



Seventy years ago, a boy named Bishnu Prasad Dhungel was not allowed to go to school. As a result, thousands of Nepalis have learned to read and write. This is the remarkable story of Bishnu, his son Dinesh, and Dinesh's wife Ratna.

When Bishnu was a child, there was only one school in Nepal and it was far away in Kathmandu. It was actually against the law to start schools in the villages of Nepal, because the government believed that it was easier to control people if they didn't know how to read and write.

Back then, parents arranged to have their children married very young. Bishnu was married when he was just nine years old, and then married again to a second wife when he was 15. He helped on the family farm, but he longed to go to school. Finally, he was so determined to get an education that he ran away to Kathmandu, walking for three entire days. He completed one year of school, enough to get a government job.

Bishnu's wives had 25 children between them, though ten died from diseases such as smallpox and measles and malaria (a disease of tropical countries). As Bishnu's children grew, he was determined that they would go to school, so he brought a teacher from India to teach them. For doing so, Bishnu was sent to jail for three months for breaking the law. However, he didn't give up. He joined the Nepali Congress—a then-illegal political party fighting for democracy—to fight the government. In 1951, when a new government came to power, education was finally allowed.

Dinesh is Bishnu's third son. He not only went to elementary school, he graduated from college. Because he had studied English, he was able to get a job teaching Nepali to U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. With the job came the opportunity to travel around Nepal.

Dinesh soon noticed how few poor Nepalis, especially women and girls, knew how to read. They now had the right to go to school, but they didn't have schools or teachers. This realization inspired Dinesh to follow in his father's footsteps as a champion of education. As a result, thousands of lives were changed.

Dinesh was fortunate to have married Ratna, a lively young woman who was also committed to helping the poor. They created an organization called the Non-Formal Education Services Center to educate poor Nepalis. Dinesh describes their first project: "We were working with a very poor tribal group that lived in caves on the sides of steep hills. When we first visited, they ran into the forest because they were scared of strangers. They had nothing. I couldn't believe our brothers and sisters were living in this condition."

While they'd set out to teach reading and writing, they quickly realized that they needed to do something about the poverty they saw. After talking with the villagers, they decided to buy goats for the ten poorest families. Goats could scale the steep hillsides and eat the brush that grew there. When the goats gave birth, the kids were given to other poor families. Dinesh and Ratna also learned that orange trees would grow in the area, so they planted hundreds of trees.

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The villagers were required to save one quarter of the money they earned from the goats and oranges. With their savings, they sent their children to the schools that the center helped build. They were eventually able to buy land and build better houses.

Since then, the center has taught 20,000 adults and 5,000 children to read as well as helped to lift them out of poverty. They have built 15 schools and 56 drinking water systems and planted thousands of trees. When democracy came to Nepal in 1990, the center also taught the meaning of democracy and the importance of voting and human rights.

Ratna was eager to help the women and children in another village, so she started her own organization, called HANDS. To get to the village, she had to wade a river seven times. It was a three-and-a-half-hour walk to the nearest health clinic. When the river was flooded, the people couldn't get to the clinic at all. Ratna's organization built a health center. It also taught women

and girls to raise animals, to farm organically and make tofu, to sew, and to make pressed-flower cards (which Ratna sells in the United States). Of course, they also learn to read and write.

"In the poor areas of Nepal," Dinesh says, "there is no TV or computer or electricity. Most children don't have enough pencils or paper. When the rainy season starts, it seems like all the rain is falling in the class because the roofs leak so much. The classrooms are tiny, dark, and cold. The children need to help their parents with housework, fetching firewood, and taking care of goats or their younger brothers and sisters. Because of this, only about one out of ten children complete grade 10."

Dinesh and Ratna have spent their lives trying to change this. Of this, Dinesh says, "We are proud."

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