



## Using Community Radio in a Rural Women's Post-literacy Programme in Nepal

*Chizuko Nagaoka and Manohar Karki*

VOL. 1, No. 2

### Abstract

This paper examines the literacy and post-literacy needs of rural women in Nepal, describes a pilot study in using community radio to supplement a classroom-based post-literacy programme for these women, analyses the findings of this intervention and considers the implications for similar programmes in other settings.

### Introduction

The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is a small Himalayan country sandwiched between India and China. It has a population of around 27 million, most of the people live in rural areas and almost 70% of the workforce is involved in agriculture. Nepal was originally a [monarchy](#) but following a devastating ten-year civil war (1996-2006), it became a democratic [republic](#) in 2008. The social and economic costs of this civil war, discrimination against women, ethno-religious minorities and low caste groups and a lack of basic education provision in the rural and remote areas combine to handicap the country's economic development. However, globalisation and the market economy are increasingly impacting the lives of the Nepalese, many of whom aspire to raise their living standards and seek employment in areas other than agriculture. Nepal's newly-achieved democracy means that people can access mass media and need to be able to voice their opinions. These developments make it essential that all Nepalese can read and write. Currently, around 43% of the population is illiterate. Illiteracy is particularly high amongst females over the age of 15 (65%) (UNESCO Kathmandu 2011).

The Nepalese Ministry of Education and a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are taking steps to provide socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups with equal access to basic education through the 2001-2015 Education for All National Plan of Action.

As Cisse (2001) observes, "while illiteracy hinders development, literacy alone does not necessarily lead to development. Literacy programmes succeed only if they result in changed living conditions for the learners and their ability to solve problems and accept responsibilities. Post-literacy is therefore an indispensable part of development." The majority of Nepalese are keen to acquire life skills that will lift them out of poverty. So the National Literacy Campaign is not only concerned with basic and functional literature but provides post-literacy programmes that encourage new ways of thinking, communicating and acting, etc.

Radio has been found to be a particularly effective medium for providing such programmes in the mountainous, hard-to-access regions of Nepal because many people already receive their news, information and entertainment in this way. The use of radio for national development dates back to the 1970s when the Nepalese government broadcast programmes on healthcare, agriculture, forestry, environmental matters and teacher training. With the rise of democratisation in the 1990s, the people demanded a free voice and uncensored journalism and this led to the establishment of community radio stations in almost 75 districts, and these too played an important role in development for remote areas (Bhutia and Martin, 2007; Pringle and Subba, 2007), providing non-formal education programmes for women and other excluded groups. Being locally-based, focused on local needs and willing to involve local people in programme planning and presentation, these stations have strong followings and high levels of credibility. And regardless of differences in ethnicity, caste or academic levels, the further people live from urban areas, the more they listen to community radio, and if they do not have their own radios, they listen on someone else's — and increasingly, on their mobile phones.

## The Adult Women's Literacy Programme

Among its various activities, the Ministry of Education initiated a national Adult Women's Literacy Programme. This is designed to help rural women in particular to achieve basic literacy in Nepali language and numeracy skills. The learning materials in the specially-designed and illustrated textbook, *Mahilako Saksharata Pustka (The Women's Literacy Book)* address topics that are critical to these women's lives, for example, preventing diarrhoea, avoiding common diseases, getting drinking water, family planning, loan systems and women's rights.

During the first six months of this programme, the women attend night classes to learn to read and develop the language skills they need to deal with their own life issues. The classes are run by specially trained facilitators who use the so-called *guru-guru* system, in which the class groups repeat words after the facilitators and then write them down. This basic instructional method enables the participants to learn to read and write Nepali but it does nothing to develop the critical thinking skills essential for social change. However, in the following three months-long post-literacy classes, the women in these reading groups not only reinforce and improve their reading skills but discuss and apply what they have read to particular community concerns.

