

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ philosophy

Murari Binod Pokhrel¹

Article history: Received: 18 Feb, 2022; Reviewed: 17 April, 2022; Accepted: 30 March, 2022

Abstract

The article aims to briefly highlight how, where and what situation led to the establishment of Rural Education And Development (READ) in Nepal. It also slightly explains how the request 'if you can establish a community library in my village' told by a common person has touched the inner heart of the person, who has educational research background herself. The article states about READ model a bit: Community involvement from planning, infrastructure management, rules and regulations formation, develop sustainable projects for daily management of the library. It states that the library is for the community, by the community, within the community. READ model has a vision, mission and strategy, so as all READ supported libraries. So far all READ supported libraries are managed on their own. It is because, all political parties, community people from children to elderly ones', local authority and all stakeholders within the community feels 'it is ours'. Thus, it seems that the future of READ libraries are driven in the right direction.

Keywords: Community libraries; Antonia Neubauer; READ Global; READ Nepal; Success stories.

Historical background

An American Lady was astonished to hear "please establish a library in my village..." (Speech by Dr.Tulsi Bhattraï.Gyan ra soochana samajmaa. Dilliraman-Kalyani Regmi Memorial Library Development Committee, 2020 (B.S.2077). Kathmandu, DKRML, page-18) It was the beginning of READ. After hearing the word "please...", the iron lady Dr Antonia Neubauer started to think how about libraries can be supportive in his village. Her thoughts resulted in READ Nepal.

Dr Neubauer, also called 'Toni', used to work as a language teacher and education researcher. Travel was her hobby. She used to travel across Asia through her own company

¹ **Murari Binod Pokhrel** is the Founding President of Nepal Library Association. He can be contacted at <muraripokhrel@gmail.com>

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

'Myths and Mountains'. Naturally, Nepal has many high peaks, including the highest mountain in the world '*Everest*' and thus, she and her team might have been attracted to visit Nepal from time to time.

At that time when that particular Nepal tour was in its completion phase, she was happy and she asked her mountain guide Mr. Angdome Sherpa, whether he wants some money or items from her as a gift. He did not ask anything for himself. However, he asked for something from the community with the thought that a library can educate people in his village Junbesi, Solukhunbu. The village is one of the trails to the Mount Everest base camp. Angdome's point of view naturally fascinated Dr Antonia, after all, she is an educationist. She envisioned a name 'Rural Education and Development (READ)' to establish and manage community libraries in rural Nepal.

Dr. Antonia started collecting books to suit Junbesi community people. In 1990 she came back to Kathmandu with 900 books, carried them on persons' back in DOKO (a sort of bamboo netted big basket) walked 10,000 to 12,000 feet peaks to Junbesi and established a small library over there. She said that no person had ever seen in that area such a huge number of books in their lifetimes. At that moment a person told her '*You westerners come in and build us schools and hospitals. Then you expect us to support them. But we are poor farmers and can barely support ourselves.* (Speech by Dr. Antonia Neubauer. *Gyan ra soochana samajmaa. Dilliraman-Kalyani Regmi Memorial Library Development Committee, 2020 (B.S.2077). Kathmandu, DKRML page 13*). Then she realized the difficulties of growth of the library, day to day management and services. It needs regular income. She then explored herself that libraries should have sustainable business plans and for that purpose some backup programs are essential. After returning to America, in her leadership READ Global was founded in 1991.

Till 2021 December, 69 community libraries and resource centres have been supported by READ in 42 districts of rural Nepal through its campaign. The motto of READ is '*Inspiring Rural Prosperity*'. Almost all libraries do have sustainable projects from their very beginnings. Some examples are: shutter of library buildings is given for rent, some per cent of women's cooperative's income was donated to their libraries, profit of woods cutting mill, rent of the training hall, profit of gift shop, the rent of a flat of the building, and so on.

