for justice.

These are very important. And again, I mean, we live in a time of unprecedented human rights crisis, and this seems that everywhere in the world, in different contexts, different actors, such as powerful states to non-state militias, to international terrorist groups are abusing human rights on an unprecedented scale. Ongoing conflicts around the world today have tested the very limits of the international rules based order around the war and conflict calling into, I mean, question the international community's ability or even willingness to hold to account perpetrators of aggression, I mean, human rights savages, brutal counter terrorism campaigns and insurgencies, coups and crackdowns have seen people around the World and endure the scourges of arbitrary arrest, impose disappearances, healings, rape and other forms of gender based violence and other serious I mean human rights and averages, I think. I mean I'm in this also. I mean I think myself and I ask and often, how does this impact the work of victims and their movement has impacted a lot, you know, too. I mean and the weekend, and then I mean keeping, I mean passive I mean victims movement and isolated from mainstream and without moral, technical and financial support and facilitations, you know, by the other I mean different organization, and then there are some, I mean, impacts. But I'm, even though you know victims survivors, you know they are leading the, I mean movements, and I'm, I'm standing for their rights together, you know, it's, I mean, there is a greater connection, you know, between victims and survivors from different parts of the world. That's why, as you mentioned earlier, that how, I mean Inovas, encourages and then empowers each other and then to support each other, you know, this kind of I mean Solidarity Network and solidarity discourses between other groups, between academia, policy makers, expert agencies, you know. I mean we need this. I mean more kind of solidarity approaches.

Thomas Unger 14:41

Yeah, so you're still calling for this solidarity networks, basically, you know, and that could, that includes victims, survivors, but also other actors that believe in injustice, human rights fighting impunity, and they have it more difficult today, because their space is shrinking or slowly disappearing. But I think we have experiences no of the past. I always think, you know, the idea of resistance against the impunity is nothing new.

So I mean, their networks have existed in the past, and they are existing now, and they will in the existing in the future. So, I think that gives give some hope, at least, but you also see that the current trend is making your space to work smaller. Is that correct?

Ram Bhandari 15:29

Yeah, it's, I mean, there are many challenges, and they're very narrow spaces in many cases, in the past experiences, even the victim survivors, created spaces, I mean, have been stolen, manipulated in many ways, you know, on behalf of victims, but I mean, you know, out of the victim's participation, you know, that's the I mean another, another. I mean shared realities. You know, in the different

context, it can all feel, I mean, overwhelming, as if there is a little hope left to end impunity. But rather than asking, I mean, what is the point in fighting for justice when so many injustices are being perpetrated on a regular basis, the better question is, what is the best way to fight for justice and accountability, you know, and then to answer this, this question is collective solidarity,

Thomas Unger 16:21

Yeah, collective solidarity. And I think if you could say a few words about Inovas, because this is really something interesting newer groups from different countries came together to form a net, a network, if you could say just a few words about this, how did this come about? What is Inovas is currently doing? Would be nice to have a concrete idea or example here.

Ram Bhandari 16:51

You know, it's very clear that the Inovas was born, you know, in this context, you know, in the, I mean, overhaul challenge, and then and then scrutinizing the victims space at local and international level. And then, you know, still the old, you know, very, I mean, has done less, you know, for the victims and survivors, and then many organizations, I mean peace activist and workers, you know, they, I mean, often I speak on behalf of victims, but not for the victims, and not empowering them as a leaders. And then I mean, they have lost their essence. You know, that was the reason. And then in this same case, the victim and survivor activists from different contexts, they have come together, and then they share their grievances, and then they found themselves. And then maybe they can lead international campaign or movement purely led by victim and survivors. And that way, I mean, Inovas born to represent them in the global policy forums and also to intervene in the you know justice movement, you know together. And also, I mean, as, I mean, to reflect the concept of collective solidarity. And then Inovas born. And then now, I mean, Inovas has more than 20 members from around the world. And then they are sharing each other, they are helping each other and also they are involved in policymaking, they are involved in policy lobbying. They are involved in, you know, reforming global justice courses, you know, in ICC in the United Nations level, in the regional bodies, including European Union and African Union in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East, in, you know, today, in conflict zones from Gaza to Ukraine to Ethiopia.

