

## Getting connected in the schools in the hills by Marianne Heredge

What school nowadays would be without computers? However, this is much easier said than done for most schools in Nepal. Most schools don't have electricity, let alone enough teachers or classrooms for such an expensive luxury.

While not included on the school curriculum, computing is becoming increasingly important in this day and age. Private schools proudly proclaim 'computer room' in their bid to recruit students. Even in the villages outside the cities, many private schools will have a few computers. Sadly this is still beyond the purse-strings of most government schools.

Shree Hana Jyoti Secondary School, in Garimudi, Dolakha is very lucky. A French donor gave them the choice: sports equipment or some computers. With limited grounds for sports, the answer was obvious. So three good, high specification computers arrived from Kathmandu at the beginning of the year, with a printer and UPS to protect them from the frequent powercuts that are a fact of life all over Nepal.



Volunteer sets up computers for use.

But the problem then was what to do with them? None of the teachers knew more than basics of sending an email from a cyber cafe. For six months the computers sat in the staff room, covered in a cloth to keep off the worst of the all-pervading dust.

Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN), a UK registered charity has been supporting the salary of a maths teacher at this understaffed school for about three years. Contacted by a couple of volunteers, it was good news to find one worked as a computer engineer. Though this school had never had any volunteers, being in a very poor village, arrangements were made with the brother of trekking guide friend from the village, who himself a trek cook, had a good idea of what to expect as a host to these first volunteers.



Cleaning and working out what's where.

After shaking off the dust, cleaning everything in sight, it was all systems go. Everything had to be tested out. Mice had been busy chewing cables; one computer whined its protest and shut-down, overheating when processing got too much; another computer was not set up with the same software as the others – and the CDMA wireless phone, though registered for internet use as well as a telephone – was locked in the head teacher's cupboard and of course, he was away from school for the rest of that day.

Steady hands soon fixed the cables to speakers that had been eaten by mice. Configuring the software on all three machines with Linux, a stable operating system that offers advantages of simplicity as well as shareware, which costs nothing was also straightforward, even with one computer not having a CDROM drive. It took no time for a computer engineer to pull off the casing from one of the others and take out the CD drive to use for setting up the third machine.



Many hands make light work - repairing chewed cables

More of a challenge was setting up a connection to the internet. On the headteacher's return, the key to the cupboard produced and the telephone available, there was a certain amount of head-scratching first to find pieces of cable that could connect the phone to the computer, but then to fathom out how to get the internet connection.

That said, the internet cost per minute using CDMA - a fast link and one with reasonable coverage in Garimudi - costs about 270Rs an hour (nearly 4US\$), which for a government school with no budget for this sort of thing, would be prohibitively expensive to use for more than minutes at a time. Nepal Telecom (NTC) in comparison, is a fraction of the cost at around 50Rs an hour, but offers a slower connection and also relies on there being coverage. In much of the hill areas of Nepal, communities are lucky to get CDMA coverage if anything at all.

The volunteers will stay a month, teaching the teachers and senior students some basic skills on the computers. First lesson will be on shutting down safely when the power goes off, a common occurrence throughout Nepal. Loaded to full capacity, the UPS gives barely three minutes of time to close down, which at least will ensure some protection for the computers. Experience without any backup in another school in Helambu, where the volunteers were helping prior to their visit to Garimudi, meant expensive repairs to these computers in Kathmandu.



Fascinated audience of teachers watch volunteers from the UK.

Computing skills are increasingly important in all walks of life, but until a country like Nepal has electricity in all its villages, can afford computers and have teachers to teach the skills needed, then it will be impossible to include the subject as a compulsory part of the curriculum. For now, it's a 'nice to have'. However, slowly more schools will be able to offer their students with this vital area of education.

*Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN) is supporting a maths and science teacher at the government secondary school in Garimudi and another three teachers at a secondary school in Deusa, Solukhumbu. Anyone interested to support these schools, as volunteers or in any other way, please contact Marianne Heredge at [m\\_heredge@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:m_heredge@yahoo.co.uk)*