An experienced, well-known, development researcher, social expert and consultant Dr Shibesh Chandra Regmi asked how do you perceive READ Nepal ? He states "*READ Nepal is the energy for social and economic transformation of the rural population, including women, girls and other excluded and marginalized groups, that READ wants to achieve through CLRCs that they support only after ensuring effective community engagement from the time of their establishments.*

READ's model of community development, that centers around CLRCs, aims to provide knowledge, skills, resources, opportunities, capacity and confidence to the local communities

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy by ensuring the latter's ownership and management of CLRCs for providing sustained social, economic and development benefits to the local communities. READ's model also aims to create space for everyone in the community, regardless of their gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, physical ability, among others, to make the best use of their potential for overall societal development".

READ Global

READ Global was established in the US in 1991. READ Global has its own office in San Francisco, it has a Board of Directors, raises funds from potential donors and uses those to establish and manage community libraries in this part of the world. A Nepal community prosperity model through libraries spread in Bhutan and India from the year 2006 onwards. As per READ Global website- 2.52 million rural villages have access to READ supported centres; 123 centres have already been established; 185 sustainable enterprises launched; 421 villages are served by READ centres. READ Global is dedicated to financial transparency and accountability.

READ Global directly and solely was involved up to 2006 in the establishment and management of community libraries in Nepal. As per Nepal Government policy; International Non-Governmental Organizations should not implement programs directly; in 2006 the Read Information and Resource Center (in short READ Nepal) was established as one of the national non-governmental organizations and carried READ missions continuously.

Strategy plan of READ Global

The strategic plan of READ Global states its vision as "*READ Global envisions a world where individuals, families and entire communities have access to the knowledge, resources and opportunities necessary to shape their own prosperous futures and build cohesive, resilient, and inclusive societies*" and mission as "*READ Global facilitates the creation of self-sustaining community-owned and led library and resource centres as catalysts for unlocking a community's programmatic, social and economic potential*". It has four strategies as well. "1, Ensure that READ Global is a valuable, viable, and sustainable organization. 2, Establish the core elements and impact of READ's model. 3, Partner with READ Country Organizations to sustainably meet the needs of their communities. 4, Raise the profile of the READ model and expand the global network of community centers".

Strategy plan of READ Nepal

The philosophy of READ emerged in Nepal. Nepal is the mother place of READ as an institution. Later READ Global was established to flourish READ venture widely. It means READ Global and READ Nepal is not at all different, even READ Bhutan or READ India could be. As per the rules of the Government, it had to be divided into the international

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

non-governmental organization and national non-governmental organization. That is all. So, in line with READ Global Vision, Mission and Strategy, READ Nepal has drafted its three years strategy 2022-2025 plan and in near future, it will be finalized with a certain process and disseminated. The major 5 elements of the draft READ Nepal strategies are: "1. *Stewardship of READ Nepal Model/Elevate READ Model at National/International level.* 2. *Development Outcome; (Women Empowerment, Youth Empowerment, Child Education and Empowerment, Livelihood, Entrepreneurship, DiDRR).* 3. *Institutional Strengthening (Human Resources, Budget, Strengthening the Board, Capacity Building).* 4. *Monitoring and Evaluation, Reporting and Advocacy.* 5. *Sustainability (Social Enterprises (SE, Networking) and Fund Raising (Nepali can do campaign)".*

Module of READ

READ Nepal states communities should have a lifelong learning facility in their catchment area. All segments of the community people should be able to use libraries and their facilities for the overall development of society. Libraries used to be established and managed by groups of young people for some time and most of them could not sustain themselves. Thus, the question of the sustainability of these enterprises is the most essential part. It must be the community's vision, sense of ownership, their management in line with the basic principles for READ centres. All development activities are carried out as per the community's needs. As libraries are managed and widely used by the community people, libraries should honour all ideologies, however, there will be no room for vested political interests within library premises. The democratic principle 'we all are one' is adopted in libraries. Libraries provide ample learning activities as per community needs. A farmer wants soil testing for his/her harvesting, ok library take care. Teenagers come to the library and ask for IT learning, master of ceremony training, theatre management workshop, etc. A library arranges those. Elderly people want religious books and arrangement of spiritual discourses, women would like to have meetings for their concerns, youths need sports and youth-related activities, children would like to play with dolls and other playing materials, outside visitors want information related to the particular place or of Nepal, ... community libraries are managing all these objectives.

