

Library Development in Nepal: Problems and prospects

Introduction

The Nepal Library Foundation (NLF) was registered as a charity with the Government of Canada in 2005. The organisation's stated mission is to enhance educational opportunities in Nepal through the medium of public libraries and to support their systemic development. In 2007, the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA), an international affiliation of people of Nepali origin living outside Nepal, appointed the NLF as its agent to carry out its Public Libraries project (NRNA, Kathmandu Declaration). By the end of 2010, the NLF, in a partial fulfillment of this mandate, had provided books and computers to twenty six schools and community libraries in Nepal. It was expected that these new resources would be used by schools and the communities to enhance their knowledge base and develop critical thinking and decision making skills. NLF's work has also included advising communities in library development, training teachers in the basic use of computers, digital content development and advocacy for national policy supported by enabling legislation on government support for rural libraries. The NLF collaborates with other Nepali and international organisations dedicated to library development and the enhancement of education to fulfill its mission. The NLF has targeted communities with existing libraries requiring upgrading and also those seeking to re-establish ones that have become dormant.

In November 2009 the NLF completed a limited audit of some of the libraries it has supported. The purpose of the audit was to assess whether the use of computers in these libraries met NLF's expectations and also to assess the overall management and long term sustainability of the audited libraries. This paper presents the findings from the audit with a brief description of the history of library development and the status of existing libraries in Nepal. It concludes with recommendations which we believe could be usefully applied in whole or in part to library development in Nepal.

History of Library Development

The UNESCO Human Development Report (2004¹) states categorically that literacy 'is the foundation for social, economic, and environmental progress

1 http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR2004_measuringliteracy.pdf

in developing countries.' Any long term vision for the development of Nepal needs therefore to include literacy as a priority. The current lack of government support for libraries in Nepal reflects a lack of recognition of the part that libraries can play in promoting literacy. This situation, however, needs to be seen within the historical development and support of literacy in Nepal.

Nepal was ruled from 1846 to 1950 by an oligarchic dictatorship of the Rana clan, which sought to maintain its monopoly on power and actively discouraged public education. A British Army surgeon in the Kathmandu Residency stated in 1877 that '... to find schools and colleges in Nepal is like finding snakes in Ireland' (quoted by Parajuli, 2009). Visiting Nepal in 1890, Sylvain Levi commented that 'there were a few learned scholars here and there, but the torch of ancient knowledge was dying out' (quoted from Uprety, 1962). The first college for tertiary education in Nepal, Trichandra College, was opened in 1918. Its primary purpose was to provide English education to the Rana clan. Prior to the opening of the college, the Ranas had opened a few schools but there was no system of universal education. At this time (except for some minor local instances outside Kathmandu) public libraries were largely unknown. With the gradual opening of educational institutions, a growing awareness of the value of libraries developed, an enthusiasm not shared by the government. In 1930 a group of young students applied to the Rana Government for permission to start a public library (the Sarawasti Public Library) in Kathmandu. They were charged with sedition; some were jailed, some were released after paying huge fines and others released after signing an undertaking to eschew any social activism for the ensuing twelve years.

In 1950, the Rana oligarchy was replaced by a democratic political system. This led to a tide of enthusiasm through the nation for public education and the founding of public libraries. Between 1950 and 1960 several public libraries were established throughout the country through community initiatives, but there was no formal state recognition of libraries as institutions at this time, a situation which has continued to this day.

In 1960 the king dismissed Nepal's first popularly elected government and started ruling the country as an absolute monarch. Public libraries were again discouraged and the libraries established in the fifties began to close. This was possibly hastened by the lack of dedicated financial

support, as well as it being to the benefit of the government to limit access to information. The interest in public libraries blossomed again after 1990 when absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional form of democratic government. This is evident from the re-opening of a number of rural community libraries which were closed during the king's authoritarian rule and the number of requests for support for community libraries being received by INGOs such as Room to Read, Read Nepal and the NLF. The number of libraries in Nepal increased from about 400 in 1990 to about 800 in 2003 (Shrestha 2009). In 2004, for the first time a significant urban community library run by Nepali people, the Society for Kathmandu Valley Public Library, was established in Kathmandu.

Library development started to suffer after 1994 when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) started the self-styled 'People's War' and the whole country became engulfed in the resulting insurgency. Such an environment diminished any enthusiasm to allocate funds for supporting any but basic educational needs. Although most community-based libraries escaped unharmed during this time, at least one long established community library (in Beni) was destroyed in a battle between the CPN-M and government forces. In 2006, the insurgency ceased and the issue of education and literacy has since come to the forefront politically, with efforts being made to enshrine education and free access to information in the new constitution.

The current status of literacy and public libraries In the last 20 years, the adult literacy rate in Nepal has grown from around 30 percent to 49 percent (UNICEF 2008) and the demand for libraries has grown in tandem. The growth in libraries since 1990 has occurred because of community initiatives and financial and technical support from international non-government organisations (INGOs). The two most prominent amongst these INGOs are Rural Education and Development (READ) and Room to Read. Both of these INGOs are based in the US and operate locally from offices in Kathmandu. Room to Read states that it has established over 2,800 libraries of different kinds and has built many schools in Nepal (2011)². READ Nepal has helped create 45 community libraries which are often multi-functional and all of which have a self-sustaining component (2011)³.

