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Information Literacy for a Multipurpose Community Telecentre:
Nepalese Perspectives

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White paper prepared for UNESCO, the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, and the National Forum on Information Literacy. See recommended bibliographic citation format at the end of the paper for use when quoting from or reproducing this paper.

Abstract

The author presents the genesis and growth of library and information services in the last 50 years in Nepal and describes the emerging changes and challenges in the field of library and information sciences. She describes the policy initiatives taken by the government for the development of information and communication services in Nepal and subsequent initiatives taken by library and information professionals, local government and civil society organizations for translating the policy decisions in action. She concludes the paper by focusing on certain initiatives taken by library professionals for the spread of information literacy in relation to the emergence of telecentres in recent years, and identifies major challenges and opportunities for discussion and strategy development.

Key Words

Library education, library services, information literacy, research methodology study and teaching, library science study and teaching, rural information, telecentre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal's total population is 23 million. The literacy rate is about 52 percent (2001 Census). The literacy rate of women is below 30 percent. The literacy rate among dalits (occupational caste groups) and Janjatis (ethnic nationalities) remain below 20 percent. About 40 percent people live below the poverty line. The government has developed a twenty-year perspective plan to reduce poverty level from 40 to 15 percent in the next 20 years.

Nepal is divided into five development regions, 75 districts, 4000 villages and 50 municipalities. About 84 percent population lives in rural areas.

Information, skill, and knowledge transfer takes place through both information and formal channels. The oral tradition is still strong in rural areas for information transmission. Skills and knowledge are transferred by "know-how", "show-how" and "do-how" process.

The government has put special emphasis on decentralized planning processes, developing and supporting information and communication policy, improving the quality of education, and spreading information technology (IT) in rural areas to help reduce poverty.

2. GENESIS AND GROWTH

Formal literacy and formal education has gained added momentum in the last 40 years. With the spread of an education network of schools, colleges, technical and vocational education, the growth of a library and information system network has been also impressive. We have observed the following four stages of library and information network growth.

2.1. Growth of School and Community Library Network

A majority of schools have symbolic libraries—either confined to an *almirah* or a school room. Library use is scant in government schools while in the private boarding schools students are encouraged to use libraries for their "project work."

Community libraries have been established to meet limited information requirements of the newly literate, as well as school and college students. A series of new initiatives have been taken like the establishment of literacy centres, mobile libraries in urban areas, a tin-trunk library system, and an integrated community library system where information needs of community people and community school students are partly met. These initiatives are still under a pilot phase supported by various donors and time will tell whether these book-based information service systems will be sustained by community resources and institutionalized in the years to come.

2.2. Establishment of District Information Centres

After the restoration of a multi-party democracy in 1990, the government has taken a series of policy decisions to promote the development and support of an information and communication system. For example, all local governments in 75 districts have been empowered through a legislative measure to identify and prioritize development needs, and to prepare District Periodic Plans to achieve development objectives.

To support this process the government has established district information centres in each district to collect, compile and analyze information by the people's representatives and use the results for district level planning. So far, 35 out of 75 District Information Centres have become fully operational.

To meet the community information needs Village Development Committees (VDCs) will also establish village information centres as mandated by the government's decentralization act in the coming 5 to 10 years.

2.3. Proposal for Telecentres

To meet immediate needs the government has decided to establish 1500 telecentres at the VDC level where communication facilities are available. This decision has been influenced by the success of privately operated telecentres in the rural areas where people come to use telephone facilities for various purposes like getting information on agricultural input and supplies, commodity prices in the market, health, education, and information about job opportunities, etc.

2.4. Use of Community Radio for Information Support Service

In the recent years, the government has allowed the people to establish/operate community radio services to meet specific community needs in the local languages. Through the community radio important information on agriculture, health, and market opportunities are broadcast. More than five community radio stations are operating and meet the needs of the listeners.

2.5. Establishment of Resource Centre

Resource centres have been established in the areas of education, health, agriculture, family health, community forestry, small-scale enterprise development, environmental conservation, etc.

These resource centres meet the information needs of an array of information users from research and extension workers to community people. The services provided by these resource centres are very effective but they operate within limited urban and semi-urban areas.

3. EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3.1. Information Literacy in Rural Areas

The rapid changes in the communication system have brought new challenges and opportunities. A series of consultations has taken place to assure continuity and change.

The following questioned are being debated:

- a) How to establish a link between the community library/information centres and the telecentres?
- b) How to prepare human resources to meet new requirements of community library-cum-telecentre?
- c) What changes are required in the curriculum to meet the changing needs of information professionals?
- d) How to introduce an information literacy program to the formal education system?
- e) How to introduce information literacy at the community level where a majority of community members are still illiterate and acquire information through inter-personnel communication?

To address the above issues and assist in the system development of community telecentres, the Nepal National Library has prepared a concept paper for discussion and review and has asked the UNESCO/Regional Office to assist in organizing a South Asian Regional Seminar on Community Telecentres to share experiences.

3.2. Information Literacy in Higher Education Sector

Library-based information use by Nepalese students in higher education has gradually increased due to various requirements like meeting course/curriculum assignments and research work to prepare theses to meet partial requirements for Master and Ph.D. programs. Library visits are encouraged to familiarize students with the system of searching for information. Some initiatives have been taken to promote the concept of information literacy at the higher level by the Central Library of Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

However, no systematic study has been carried out to determine the level and effectiveness of information literacy training among students. There is not enough understanding among the policy makers and planners to integrate information literacy courses into the curriculum and in the community-based development initiatives.

