

On ASSIGNMENT

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Nepal

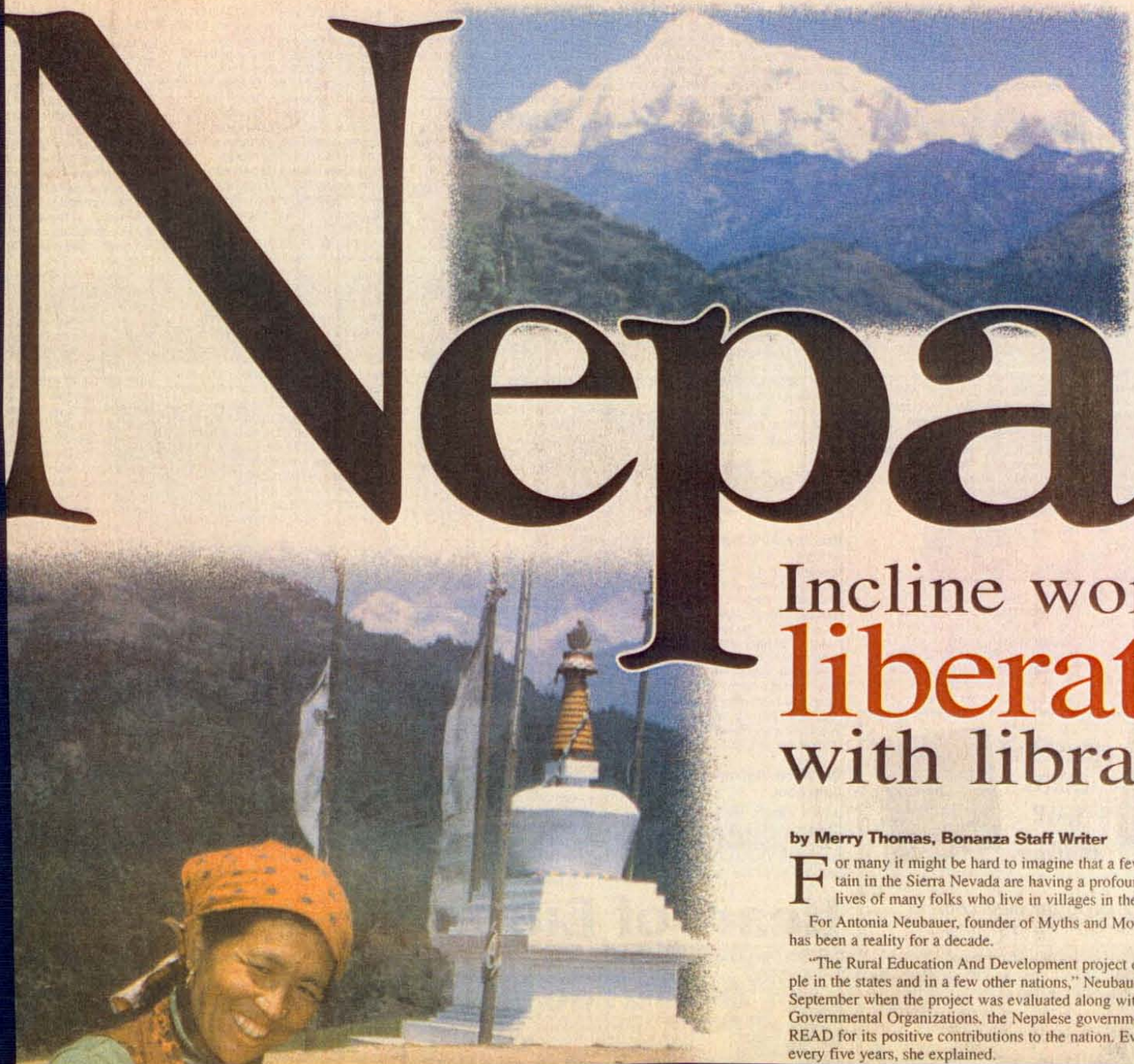
Incline woman
liberates
with libraries

by Merry Thomas, Bonanza Staff Writer

For many it might be hard to imagine that a few folks on a mountain in the Sierra Nevada are having a profound influence in the lives of many folks who live in villages in the Himalayas.