## Reconsidering the Post Literacy Programme

The programmes were carried out in two communities — Bungmati and Tenuhawa. Eighty percent of the inhabitants of Bungmati are Hindus. Buddhists, an indigenous Newari Maharjhan caste community and the Tamang ethnic group make up the other 20%. While 79% of the male adults in Bungmati can read and write, only 45% of the females are literate. In Tenuhawa, 80% of the villagers are Muslims. However the district verges on a World Heritage Site famed as the holy birthplace of the Lord Buddha so the surrounding communities are a mix of Hindu and Muslim, who tend to lead separate lives. Fifty-six percent of the adult males in Tenuhawa and 76% of the females are illiterate.

Most of the women attending these post-literacy classes had not gotten opportunities for formal schooling during their childhood due to religious reasons, traditional customs or economic problems. The class facilitators were higher secondary-level graduates who lived in the same villages, were known to the participants and well-attuned to their circumstances. The associated radio broadcasts featured the voices of these local women and also addressed issues of village life identified as important by these women.

In Bungmati, the *Barakhari (Read and Write)* programme was transmitted in Nepali and produced in partnership with Radio Sagarmatha and Skill and Education for Underprivileged (SEFU). In Tenuhawa, the *Hamar Gaunghar (Our Village, Our Locality)* broadcasts were transmitted in Bhojpuri and produced in cooperation with Radio Lumbini and the Lumbini branch of Nepal Foster Mate. In both cases, the village women gathered in weekly listening groups — in Bungmati in a classroom at the local school and in Tenuhawa at the local Community Learning Centre — and following the broadcasts then discussed the issues raised, assisted by the local facilitators. The topics covered in the broadcast series are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The topics covered in the two series of community radio broadcasts.

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Location, Radio Station and Broadcasts	Episodes
<p>Bungmati</p> <p><i>Barakhari (Read and Write) Radio</i> Sagarmatha</p> <p>(Broadcast October - December, 2010 for 15 minutes every Monday 7-7.15 pm)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The importance of non-formal education</li> <li>2. The changes brought about by non-form</li> <li>3. Farming and education.</li> <li>4. How husbands and families can help in e</li> <li>5. Women who are keen to attain classes b families.</li> <li>6. Experiences of women barred from joinir</li> <li>7. Encouraging families to join literacy clas:</li> <li>8. Pollution – the effects of dust and smoke</li> <li>9. What women gain from adult learning.</li> <li>10. Teaching women with different capacities:</li> <li>11. Safe motherhood.</li> <li>12. Need for continuity in non-formal educat</li> </ol>
<p>Tenuhawa</p> <p><i>Hamar Gaunghar (Our Village, Our Locality) Radio</i> Lumbini</p> <p>(Broadcast September 2010 - February, 2011 for 30 minutes every Monday, 7 – 7.30 pm)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Health and Cleanliness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Personal Cleanliness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Importance of washing hands.</li> <li>▪ Oral hygiene.</li> <li>▪ Genital hygiene.</li> </ul> </li> <li>◦ Household Cleanliness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Safe and pure water.</li> <li>▪ Cleanliness of house.</li> <li>▪ Use of toilets.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Educational equality</li> <li>◦ Education for all</li> <li>◦ Education for life</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Agriculture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Using compost and manure</li> <li>◦ Kitchen gardening</li> <li>◦ Bio-farming</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Forestry and environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Marshy land</li> <li>◦ Plantation</li> <li>◦ Cleaning surrounding areas</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. Human Rights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Children's rights</li> <li>◦ Women's rights</li> <li>◦ Human rights</li> <li>◦ Religious tolerance</li> </ul> </li> <li>6. Communications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Communication in the village</li> <li>◦ Communication skills</li> <li>◦ Advantages of effective communica</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

## Evaluating the Programmes

In funding community development programmes the following were considered: the intended outputs (the immediate effects of the programmes on the participants), outcomes (the short- to medium-term effects on the participants), and impacts (the long-term effects on the participants). With this in mind, one year to eighteen months after these programmes had finished, surveys were conducted within these two communities to gauge how the women's behaviours and understandings had changed as a consequence of these programmes.