READ supported libraries should have at least these basic components: A library room with sufficient relevant books and information materials. Women's unit where they could discuss their concerns and work for themselves. Children's unit full of baby-related playing accessories. For youth sports and athletic materials. Separate space for computer (IT) and audiovisual equipment. A community meeting/training hall.

READ Nepal launched a program 'Nepali Can do'. With this mission, two library buildings were erected in Panauti in Kabhre District and Takukot in Gorkha District and library services are started.

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

Covid has a worldwide effect and READ Nepal activities are also equally affected. Donors are not able to visit the libraries they are supporting. Thus, READ Nepal has started a virtual tour of the libraries. The second virtual library tour of Giranchaur Community Library and Resource Center at Melamchi Municipality ward 12 of Sindhupalchok district was arranged by READ in the third week of February 2022. As of February 15, 2022, READ Global note; Founder of READ and RG Executive Director stated that within March 2022, READ Nepal supported libraries will reach 70, READ Bhutan 8 and READ India 45 totalling 123 library and information resource centres in South Asia.

Many expatriates have worked in Nepal at different times to explore, preserve and spread history, culture, arts and architecture, mountaineering, etc. Likewise, Dr Antonia worked for the prospering community of Nepal through libraries as a rural development vehicle in the community. The logo of READ Global with the words together '*Inspiring Rural Prosperity*' proves that READ does not do it on its own, however, inspired communities to do it. Community people themselves are involved in the planning layout, building construction, section management and natural function of the library including self-sufficient component/s.

Hidden reality

READ believes that attitude makes a difference. Community space, ownership, engagement, volunteerism and participation are prime concerns for the institution. Education is a lifelong learning process. Women, girls and youth need empowerment. The inclusion component is a must. For all these, there is no plan B. These all are essential and accordingly plan and programs are being launched by READ Nepal. Furthermore, as per community will and capacity components can be added.

A glimpse of living library activities

Just to keep a birds' eye view of one of the READ Nepal supported libraries, Godawari Community Library and Resource Center (GCLRC) website was looked at for the last 4 months. On 23 March 2022, the library conducted a welcome and farewell of the Country Director of Shanti Volunteer Association- Nepal. SVA-Nepal is an international non-governmental organization. SVA is supporting through READ Nepal for four Libraries in Lalitpur, Solukhumbu, Syanga and Dharan districts for its building construction and overall library programs for three years 2020-23 through Government of Japan resources. GCLRC is one of them. On March 19, 2022, GCLRC arranged a social audit program to present transparent details of the program and budget to community people. On March 18 and 19, GCLRC had managed PPR (Peste des petits ruminants) vaccination for Goat in support of Godawari Municipality Animal Health Section. On the dates 23 and 24 February '022, GCLRC organized Market Management Training under the Entrepreneurship and skill development program, and so on.

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

Mr. Bholanath Sharma; a retired Chief District Officer, who established Moti Community Library and Resource Center in 1960; one of the library philanthropists' awardees on Nepal Library Day 2017; educationist and tireless library and education promotion worker was interviewed. He briefly highlights the last four months Moti CLRC activities as:

Apart from ritual and regular library activities, Moti CLRC recently completed 3 months long (every half-day) of 30 youth girls empowerment training through information technology (IT). The outcome of the training so far is a) one person received an IT job in Chitwan District, b) the other one was recruited by a local cooperative and a few who were teachers have started teaching as IT teachers in Schools.

Library, in association with the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), is organizing 60 workdays of Advance Training on Tailoring. These trainees will have further each week additional skills learning for the preparation of sanitary pads and entrepreneurship development training. The training will be completed at the end of April 2022.

Lions' Club of North Seeland, Denmark donated Moti Library a sum of rupees 60,000- to organize its activities on 15 March 2022. The library is going to use the money for reading habit promotion activities among local school students and library members. ICA also supports a reading habit promotion program with the gift 'We Read' T-shirts for those who are selected as good at reading books and expressing their learnings.