For Antonia Neubauer, founder of Myths and Mountains, the concept has been a reality for a decade.

"The Rural Education And Development project exists because of people in the states and in a few other nations," Neubauer said. In September when the project was evaluated along with other Non-Governmental Organizations, the Nepalese government highlighted READ for its positive contributions to the nation. Evaluation is done every five years, she explained.





▲ A WOMAN in rural Nepal husks rice in preparation for a meal.



▲ NEUBAUER, center, enjoys a meal with some of the women in Gauradaha.

"This was our second evaluation," she said. In one decade READ has built 20 libraries in Nepal, filling them with 30,000 books. Neubauer views the project as critical, recognizing the connection between education and a stable democracy.



▲ THE LIBRARY Planning Committee stands in front of a school, as the library construction was underway.

"Surrounded by India on three sides and China (Tibet) on the north, Nepal is not very far from Afghanistan ... [it is] a critical buffer between two great powers. For India and China and now for the United States, it is essential that Nepal remain a secure constitutional democracy, part of our strategic alliance. We can help strengthen Nepal through our efforts to create an educated society," Neubauer said.

Nepal has only a 30 percent literacy rate, she said. Traditionally, only the children of royalty were taught how to read. Politically, Nepal has been a constitutional democracy since 1991.

Since the royal family was assassinated only a few months ago, some

insiders say a Maoist cell has developed in the country. There has been a call for insurrection, Neubauer said.

"Funds have been sent. I don't know if they're from the Taliban or from Pakistan," she added. "This is the last thing

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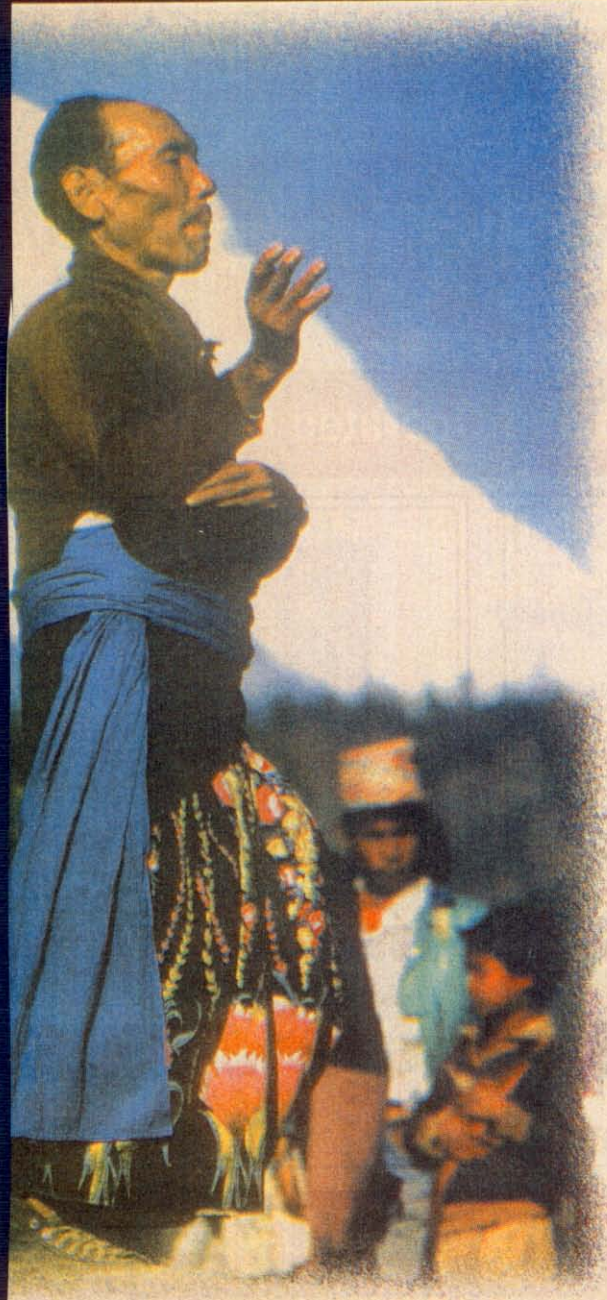
the Indians or the Chinese want along their borders."