4. EVOLUTION OF INFORMATION LITERACY

The evolution of information literacy in Nepal can be traced back to introduction of higher education in the 1950s when college and university libraries were established to support college/university courses. Students were required to visit libraries to prepare papers to meet the partial requirements of degree programs.

Information literacy received an added impetus in 1971 when students were required to spend one year in rural areas and prepare village profiles based on the analysis of secondary and primary data/information. Students were oriented and trained on how to use information sources, how to collect information, how to analyze/synthesize information, and how to prepare village/district development profiles.

With the introduction of Ph.D. programs, special courses are offered under research methodology to orient students on library use, information search, survey methods and information analysis work.

To meet specific information needs trained librarians, documentalists, and information specialists have been posted in four research centres of Tribhuvan University to promote information literacy among researchers and also meet their specific information needs.

In 1995, Tribhuvan University under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences has established a Central Department of Library and Information Science to produce skillful library and information managers. Until 2001, the department granted only bachelor degrees. At present more than one hundred professional degrees have been granted and graduates are working at different libraries and information centres in Nepal. In 2002, the department has started the course for Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS); and the author of this paper has been heading this department since 2000.

4.1. Major Challenges

The use of the Internet at a majority of libraries, documentation and research centres is still limited. Therefore, majority students do not access information on the Web. However, the availability of information in CD-ROMs etc. is gradually increasing.

There are no survey results to determine the level of use and effectiveness of modern IT network to search for information. To address this issue the Tribhuvan University Central Library (TUCL) organized a national seminar on information literacy in February 2002, in cooperation with American Information Centre in Kathmandu. It focused on the following issues for Nepal: (a) the necessity to integrate information literacy into the curriculum at different levels of education to produce information literate graduates; (b) developing the capability to test information literacy skills; (c) creating a forum and network to promote information literacy; (d) creating a favorable environment to increase the effectiveness and use of information centres, and (e) increasing access to international information resources.

As a follow-up, the Nepal Library Association has started working on strategy development for promotion of information literacy in Nepal. The Nepal National Library has also prepared an agenda to share information and experience on information literacy in South Asia and has approached UNESCO/RO to provide technical support.

4.2. Rural Information

Major changes have been recorded in the information literacy scene in the rural areas. The representatives of local government participate in data/information collection, data/information analysis and use the results in the local planning process. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are putting special efforts on promoting information literacy to analyze (i) causes and consequences of human and institutional poverty, (ii) issues in human rights, (iii) issues in environmental degeneration, (iv) gender, and (vi) voter education. Voter education has empowered the community members to analyze manifestos of various political parties and choose the right candidates.

The functional literacy programs initiated by 400 plus NGOs all over the country has helped community members to improve their information literacy level by using different tools and techniques like the Rapid Rural Appraisal Technique, the Participatory Rural Appraisal Techniques, Reflect Methods, numerical literacy and skill transfers in small-scale income-generating activities and small-scale enterprise development.

Due to increasing community pressure on the government, the government has decided to establish 1500 community telecentres to meet information needs of the community.

4.3. Transitional Environment

Due to book-based and electronic-based information sources and services new challenges are emerging. These are: (i) how to establish linkage between book-based information centres and electronic telecentres, (ii) how to orient and train the information users to search, find, analyze and synthesize information for decision-making; (iii) how to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas, and (iv) how to develop the network of information specialists concerned with information literacy issues to share experiences and information.

Since the representatives of local government, civil society organizations, political parties, donor agencies all participate in the preparation of village/district profiles, preparation of Periodic Plans, and determination of development priorities, and analyzing resources, an assessment of the people's present information literacy capabilities is crucial. It is also required to orient the people's representatives to improve their level of information literacy through orientation and training.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF INFORMATION LITERACY

5.1. In the Formal Education Sector

- a) Integrate information literacy in the curriculum.
- b) Integrate information literacy component in the library and information education program.
- c) Orient/train librarians and information professionals in information literacy to assist the information seekers.
- d) Develop a time-bound strategy to promote information literacy with machine readable formats (CD-ROM, Microforms, etc.).
- e) Develop/disseminate standards for promotion of information literacy and insure their effective implementation.
- f) Organize seminars/workshops to educate/inform the policy makers and planners to develop appropriate policy and programs for promotion of information literacy.

5.2. In the Information Education Sector/Community Level

- a) Orient/train the representatives of local government about the importance of information literacy.

- b) Orient/train information users on how to increase their information search and utilization skills.
- c) Establish a link between the community library/information centres and the proposed community telecentres to assure continuity as the government develops support for information services.
- d) Develop specific courses for rural information and develop a time-bound action plan to orient/train them.
- e) Since computer literacy and user-friendly computer software packages are required to promote information literacy in the context of the globalization process, it is necessary to look into the existing constraints and opportunities to develop computer hardware and software strategies and policy decisions.
- f) Mobilize civil society organizations in the spread and development of information literacy to support poverty reduction, promotion of human rights, and good governance at all levels.

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Suggested Bibliographic Citation:

"Information Literacy for a Multipurpose Community Telecentre: Nepalese Perspectives," July 2002, White Paper prepared for UNESCO, the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, and the National Forum on Information Literacy, for use at the Information Literacy Meeting of Experts, Prague, The Czech Republic.

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