Moti Library has good records of library users. One of the library readers, who was in high school, won the best library reader and received a certificate in one of the Nepal Library Day Celebrations earlier. Now he is B.Sc. Agriculturist and teaching undergraduate agriculture students in the college. The real impact of library users can not be measured easily. Community library not only circulates books and information these days but also does all community activities without any border, Mr. Sharma expressed.

What sort of unique or uncommon work/s your library is doing ? This question was asked to Mr. Omkrishna Shrestha, Jyan Bikas Community Library, Kabhre. He told: the library is doing many unique services such as soil tests for farmers, women/girls' health support, different relief activities during disasters, et. al. However, vasectomy of street dogs has been totally different. To avoid street dogs problems, the community for the first time requested the library to lead on the same. Library, in consultation with stakeholders, initiated starting vasectomy on street dogs in 2018. Some of the community people, for the first time, told that it was not the work of the library. However, to look at the problem and how it was addressed, they themselves, later said that the unique work library has been initiated. Now, this activity has been continued by the Municipality yearly.

READ and the founder of READ received Awards

Association of Nepali in America honored Dr Antonia Neubauer with the *Friends of Nepal Award* in 2002 and the *Visionary Award* in 2009.

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

In 2005 she was honored with *International Visionary Award* by North Nevada International Center.

UN Sponsor awarded her with *Global Award* in 2006.

READ received the *Access to Learning Award* with 1.2 million dollars from Bill and Melinda Gates foundation in 2006. The same was provided as the Nepal model *replication grant* to India and Bhutan in 2007.

Nepal Library Association was awarded to Dr Neubauer with *Saraswati International Award* in 2007.

For *outstanding contribution*, Nepal Tourism Board Felicitated Dr Neubauer in November 2009 for developing rural tourism in Nepal through literacy programs.

She as a Founder and President of Myths and Mountains received *London Observer Ethical Award* in 2014.

International Institute for Peace Through Tourism honored her as *Ambassador for Peace* in 2014.

Dr. Neubauer's institution Myths and Mountains received *Top 20 Asia Tours of a Lifetime 2015* by National Geographic Traveler.

Her institution Myths and Mountains was honored with *Tourism Cares Award* for Legacy in Travel Philanthropy 2015/16.

Myths and Mountains received *Conde' Nast Traveler Top Travel Specialist Award 2019*.

She became Wendy Perrin's *WOW trusted travel expert for Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar in 2019*.

Dr. Neubauer was awarded *Dr Dilli Raman Regmi International Peace Award 2019* by Dilliraman Kalayani Regmi Memorial Library Development Committee, Nepal.

How READ supported libraries became among the first responders during Covid 19 pandemic?

Community Libraries are together with community people. With this philosophy, when Covid 19 spread in Nepal, READ Nepal supported Community Library and Resource Centers (CLRCs) connected in a messenger group as 'Library Chairperson' and worked together. The group started an emergency support fund-collecting money from among libraries. CLRCs started advocacy among the community through library readers by disseminating reliable information that not to panic but take necessary precautions. Library management committee members with the Covid responder team together started to work in the community. They were involved to distribute appliances such as sanitizer, masks, gloves, face shields in acute need. Food distribution to the people who were in a severe helpless situation not getting any work because of Covid quarantine in a home. Library supported with some money to establish an oxygen generator plant in Province one. Some parents wanted to go for daily labor when possible and the care of babies were the problem. To avoid the same, the baby care and learning

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

facility in the daytime was supported by the library. Need-based educational information and free e-books links were provided through group Facebook and emails to the community people where ever possible. Thus, community members felt the library was their unique family. The community believe that libraries are with them in times of sorrow and happiness !

A few examples of READ Nepal success story

The family has been empowered with the skill received from the library. Ms. Sumitra Tharu, age 46 used to live with eight members of a family at Basgadi Municipality in Bardia. As they had a small piece of land and insufficient food supply, she used to go for daily wage too and very hardly managed hand to mouth for her family. Her son went for foreign employment in Malaysia through a local agent by taking some loans. It, unfortunately, did not work and he returned back. The family had further added problems with the payment of the loan too. One of the members suffered from a skin disease which added severity to the family.

