

Educational Infrastructure and Peace Building in Nepal

Goals: To strengthen the educational infrastructure of Tharu villages by building libraries, adding new classrooms and repairing the existing schools in the Tharu villages to improve the quality of education and enhance the enrollment rates.

Background Information: About 15% of the Parsa District (Nepal) where I am from is populated by Tharus. They live along the Parsa Wildlife Reserve. Tharus are the indigenous people of Southern Nepal and make up about 6.6% of the total population. Currently they live in 23 districts in Southern Nepal and have unique languages and culture. They do not speak the national language (Nepali), which makes it difficult for these people to actively participate and contribute in the governmental sector or any formal sector of the economy. Although they are the fourth largest ethnic group in Nepal, they are the least represented group in the parliament and other government institutions. They are proud to be identified as Nepali, but the government's economic development planning has done little to integrate these people into the system to upgrade their quality of life. The major source of income for Tharus in the Parsa District is subsistence farming. Everyone in the family is employed on the farm. As the demand for labor is high, school dropout rates are very high. The poor quality of education due to poor educational infrastructure is another reason for high dropout rates.

With the increasing population pressure on the land, the majority of youths have found other alternatives to earn their living. Instead of using their small piece of land to grow food crops, they also grow marijuana. Marijuana is a major cash crop for Tharus in the Parsa District as the demand for marijuana in India is high. Besides growing marijuana, the youths are involved in transporting the marijuana to India for money. Although marijuana is illegal in Nepal, these youths find it more lucrative to grow and transport marijuana to India than working in the small piece of land to grow food. Tharu youths do not have different opportunities in their villages. Like most rural areas of Nepal, Tharu villages are also marginalized and deprived of any right to development. The annual budget allocated by the central government of Nepal is not sufficient to make any real changes in the quality of life for the Tharus. The government allocates a certain percentage of the GDP for the education sector in Nepal, which is never above 4 % of the GDP, and which is lower compared to countries like Lesotho and Marshall Island (13.4 and 11.8% respectively of their GDP for education). Insufficient funding and inefficient management of the allocated funds are the major challenges to providing quality education to the youths in Nepal. According to Global Education Digest (GED) 2007, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) in higher education in Nepal is 6%, very low when compared to other countries such as India (11%) and South Korea (91%), and the South Asian and world averages (11 and 24% respectively¹). The gross enrollment ratio among the Tharus is also lower than the national standard.

Need for Project: As a Tharu, I see the need to integrate my people into the Nepali system for the overall development of Nepal through education. I do not want to see my village turn into another Afghanistan where many people make their living growing opium. The youths who are the future are not going to make a significant contribution to the economy unless the government starts to invest a significant amount of funds in the education sector. Lack of education is the root cause of the majority of the problems in Nepal, especially poverty. Poverty and unequal distribution of wealth in Nepal are the main reasons the Maoists (rebel group) fought with the central government for 10 years. I see lot of potential among Tharu youths, and if the Nepali government can integrate them into the national system by educating them, then the government will be able to tap their human capital. Education helps generate a skilled labor force to exploit resources and enhance economic development. If I had not gone to school, I would be doing the same things the majority of the youths in the Tharu villages of the Parsa District are doing today. Education gave me a different career option and the confidence to voice my opinions.

My library project in the Tharu villages is a small step to fight illiteracy in Nepal. If the Tharus are not included in the national system, then someday they will also fight the government for their rights. Providing opportunity to the underprivileged is one of the ways of creating the peace Nepal really needs. Maoist rebels did not fight with the central government for nothing. They fought against injustice and inequality. I do not want to see any more civil unrest in the country due to inequality and poverty. I want to be able to say proudly that Buddha was born there.

Project Implementation: I have chosen two Tharu villages for this project: Sugauli and Sedhwa. Last summer (2009), I visited these villages and talked to the headmasters of the schools and the villagers to propose my ideas. These villages are half an hour away from my native village, Nichuta. I will be working with the headmasters and villagers as the project director and will oversee the library construction. However, during my free time I will also volunteer to teach in the school. In Sugauli, I was amazed with the enrollment rate, which is about 90% and is the highest of all the Tharu villages. But the school is struggling to accommodate the students. I have never seen such a crowded school. In Sugauli, I will be building two rooms that

¹ Uprety, Niranjana. From Mess to Mass Higher Education. Nepalnews 2008.
<http://www.nepalnews.com/archive/2008/others/guestcolumn/nov/guest_columns_13.php>.

