

The Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra's unique approach to literacy and its sustained efforts among the Van Gujjars of Uttaranchal, have helped foster a desire to learn and an understanding of the importance of education, even in a pastoral community

Spreading literacy among a nomadic pastoral community is a daunting task, not least because of the logistics involved. It also involves changing mindsets. But the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), a non-government organisation based in Dehra Dun, Uttaranchal, has risen successfully to the challenge. Between October 1993 and December 1995, the RLEK was able to help 21,000 adults from the Van Gujjar tribe become literate under the Government of India's National Literacy Mission (NLM) programme.

In its 30-odd years of existence, the RLEK's strategy has been to 'include the excluded and reach the unreached'. The Van Gujjars, an indigenous forest-dwelling nomadic tribe that has lived in the foothills of the northern Himalayas (mainly Uttaranchal, formerly Uttar Pradesh) for centuries, certainly fit the bill.

Since its inception, the RLEK has been working on the socio-economic problems of marginalised people in the Himalayas, chiefly through empowerment and capacity building, rather than the mere delivery of services. It rightly concluded that the best way to do this was through education.

Unlike other Himalayan nomadic tribes that have a village base from where they practise part-time agriculture, the Van Gujjars are entirely nomadic. They lead an isolated existence, spending the winter months in the Shivalik forests in the foothills of the Himalayas (near Dehra Dun city) which serve as their home and pasture for their buffaloes -- their chief source of livelihood. The rest of the year they live in the upper reaches of the Himalayas. Thus isolated from civilisation for six months in the year, the tribe has been deprived of the benefits of state-run education programmes.

To overcome this major impediment, the RLEK designed an innovative literacy programme. A 'forest academy', brainchild of RLEK chairperson Avadesh Kaushal, was set up. It involved a group of volunteer teachers (350 of them) who lived and travelled with the tribe, thus continuing their education all year round. In time, the Van Gujjars began to look on the teachers, who were mainly young couples, as family members and the programme made great strides, very quickly.

To ensure that learning was both easy and fun, the books and teaching materials used in the programmes designed by the RLEK, were context-specific, with examples from the daily lives of the Van Gujjars. Stories revolved around things the students could relate to -- the problem of a dying buffalo, a dispute between two friends, etc. They also took into account the community's knowledge of animal husbandry, the forests, milk production and bio-diversity. A three-part primer series, titled *Naya Safar* (A New Journey), was specifically developed by the RLEK for its adult literacy programme.

A mobile library that keeps neo-literates supplied with reading material and helps them hone their skills, does the rounds of the Van Gujjar settlements. The RLEK's education team also publishes a bimonthly Hindi newspaper *Khoj Khabar* that focuses on news relating to the Van Gujjars' immediate environment and news and events from around the country. Besides

successful implementation, it is the careful thought that has gone into the RLEK's literacy mission that deserves special mention. The mission began with an adult literacy programme, in marked contrast to the approach to literacy programmes across the globe, where child education initiatives come first. In fact, the RLEK maintains that the sustainability of child education programmes is better achieved if adults in the community realise the importance of literacy and education, and wholeheartedly support the concept. After completing its total literacy (TL) and post literacy (PL) campaigns, the RLEK is currently running a community empowerment (CE) programme. The thrust of this ambitious initiative is on sharpening the literacy skills of the Van Gujjars and helping them gain an insight into issues such as health, sanitation, natural resources, environmental management, veterinary care and the rights of the citizens under the Indian Constitution. Presently, the NGO runs 43 CE centres and five nodal centres. The Van Gujjars have used their newly acquired skills well, to address some of their most critical problems and integrate themselves into the mainstream. They are lobbying for their rights and fighting off the corrupt forest bureaucracy. Today they are capable of independently writing applications to the district authorities, lodging FIRs at police stations and filing their nomination papers for panchayati raj elections. Recognition for the RLEK's outstanding efforts in promoting adult literacy has come in the form of the UNESCO-NLM award for 1998. Rotary International has also commended the organisation for its adult literacy and child education programmes among the Van Gujjars and its contribution to non-formal education. The RLEK has been selected by the Government of India to run a state resource centre for adult education for the entire Garhwal and Kumaon regions in Uttaranchal. The centre will provide training to various government and non-government organisations (including zilla saksharta samitis) and assist them in material-preparation, monitoring and evaluation.

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(InfoChange News & Features, October 2003)