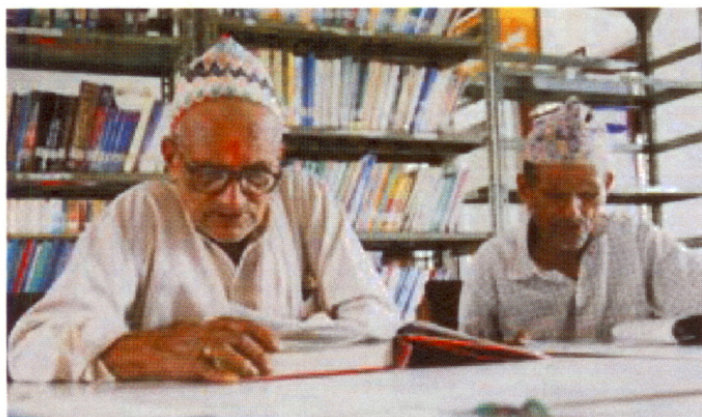


Reaching Rural Nepal

Source: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/GlobalDevelopment/GlobalLibraries/AccessLearningAward/2006Award/default.htm>

Possessing eight of the world's 10 highest peaks, Nepal is among the most mountainous countries in the world. It is also among the least economically developed: of its 28 million people, nine out of 10 live in rural areas, fewer than half have electricity, and one in three lives below the poverty line. Only half of adult Nepalis—and only one-third of women—can read or write.



Rural Education and Development (READ) Nepal received the 2006 Access to Learning Award for its innovative approach to building and sustaining village libraries. No-cost access to books and information technology is advancing learning and literacy in the country's underserved, rural population.

READ Nepal was founded in Kathmandu in 1991 to establish a library system that could help rural Nepalis advance their own educational, economic, and community development.



The Jhuwani Community Library

To furnish the first library, six porters carried 900 books on their backs for three days, crossing a 12,000-foot pass before setting down their bulky loads in the tiny village of Junbesi. From this modest start, READ has gone on to touch

the lives of more than half a million Nepalis from one end of the country to the other. To date, the organisation has built 39 libraries, some in very remote, mountainous villages.

Although each READ library reflects its particular community, all provide similar resources: 3,000 to 5,000 books written in Nepali; an adult reading area; a women's section; a section for teenagers and young adults; a children's section with educational books, games, and toys; a multimedia centre; and one to five computers (with Internet access where possible).

For its many achievements, READ Nepal received the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2006 Access to Learning Award in August. The Council on Library and Information Resources administers the \$1 million award, which READ will use to expand its already successful programme.

Building Sustainable Libraries

At the heart of READ's success is a model that ensures a sponsoring village conceives and nurtures each new library. The process begins when a community learns about READ (often by word of mouth) and submits a proposal. To foster strong local commitment, the community must contribute the necessary land and cover 20 percent of the library's start-up costs. In one village, a man donated his former home. In another, an illiterate woman gave land so her grandchildren could learn to read. Some villagers participate by selling a handful of rice.

Before construction begins, villagers develop a business plan to cover the anticipated costs of ongoing operations. Undertakings have included a furniture factory, a printing



The new bridge now shortens the walk to school

press, a stationery store, a grain mill, and a fishpond, as well as ambulance, X-ray, rickshaw, telephone, and storefront rental services. These businesses often raise considerably more money than the library needs. The extra funds have been used for additional community projects, such as child-care centres, health clinics, scholarships, and a bridge to shorten the two hours it took children in one village to walk to school.

To promote a sense of ownership, villagers manage the libraries themselves, with training and oversight from READ. Each village assembles a library management committee, reflecting diverse membership. Villagers also develop their own charter, open a bank account, select a building site, design the building, supervise construction, and select librarians.

Observes Rashidah Begum bt. Fazal Mohammed, a member of the award selection committee and retired chief librarian at Universiti Sains Malaysia Library, "This model ensures libraries' ongoing prosperity, independent of external aid."

Opening Doors to Learning and Knowledge



School girls read in Argyole Community Library

In the 15 years since its inception, READ has facilitated access to books, newspapers, computers, and other educational materials for hundreds of thousands of Nepalis. People who cannot read watch videos or listen to audiotapes, to learn about investment and microfinancing opportunities, for example. The libraries also serve as social hubs for child care, medical assistance, literacy training, women's discussion groups, AIDS awareness programmes, and farming and animal husbandry workshops. These vital social services are provided through READ partnerships with Nepali social welfare providers and university libraries, Nepal National Library, Asia Foundation, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

READ library activities are as diverse as the communities where they take place. In Danda, a village inhabited by

several ethnic groups, including Tharu, Newar, Magar, and Gurung, the library has sponsored a poetry festival and a writing contest for children. A women's literacy group in the village applies for loans to support small, home-based businesses, such as candle-making and raising goats.



Children read books from Jhuwani Library

In nearby Jhuwani, a local Tharu community leader devised a "10 Programme," which encourages women to borrow 10 books and 10 toys for 10 days. Since this outreach, more Tharu and other indigenous people use the library.

In the remote Mustang district of north-central Nepal, women often suffer complications during pregnancy and childbirth, reports villager Ratna Sherchan. But now, with the local READ library recommending books on women's health, "We are borrowing books to read out to other members during our meetings," she says. "Now the women here are gaining knowledge about the proper care to be taken in the stages of pregnancy."

Village libraries are contributing to a more equitable distribution of information and communication technology throughout Nepal. In a country grappling with political and economic instability, the libraries have become safe havens to enjoy community life and cultivate literacy, learning, and opportunity.

"I saw many men, women, and children reading books and using computers," says Rashidah Begum, who has visited several of the READ libraries. "What I remember most was the look of hope on their faces. They knew that what they were learning would change their lives for the better."

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