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will accommodate the extra students, and I propose to supply them with books and newspapers. Sedhwa is another village that is heavily populated with Tharus. I will be constructing a new library there. All the building materials will be purchased locally. Most of the books that will be bought for the libraries will be in Nepali to help students (ages 5-16 years) learn Nepal's official language. I will also provide subscriptions to the latest newspapers and magazines for use by the teachers, students, and educated local citizens. All the books will be purchased in Kathmandu. The libraries will be managed by the school administrations, as they will be built within the school compounds. In mid-August, inauguration ceremonies will be held at all two sites. After completion of the libraries, Literacy for Nepal, a student organization I founded at St. Lawrence, will continue to raise funds and sustain the libraries for five years.

Project Timeline:

20th May, 2010: Arrival in Nepal

23th May: Hold meetings with Sugauli School administrators, villagers and Village Development Committee to discuss building the two extra rooms to hold extra students. Finalize the site for construction.

24th May: Hold meetings with Sedhwa School administrators, villagers and Village Development Committee to discuss building the library for the school. Finalize site for construction

26th May: Hire constructor to build two rooms in Sugauli and a manager to oversee the construction work. Estimate how much building material is needed for 2 rooms of size 15ft. x 13 ft.

27th May: Hire constructor to build a single room library in Sedhwa of size 18ft. x 15ft. Hire a manger from the school to oversee the construction. Estimate the building supplies required

28th May: Purchase the building supplies for Sugauli and Sedhwa

31st May: Begin Construction in Sugauli and Sedhwa.

15st June: Hire Carpenters to construct shelves, chairs and tables

1st August: Leave for Kathmandu to purchase books for Sedhwa

7th August: End of Construction

10th August: Start furnishing the library with furniture and books

12th August: Inauguration ceremony for Sugauli – Everyone invited – Speech by Brijlal & other distinguished guests

13th August: Inauguration ceremony for Sedhwa – Everyone invited – Speech by Brijlal & other distinguished guests

15th August: End of Project

Outcome: Adding the library to Sedhwa School will provide opportunities for the students to have broader reading opportunities than that normally available in class. The new resources will help students improve their reading skills and broaden their knowledge about the world outside their villages. The library will be very useful as a source of additional materials for the teachers to teach the students. Newspapers and magazines will also attract the educated local residents. The extra-classrooms in Sugauli will help reduce the classroom size, which will facilitate better environments to learn and teach. Improving the educational infrastructure at Sugauli and Sedhwa will enhance the quality of education; hence the performance of the students will be better. Increasing performance level of the student will discourage the parents to divert them into agriculture which will reduce the dropout rate. Increasing school attendance among the Tharu youths will provide them with different career options besides agriculture and drug-trafficking.

My Expertise: I co-founded a club at St. Lawrence called Literacy for Nepal which is soon going to be an NGO. Last year I raised \$8000 dollars to build a library in Nichuta (one of the Tharu villages in Parsa District). I used \$4000 towards the library and \$2000 towards sponsoring 5 students to attend high school for two years. The rest of the fund is allocated for the maintenance of the library for two years. I started the project in May-August (2009) as a coordinator and supervised the construction. I also had several village meetings to elect a board of directors, which is responsible for the library's maintenance. The library in Nichuta will start functioning from May 2010. I am also networking with my classmates from United World Colleges to raise funds to expand the projects of Literacy for Nepal. Francesco Valente from Italy is helping to fundraise in Italy and the UK. He will be transferring the funds he has collected by the end of May to purchase more books for Nichuta Public Library. Fundraising at St. Lawrence University is still going on. After completion of Nichuta Public Library, I have gained the confidence and experience to build more libraries in the Tharu villages to strengthen the educational infrastructure. In addition, I made many contacts for construction work, which will help me complete building two rooms and a library in two months. I also gained experience while working in Uganda for Softpowers Education building schools along the Nile Basin.