It is too easy to fall into the attitude that those nations are not only far removed geographically but have no relation to us in the United States, she said. The reality of Afghanistan refutes that kind of thinking, however.

Kathmandu, the capital city, is really the nation's only city, Neubauer said. The other communities are cow towns. There is a university library in the city, but most of the books are in English and the stacks are closed. It isn't easy for those living in rural areas to get into Kathmandu.

"There are few roads. One main road runs North-South and another runs East-West. They can't have book-mobiles," she said. The terrain is difficult, rising from a hundred feet above sea level to the top of Mount Everest in less than a hundred miles.

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LAGE MAN performs in a traditional pun mugger dance. The snow capped Daulagiri is in the background.

"They can't even build roads," she explained. "It isn't even a place where people can actively use computers because electricity is not reliable."

The library project began after Neubauer's Nepalese friend Domi answered her question: "If you could do anything in your village, what would you like?" After a few moments of reflection, he replied, "I'd like to build a library in Junbesi."

In the fall of 1991, eight porters carried 900 books and a card catalog over the 11,800-foot Lamajura pass into the tiny town in the Solu District of Nepal. In May, 1992, the Junbesi Library opened with more than 800 books written in Nepali, a card catalog, and a librarian who had been trained in Kathmandu. The building was dedicated before a crowd of 100 villagers and their guests.

The total cost was \$9,200, with villagers donating the land and some labor.

Neubauer said villagers must come to READ with a proposal before they will begin a project.

Before they begin, they need to have a means of sustaining the library, she said. For instance, one village started an ambulance business. It's in the south where elevation is lower, she said. The service earns 10,000 rupees a month; it takes 5,000 rupees a month to support the library, she said.

Another village started a furniture factory. It brings in 13,000 rupees a month — enough to open a community center and donate



▲ TIBETAN MONKS pose near their hillside monastery.

▼ DURING A CEREMONY celebrating the cornerstone of the Moté Library, the Gauradaha women paint Neubauer's face. The face painting, called "giving a tilka," is a Hindu ritual of honor.



stipends for children to attend school as well as support the library.

One town's mill grinds sesame seed and millet. The women in the town said it's the first time in their lives they've had free time. Other villages have supported their li-

braries by storefront rentals, book stores and coffee stores.

Because of READ, libraries are becoming institutions throughout Nepal. One of the more interesting aspects of the evaluation by the country's social welfare council was its pointing out the program's impact on women's literacy.

READ's goal is to build 250 libraries throughout Nepal. Children in the American school in the Hague have been holding bake sales for the past five years to raise funds to send to the project.

"They came to visit the libraries they helped support," Neubauer said. Incline residents Nancy Binns and Art Schultz also have donated generously to the project, and former resident Jean Chang, who now resides in Los Angeles, also is actively supporting READ and is a member of the board of directors.

Most of the libraries cost only \$18,000 to \$20,000 to build, and that includes training a librarian, she said. READ is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization, so donations are tax-deductible. Because of minimal administrative expenses, more than 90 percent of the donations go directly to the work in Nepal.

Neubauer has planned a slide show for Incline residents after the holidays. The event is tentatively planned for 7 p.m. on Jan. 31, 2002, at the Aspen Grove facility. To receive a flyer through the mail, call her at (775) 831-5454.

For more information, visit the Web site, www.educationinnepal.org or www.mythsandmountains.com.