There are, I know where I'm encouraging individual victim activists, their small groups, their survivor led movements, they're all coming together. So it's a real international voice to represent their agenda also, and also to gain international agencies, and this is a kind of, I mean, Inovas and acts today, as a Solidarity Network to represent victims and survivors, and then they are, you know, giving international voices and global solidarity, you know, to the moments around the world and also in the past, in the recent past, I mean, we have also, I mean, produce some knowledge in terms of, I mean, victim center reparation, and then victim participation in justice processes. You know, these are very, I mean, important things for the victims movement, what kind of reparation they need and seek for, and then what kind of participation they look for in the justice processes. And, you know, so the real victim participation. And then even, I mean, Inovas raises for the structural participation. You know, they need their own representation in the Justice mechanism, in justice bodies that both international and local context. So these are very important. And Inovas also producing knowledges and also showing the what kind of. You know, facilitation they need, what kind of partnership and strategic support they'll, I mean, look for. And so from the very beginning, and Inovas, as has developed a

very exemplary partnership and with the and one organization based in The Hague called impunity wards, I mean, and Inovas and infinity was working together and then swing the other organization and the world that look, I mean, what kind of strategic partnership victims organization and their network need, how we can build, you know, the partnership, and then how, how we can develop some sort of partnership with another organization. Many victim organization, and they have failed that and in their own context, in different regions, in many cases, they have been manipulated by powerful actors, you know, and donors, and also the big, I mean, NGOs, you know. And then they failed that, you know, marginalized. They failed that they have no voice. No, I mean equal partnership. And no equal role in building agencies and so now I mean Inovas is just. I mean practicing how, you know, victim and survivors can, can build capacity themselves, you know. And I may as a new leader justice riders in these austere struggles and so and they can lead, I mean, they can produce knowledge, and then they can build partnership and together. Also, I mean, they can, you know, create some spaces at different level, from local to national to international level. And also, I mean, they can produce some knowledge based on their understanding, based on their circumstances, based on their things. So Inovas also kind of developing, I mean victims and survivors movement strategy, not only strategies, but also it. I mean it is also, I'm developing their own terminology in the justice field, you know, and so the victim participation and the reparation this, I mean a guiding, you know, guiding principles you know, they have produced. And then now also, I mean we have published, you know, and disseminated, I mean, widely, on different languages. And then any persons or movements, groups you know, and they would be interested, you know, to learn about victim participation and guiding principles and the reparation policies for the victims in post conflict. I mean context, and you can find it in different languages, in Spanish, in Arabic, in French and English and also, and we are translating it into an action and implementation, and so we are disseminating, I mean, widely, up to the, you know, various victim groups around the world.

Thomas Unger 22:49

Yeah, it's super. I mean, when I listen to you, it's, it's, it's obviously, I mean, we have this grim picture over us, and, and, and which is, which is this, this kind of changing world, world based on influence zones, interest based, less multilateralism, but you really depict an alternative world.

And I think that's really nice to hear that, that victims should be part of this alternative thinking. And I think in the past, I think that was one of the big criticism is that victims were marginalized a bit on the sideline. And I think, since I know you, you always tell me also that that you know victims can be experts, because they know their own struggle. I mean, they basically have lived, and they also know what change means, no. And I think to create these alternatives, in a world where we think there are no alternatives, than power politics is very, very important, and that moves me already to the last part, maybe, to think about avenues, pathways.

How can we challenge what's currently going on globally? No. And I mean, you mentioned solidarity, you mentioned participation, you mentioned expertise of victims that they should be heard. How should we do that? What processes needs to be there? What structures do we need to create? It seems that the UN is in a crisis. The would have been always the classical kind of avenue we take, but it's becoming less and less relevant. And unfortunately, I believe in the UN, but it has less and less teeth, or is absent in a lot of conflicts. So what to do? What alternative processes to create where to go. You mentioned the regional level. You mentioned the local level. Explain to us a little

bit pathways you see, concrete pathways or processes you think we should take to challenge the status quo.

