

LEARNING

LITERACY

# New libraries spring up in Nepal's furthest corners

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CONTRIBUTOR

TUKUCHE, NEPAL

Seven-year-old Pratikshaya Pariyar pushes away the hand of her 3-year-old sister, Beshy, from a picturebook full of kittens. "She doesn't even know how to turn the page of a book without bending it back," laments Pratikshaya.

But Pratikshaya knows a lot about books. She spends every afternoon after school in the library in Tukuche, a remote village in the Nepali Himalayas.

"It's my favorite place in the world," she says as she studies Richard Scarry's "Big Book of Things," repeating to herself the names of all the objects in both Nepali and in English.

Foreigners come to Nepal expecting a land of magic, mountains, and Brad Pitt.

But Nepal, in the midst of a standoff between Maoist rebels and the king, is short on resources and infrastructure, and largely dependent on foreign aid and foreign tourists.

Until two years ago, many Nepali districts had no public libraries where a child like Pratikshaya could rifle through a shelf of books or look things up in an encyclopedia.

Literacy rates in Nepal are 50 percent (closer to 35 percent among adult women), the legacy of a kingdom where, until the 1960s, access to education was limited to the royal family and its retinue.

But today, even in remote Himalayan villages like Tukuche, Marpha, and Jomson, where everything moves on donkeys and oxen, children and their parents are starting to know about the world, and they want in. That is where READ comes in.

In the past 15 years, READ, a nonprofit organization spearheaded by Antonia Neubauer of Incline, Nev., has been building libraries in rural and remote Nepali villages and towns.

**A determination to help**

It all began when Dr. Neubauer, who owns and operates an adventure travel company called Myths and Mountains, became captivated by Nepal during a trek.

But she was appalled to learn that there were no public libraries in the country outside of one or two in Kathmandu, the country's capital.

So in 1988 she established READ, an independent nongovernment organization with a mission of building community libraries in villages where, until now, books have been rare.

With READ's help, villagers in 35 Nepali towns - from the Indian border to the Chinese border - now have community libraries where small girls like Pratikshaya can explore a world farther away than a one-day walk down a mountain pass.

It costs about \$20,000 to build each library and to supply it with 3,000 to 5,000 books written in Nepali and English, says Neubauer.

But she didn't want to simply write a \$20,000 check to endow a library for a village. "I knew that if the libraries were to succeed in the long run, each Nepali village had to make an economic investment to build the library in the first place, and

to maintain it in the long run," she explains.

So READ requires that each village submit a proposal for a sustainable development project that will raise 15 percent of the building costs. It will also support the ongoing expenses of the library - new books, a living wage for a librarian, building maintenance, and, in the future, a computer center.

Village library projects range from an apple cider press, a wood shop complete with lathe, a preschool day care, and a fleet of public ambulances. Today all the sustainability projects are successful, and the libraries thrive.

**Celebrating the openings**

Recently, Neubauer and her Nepali colleagues from READ traveled to Jomson in the Annapurna mountain range in the Himalayas on Nepal's northern border with China, and to Jhuwani, a larger town on Nepal's Indian border, for two ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

In Jomson, after a feast and the usual speeches by politicians and members of the library building committee, the children were allowed into their library for the first time.



RICHARD SOBOL

**SOMETHING NEW:** Two girls examine books in the newly opened library in Jhuwani, Nepal. The library is one of 35 built by READ in remote Nepali villages where libraries didn't exist.

Like kids in the proverbial candy store, Jomson's young people flooded the reading room the instant the doors opened, pulling books from the shelves, cooing over the educational toys, spinning the globe.

But there was not pandemonium. The children carefully and lovingly handed each book to the next set of waiting hands.

All over the building, clusters of older children sat huddled on the floor reading stories out loud in both English and Nepali. Groups of young girls paged through fashion magazines, gazing at pictures of jewel-toned wedding saris.

A handful of serious teenagers sat at the long reading tables, taking notes from books with titles like "Respiratory Physiology" or "Basic Chinese Grammar."

A few days later, in the humid south valley of Nepal, there was another dedication ceremony. This one was for the Jhuwani library's new computer center, where a dozen terminals and workstations were arrayed in as orderly a fashion as they would be in any suburban high school classroom in the United States.

The library in Jhuwani was the first built by READ. Seven years later, the economic sustainability projects created and managed by Jhuwani Mothers' Library Committee - beekeeping, a public ambulance service, a dental clinic, and a blood donation program, among others - have allowed the community to triple the size of the library.

A sign on the wall of the Jhuwani library reads: The Five Rules of Library Science 1) Books Are For Use; 2) Every Book Has Its Reader; 3) Every Reader has his/her Book; 4) Save Time of Reader; and 5) A Library is a Growing Organism.

The fifth principle, READ organizers hope, will be proved by its libraries, as they continue to sprout and grow in villages all over Nepal.

■ For more information on READ, visit [www.readNEPAL.org](http://www.readNEPAL.org).