In her catchment area, Tribhuvan Community Library was arranging livelihood and small enterprise training programs. She knew that and attended one of the training programs 'mushroom farming skills'. She learned the practicalities of farming as well as the marketing of the same. With the help of family members, she started mushroom farming and selling. From the first crops themselves, she earned a substantial amount of money. The family was encouraged by that progress. Within three years period, the family was free of debt, able to take proper medical care of the skin disease person and happily managing day to day life of the family.

Disabled person has a place in a library. Ms. Laxmi Neupane, 28 years of Bhimeshwar Municipality, Dolkha is a by birth physical disability person. She was having higher education at the local college. She used to be asked, why you are studying, since you are disabled, you can do nothing? She did not care about any queries. She is one of the good readers of the local Gaurishankar Community Library and Resource Center. She attended 3 months long computer training, 15 days of library management workshop, disabled' rights, disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction training programs et. al. She is supporting library organized disability activities to the fullest. She says: 'I was almost only at home. The library has cared for me and many disabled persons like me. Because of me, many disabled persons are coming to the library and attending activities organized by the library. Societal eyes to look at disabled persons have been changed now'.

She was able to read. A lady from Bardia, Ms. Urmila Chaudhary completed her higher secondary education. She wanted to continue college. However, her farmer parents were not able to support her education. She wanted some sort of job, earn some money and continue her education. She found computer skill-oriented jobs are available in the market and to learn in the local market had to pay Rs. 2500/month. She was not able to pay at all. By chance, she came to know that Tikapur Community Library is arranging basic computer training. She applied, selected and completed basic computer operations, word, excel, PowerPoint, Skype, e-mail, internet etc. Now she received a job in the local printing press. She is happy and says- now I can continue education on my own.

People's transformation through community library: a brief study of READ Philosophy

A library plays a role to reduce early child marriage. Ms. Sabita Kumari Bin, a resident of Langadi, Parsa, was not able to read four classes beyond. Her parents were trying to marry her at the age of 13. She was not happy, friends used to tease her saying congratulations, you are getting marriage,... . So, feeling helpless, she even hesitated to go out of the home. In the meantime, Bhanu Community Library was organizing different programs for youth empowerment. She received the chance in basic tailoring training. Within a year she earned advanced level training on the same. After that, she was hired by one of the tailoring shops with a monthly remuneration of Rs. 3,500. Slowly she saved some money and she started her own tailoring unit with 2 machines and also started to train young girls like her. Her parents revisited their thought and said that they will stop early child marriage. Ms. Sabita has been an example in the surrounding community too (*stories source: Leading through a community library in Nepal*).

READ Nepal puts hands together with stakeholders for good reason

Library Coordination Section of The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Nepal has the vision to perform a Public/Community Library Survey. It was being late due to the Covid pandemic. READ Nepal also wanted to be one of the stakeholders for the same. READ Nepal through SVA assistance, joined hands with the Government for this survey activities from the beginning. Now the survey is completed and the report is published in March 2022.

On the end

Libraries have been part and parcel of some of the communities in Nepal. READ Nepal happily wants to support extending its model everywhere in any country. READ Nepal is getting wider recognition. READ Nepal equally wants to spread at least one community library to all 753 Local Government Units within Nepal in partnering with global/local donors and the Government of Nepal. To look at success stories of READ libraries indicates that who so ever support READ community library will find 'when I give, I won' feelings in their hearts.

References

- Gyan ra Soochana Samajmaa Dilliraman-Kalyani Regmi Memorial Library (in Nepali). Kathmandu, DKRML Development Committee, 2020 (B.S.2077).
- Leading through community library in Nepal: Stories of change. Kathmandu, READ Nepal, December 2020
- READ Global website: <https://www.readglobal.org>
- Samudayik Sachetana (in Nepali). Kathmandu, READ Nepal, April-June 2014
- Samudayik Sachetana (in Nepali). Kathmandu, READ Nepal, December 2020
- Strategic Plan (2013-2015), Kathmandu, READ Nepal.