Ram Bhandari 24:57

In my experience, the victims and survivors-led movements around the globe. You know, both at local and national level, in many context, they have already built and created alternative path to justice. That is, I mean, they have a vision. You know, vision for justice, what justice does look like. They have defined themselves. But the world has not, I mean, has done not so far. I mean for their, you know, for them to listen, and so, I mean, we need to create more spaces, and then we need to create more discourses on this. And then it should be interdisciplinary. And then, we all actors must, must keep victims at the center. You know, these are essential. I mean, whatever we call and participation agency or their role to be increased, and these are important. But the victims and survivors work, and their movements around the world today is essential for the collective fight to keep their justice agenda alive. This is very important. I mean, we need to keep alive the agenda, I mean, what they seek for and to sustain survivors-led struggles, to secure their rights and to enhance their role in justice processes to create this kind of discourses, you know, I mean, I mean, I again, focus solidarity discourses across the world, you know, between different actors, between victims and experts, between victims and policy makers, between victims and donors, between victims and the different I mean, donor agencies, including the United Nations. Why I mean UN bodies failed in the past? No, the I mean, things are very clear that they haven't heard much from the victims. For example, the United Nations and working group on enforced disappearances was created by the efforts of Latin American mothers the, you know, Plaza de Mayo, you know, mothers of the Argentina and also some victims moment from Latin American context. They created some momentum, and then they impacted, you know, to come up with the working group ideas, but in the long run, I mean, when we look at it, in the past 40 years, today, is the I mean very I mean it's a passive, I mean it's a senseless, and then not, I mean beneficial for the victims families and the survivors. So these are very clear there. So all the agencies, including United Nations, and all actors around the globe, they must listen voices of the victims, and they all actors must support survivor led struggles and movements to be advanced. These are important. Often their activism is at risk, you know. So another challenge is I and many other activists in the field. They daily face threats. I heard of abuses against them, imprisonment, torture, killings, disappearance, sexual abuses and other inhuman attempts to silence their voices that we have seen some of our activists, they are in exile, they are in prison, and they are, you know, I mean suffering every moment. So they need support, you know, they need protection, and then they need solidarity. And so these are an important things that I mean we need to listen, and I must not. I'm even give up the fight for the cause and human dignity. You know, this is also important, that dignity, when the movement is dignified, and you know, receive support from I mean different. I mean actors, and then they feel that I am not alone. And there are people taking care of these issues alive. And then there are people around the world, you know, and they speak out and everyday, you know, for the common cause, you know, to secure their rights, to protect their you know, defending the rights and also support them.

These are important things, and we need to continue giving a voice to the voiceless and making an international field against injustice and deep rooted impunity. So not only solidarity, but I mean, I

mean, we need to have a one international, sealed, I mean, where people feel that, oh, I'm protected. I'm also, you know, getting, you know, support from others. So I think these are important,

Thomas Unger 29:20

Yes, and I mean, I wanted to ask you, do you see someone that is listening? You have an example, maybe where you see, look, someone was listening? Is it? Is it that you could think about an example, maybe within international organizations or with certain donors or certain actors. Do you find places where victims are listened to?

Ram Bhandari 29:50

Yeah, there are few. But, I mean, there are, I mean people, organizations or, I mean experts. They are listening and they are taking care, you know, through their voices, through their writings, through their small support, through their encouragement and technical support and partnership like, I mean, Inovas receives a little support and technical strategies, strategic support from impunity was like this kind of organization. We need to produce and convince and develop partnership with more organization, even within organization level, even within donors group, even within international, I mean actors level. I mean also, I mean we need to find like minded people. And also kind of, you know, solidarity movement, you know, we need to strengthen solidarity movement, and then we need to strengthen and advance collective action and creating more spaces for victim and survivors like this, also for we need to create some support structures, even at international level, people's organization. I mean, you know, and then we can, you know, create and produce more I mean, spaces, you know, for them, I think these are important and also, and then we need to create some international movement and momentum for justice even, I mean, while loving, you know, I mean even at the United Nations level or organization level, donors level, governments level, and then we can find some and good people with dignity, those who respect, I mean human rights, Those who really interested to support marginalized groups and survivor led movements, you know, around the world, and then we can convince them, they can lobby. So that's why, I mean, we need to have a very strategic political activism to seek the current, I mean trends of I mean denial or some.