The researchers first explained their process to the two village development committees,

gained their permission to proceed, then randomly selected 50 women in both communities to interview. It was clear both from these interviews and the meetings with the villagers that the broadcasts had been very popular and had attracted large audiences. It was also found that people in the surrounding villages who had not been targeted had also been listening to these broadcasts and were keen for further programmes based on their own particular needs.

But what was really being looked for was evidence of changed behaviours and here the findings were encouraging. In Bungmati, it was found that men and women were now working together to clean up the areas surrounding their houses, that the number of women visiting the village health post had almost doubled, that many more women were now being allowed to join the women's activity because their husbands and family members recognised its importance, that the women were now much more forthcoming in suggesting future programmes and what community issues needed to be addressed, and that the men were also keen for similar broadcasts on the issues of concern to them. One husband observed:

*Before Barakhari, I didn't allow my wife to attend the night class. But then I changed my mind because I was very glad to hear my wife's voice through the radio. After this, I recommended her to join to the class.*

In Tenuhawa, it was found that some women had brought their daughters along to the night classes because they were attending a madrasa where they only learned to quote the Holy Koran in Urdu, as a consequence of which they could neither read nor write in Nepali. It was also found that the villagers were now using soap and clean water to wash their hands and dishes rather than ash and muddy water, that there was a 20% increase in the number of women visiting the local health post, and that the Muslim women were more openly questioning medical personnel on medical or gynaecological matters and therefore receiving far more beneficial medical advice. One of the local doctors commented:

*Most Muslim women do not talk to non-family men but after the broadcasts, they talked and asked about their personal health problems. I thought they would always live "on the other side of the curtain", but now this is gradually changing.*

The potential for making future programmes more interactive by linking community radio and mobile phones was confirmed by the finding that in both villages the women regularly listened to the radio on their mobiles.

## Conclusions

While this was a small-scale pilot and survey, the findings indicate that:

- It is important to re-consider the meaning of literacy and broaden the term to include all means of learning for development. Literacy should not simply be regarded as a technical, neutral skill, a matter of learning to read, but it should also involve learning how to observe, listen, think, discuss and write about what is being read and how this relates to people's lives, needs and concerns.
- Community radio is a useful means of building on face-to-face post-literacy programmes for development purposes in rural and remote communities because of its high credibility with local populations.
- Being particularly popular with rural women, radio can be an effective means of providing learning related to their needs.
- In developing such programmes, it is important to draw on the listeners' (in this case, rural women's) life expectations and experiences and enable their voices to be heard.
- The listeners need to be enabled to apply their new learning and share their experiences and ideas with their neighbours and other women to help them improve their lives. This is best done by forming listening and learning groups who can discuss the programmes, consider the implications of the new learning and decide what further actions are needed. This calls for careful selection and training of local facilitators who are well-known to the learners and familiar with their concerns and interests.
- Community radio can also help inter-generational learning, in this case with women sharing their learning with their daughters. In this way, families and entire communities can gain from post-literacy and community development programmes.
- Rural communities are often divided along the lines of gender, religion and caste. Bringing the various problems of daily life and their solutions to the attention of entire communities and improving personal communications and interaction by means of radio, may go some way towards solving the traditional socio-cultural problems of

village life.

- There would appear to be scope for using these means for other community and vocational skills development programmes.
- With mobile phones becoming more common, it is possible to make these programmes more participatory and interactive by using live phone-ins to enhance the debates and knowledge-building.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the following people and organizations:

- Samjhana Maharjan
- Radio Sagarmatha
- Kaji Ratna Shakya
- Nepal Foster Mate under SEFU
- Paramashila Baniya
- Professor Colin Latchem
- Radio Lumbini
- TOYOTA Foundation

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**Chizuko Nagaoka** is a Fellow in the National Institute for Educational Policy Research and a part-time lecturer in the Department of Lifelong Learning and Career Design in Hosei University, Tokyo, Japan. E-mail: [n\\_agao@mvh.biglobe.ne.jp](mailto:n_agao@mvh.biglobe.ne.jp)

**Manohar Karki** is a Program Director and Coordinator with SEFU in Nepal. E-mail: [siddultha@yahoo.com](mailto:siddultha@yahoo.com)

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