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HER WORLD

A Katmandu page-turner on how visitors can help

Noticing a lack of books and poor literacy, some travelers started up library programs in Nepal's impoverished but beautiful mountain region.

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Putalibazar, Nepal — IT'S often said that travelers visit Nepal because of the mountains but return because of the people. The generosity of the Nepalese goes straight to the heart and inspires reciprocation.

I found that in November when I visited a library in Putalibazar, a town about 30 miles south of Pokhara. The staff draped three chains of marigolds around my neck and gave me a blessing, or *tika*, in the form of a puff of red powder on my face. Later that day I went walking along Pokhara Lake in the foothills of the Annapurnas. People kept smiling at me and asking if I'd had a good day.

But visitors can't fail to notice poverty and disadvantage in a country hobbled by political instability and corruption, the Hindu caste system and inadequate education. The arrival of democracy and such organizations as the U.S. Peace Corps more than four decades ago brought hope and a degree of change. But, for a tangled web of reasons, much of the foreign aid has not gotten where it was meant to go and democracy foundered, leaving the Nepalese without many of the rights and services Americans take for granted.

There are, for example, few public libraries in Nepal. The lack of books, especially in remote villages, struck tour operator Toni Neubauer, president of Nevada-based Myths and Mountains, during her visits to Nepal. She began addressing the problem two decades ago by starting Rural Education and Development, or READ, a nonprofit organization that helps Nepalese communities build and equip libraries (www.readglobal.org).

"You cannot travel in places where people's lives are very different from your own without wanting to do something about it," Neubauer said.

After trekking in Nepal, former Microsoft marketing director John Wood started Room to Read, which promotes literacy in half a dozen Asian countries and South Africa. Wood's recent book "Leaving Microsoft to Change the World" tells a story similar to Neubauer's about the heart-opening effects of foreign travel.

My trip included visits to several READ libraries, accompanied by Sharad Babu Shrestha, the organization's executive director in Nepal. He grew up in the mountainous Gorkha district, then went to college in Katmandu. His father didn't learn to read until he was 18, but his daughter, Suveksha, now 7, mastered "The Cat in the Hat" at age 3.

People have no reading habit, he told me. Public schools opened a scant 50 years ago. Parents must pay for books and uniforms as well as schoolroom construction and teacher salaries, in some cases. And many children are forced to quit school to help support their families.

Community libraries can be crucial in fostering literacy and education, Shrestha said on the way to READ headquarters. It occupies a rented building on a rutted road in the Baluwatar district of Katmandu. Potted plants line staircases leading from the neat, 8,000-volume library on the first floor to a computer lab and offices above.

With a paid staff of six, 30 interns and one bicycle, the organization has helped establish 40 libraries in Nepal.

Shrestha told me that promoting literacy is more than just a general good in Nepal. It is a way of nurturing democracy. "We have to learn democracy from the very beginning," he said. "Even some of our leaders don't know what it is."

The next day, we took a 30-minute flight west from Katmandu to Pokhara, the touristy gateway to the Annapurna trekking circuit.

In the afternoon we headed to Putalibazar by car, a two-hour trip south.

Laxmi Memorial Library in Putalibazar was started about 20 years ago, making it one of the oldest in the READ system. A group of local people borrowed the money to buy the storefront that houses it.

READ gets involved only when communities show their willingness to support library projects administratively and economically. Typically, the organization provides 50% to 80% of the required funds; the rest comes largely from communities' enterprises. Capital at Putalibazar is chiefly raised by renting out ground-floor shops, but every READ library is different. Others generate funds by making handicrafts, operating a sawmill and managing rickshaw taxis.

Encouraging locals to be pivotal players is increasingly seen as an approach to development that works. Everyone who uses a READ library helps support it. "That way the people have a feeling of ownership," Shrestha said.

The Putalibazar library has 28,000 members and an adult and a children's library, audiovisual room, guest quarters for out-of-town visitors, a small display of local handicrafts and a communications center with computers. Training classes and local groups use the meeting room, which has helped make the facility as much a community center as a library.

To call READ a literacy project is a misnomer. The organization's efforts are myriad and amorphous. When Shrestha looks at the Putalibazar library, he sees much more than books; he sees proof that things can change in Nepal. "There must be some push for the government to develop," he said. "READ can't do it. It has to be done by the Nepalese people."

Room to Read takes a similar approach by matching local contributions to build and equip school libraries. It started in 1998 when Wood visited the book room at a school in Bahundanda, a village on one of the Annapurna trekking circuits. "My heart sank as the school's treasure-trove was revealed," he wrote in "Leaving Microsoft." The stacks held a small collection of backpacker cast-offs: a Danielle Steel romance, a book in Italian by Umberto Eco, the Lonely Planet guide to Mongolia and James Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake." Small wonder, he realized, that Nepal's illiteracy rate is 70%.

After the trip, Wood asked his father to start collecting reading material for Nepal. In no time his parents' garage held 3,000 books.

That was the easy part. Getting them to Bahundanda was harder. To do it, Wood's father e-mailed the Lions Club in Katmandu and got a message back from Dinesh Shrestha. The fellow Lion promised to help get the books through customs and warehouse them until father and son could return to take them by donkey train to Bahundanda.

Shrestha, who became the Nepal director for Room to Read, told me the story at the organization's headquarters just outside Katmandu. Since its founding, Room to Read has opened more than 2,500 libraries, built schools and sponsored scholarships for girls.

Like READ, Wood's organization (www.roomtoread.org) seeks to establish the reading habit in Nepal. As the founding fathers of America knew, literacy is the bedrock of democracy. It takes a reader to demand the chance to make an educated choice and determine how to vote.

By getting out and seeing the world, Neubauer and Wood found that out.

Could there be any better reason to travel?

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