Thomas Unger 31:38

It's just because what you just said, it just, it just resembled a lot. What you said is that you need the political advocacy, no? Because for years, we were thinking human rights or justice could be engineered. No? you just put the project there. You, you know, you call in a few experts that try to fix the situation, but it's political work. Human rights, no? It is what you are also doing, and what you're also saying to increase the political work.

Ram Bhandari 32:12

Yeah. And I also believe that I mean what I'm doing, I mean what I'm you know, I'm advocating for. This is political because I mean even within. I mean human rights. I mean activism and human rights movement. We have a position, right, you know, and we don't support, and then we don't, you know, go through and perpetrators, you know, and we have a position, you know. And then we don't want inhuman action, you know. And then we seek, I mean dignity, dignified work in human rights movement. So that's why I would like, I mean my advocacy. I mean my I mean activism, and my

position is my politics. And so that's why I mean I talk about political agency. I talk about political activity. I mean activism. So that's why I mean we need to advance our political I mean spaces, also in policy making, in in transformative, I mean, changes and action, these are important in the both in survivor led movements and also in an entire human rights movement for justice.

Thomas Unger 33:12

Yes, absolutely. And I think that's really a clear way forward that you that you actually need to bring politics back again to our human rights work. No, and I think without that, it will not have meaning. It will not have impact. What I'm worried about, and maybe that's my Austrian apocalyptic side, is that funding is extremely decreasing, the appetite to support human rights rule of law is less and less, so, the struggle is a real one to win over again, the hearts and minds, but we're in a bit of a cold time and age. But what I'm thinking is that, you know, we see a lot of shifts, but shifts could also bring opportunities, no, and I think victims are always there in that opportunities to show us the way, you know,

Ram Bhandari 34:15

Yeah, I also believe that, you know, transformative change is inevitable. You know, we all are, I mean working for transformation, change, making some changes, and also making some, I mean small contribution, you know, in the field. I mean wherever. I mean we work for, I mean for some good reason. And so we all actors and ourselves, even as a human right activist, we need to re-empower the entire movement for justice at local level, national and international level, and then that's why it's like, and as I mean, discuss a lot about Inovas, it's like an intercontinental solidarity, you know, we need to develop that kind of, you know, I mean, international solidarity and all kind of these things, discourses we need to build, we need to produce some knowledge to change narrative. You know, this is also building narrative. Also very important that, you know. So that's why, I mean, we need to build some sort of, I mean, strong evidence based, narrative based on our position, that is our politics. And so that's why we need to involve in political activism, and also, I mean, we need to create a safe and collaborative spaces for victims and survivors in need.

Thomas Unger 35:30

Yes, absolutely. I think we're at this time and age where so much revisionism is taking place, you know, where we're basically denial of many crimes is on a daily basis. So I think what you said resembles a lot to changing narratives again, you know, to tell the truth? No, I think that's really at the heart also what we as a movement have been doing.

Let me ask you a final question. Next 10 years, what's your hope?

Ram Bhandari 36:01

I think the I mean whole, I mean human rights landscape and the global governance will be changed. And then, and also mostly the very I mean the people, those who lead, and then those who produce knowledge and build narrative, they will lead. And then human rights movement would be more stronger and more humane, and then we can build a better role to live.

Thomas Unger 36:27

Yes, I think that's a hope I would, I would share, and I want to also express my admiration and for you for your work. I think you, you have been a really inspiring person for me personally, and what we just heard now in this, in this short podcast, also for others, people should listen to you, and you have also been extremely active in the last years to travel around the globe, to basically talk and to be part of a lot of meetings and and so I admire also your energy. So it was a pleasure being with you today for for the short period of time. So I want to really thank you for the time you took and many more discussions to come.

Ram Bhandari 37:17

Thank you, Thomas, it's my great pleasure.