2 <http://www.roomtoread.org/page.aspx?pid=311>

3 <http://www.readglobal.org/our-work/read-nepal>

As previously stated, to date Nepal does not have any legislation concerning libraries and the government has no national library policy. Consequently, there are no national library standards. A draft Library Act has been pending review by the Ministry of Education for a while. As a result, the growth of libraries has occurred without a clear understanding of the roles libraries play and without articulated classification and management standards. The classification of libraries in Nepal is thus at best informal.

Shrestha (2009) provides one such classification. Libraries are classified into five categories: governmental, children's, academic, community and 'foreign mission' libraries. According to Shrestha, the academic libraries include libraries in schools and private specialist libraries. Community libraries include a uniquely Nepali experiment in rural mobile libraries: the books are carried between villages and delivered to homes in *dokos*, a cane basket used to carry goods and infirm people in the hills. The foreign mission libraries are run by foreign embassies in Kathmandu e.g. the American Library, British Council Learning Centre, Bharat Sanskritic Kendra. Most libraries except foreign mission libraries in Nepal suffer from a very limited budget because of the lack of formal recognition of libraries in law and the subsequent lack of funding through a legally established tax base. The lack of appropriate legislation has resulted in a general lack of trained librarians and information technology experts. Very few libraries have lending services.

The UNESCO/IFLA Public/Community Library Manifesto (1994)⁴ defines a public or community library as 'the local gateway to knowledge, [which] provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups'. Based on this definition, Shrestha reports that 'The survey report (*of 2003*) shows a very poor picture about public (*community*) libraries. More than 90 percent of the public libraries were not in a position to support specific needs [and] the small collection of books and newspapers is insufficient to provide library services to the community'. Audit findings and discussion Over the last five years, the NLF has provided over 80 computers and thousands of books to various school and community libraries in Kathmandu and the mid-western hill districts of Nepal. In 2009, NLF formally audited three

4 <http://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>

school libraries in Nagi, Reema and Tikot villages in Myagdi District of Western Nepal and a children's library in Kaski which does not as yet have computers. The NLF team also completed assessment visits to two other libraries which had requested NLF support. The auditing consisted of interviewing the headmaster and 'computer teacher', visits to book holding sections and interviews with librarians. The audit questions were designed to determine whether the computers were being used for retrieving new information and for learning; to assess the library management system and the long term sustainability program of each audited library. As a policy, NLF usually does not support libraries which do not have a long-term sustainability program and a strategy for community involvement and, where appropriate, school involvement in the library management. The audit revealed a number of problems in respect of the use of computers as a resource for knowledge acquisition; in the management of library holdings (books) and sustainability of the libraries. It also identified prospects for future growth of rural libraries in Nepal. These problems and prospects are discussed below.

Problems

In all the schools we audited a number of computers were out of commission due to fairly minor issues with either hardware or software. The community or the school lacked a maintenance budget and the basic skills necessary to carry out the repairs or software reconfiguration. Due to the cost of Microsoft operating systems the NLF had recommended use of an Open Source Linux version for an operating system. This took the form of Nepalinix 3.0 as a standard workstation operating system, Linux server software for networking of workstations and Linux Terminal Server Project (LTSP) software to serve pilot thin client networks. In a thin client network, a number of terminals draw their computational capacity from a single server, thus offsetting the need for computers of full computing capability at each work station. The thin client networks provide easily managed and maintained and highly cost-effective computer labs with the potential for reduced power consumption, an issue of critical importance in a country with a serious shortage of electricity. The thin client installations proved to be very successful and have demonstrated the potential for this technology to provide low cost, lower power consuming, and relatively easily maintained computer networks in rural areas. However the Nepalinix

installations did not prove to be popular due in part to the unfamiliarity of the interface. In one school the Linux server and workstation software had been replaced with a more familiar and freely available pirated commercial product. There are also more economical and more easily managed shared computing software products now available that would preclude the use of thin client systems.

NLF had hoped that the computers would be used in educational contexts as discussed above. However, this was not happening. We found that outside the computer class where the students learned simple computing skills, the computers in libraries were being used almost exclusively for e-mail and social networking. The low band width, the teachers' limited experience of the use of digital information resources as teaching and learning aids, a lack of proficiency in the English language and the lack of Nepali content together discouraged the use of computers as a source of new information. The lack of relevant content was a major factor in the limited use of computers, but poor or non-existent training was also a major factor. This was also noted by Thapa and Saebo (2011) who studied 'the multidimensional challenges and perspectives of ICT4D project in the mountainous regions of Nepal' and concluded that to make maximum socio-economic impact by the use of ICT 'it is critical to develop on-line content based on the Nepalese Language.' Thapa and Saebo carried out their study in schools in Nagi and Tikot, two of the schools NLF had audited.

The other significant finding from the audit was that very little thought had been given to sustainability issues, e.g the limited life of computers and the resources required for their efficient use. It is perhaps a reflection of the difficulty of keeping the computers running once they have been installed that Room to Read, by far the largest provider of library resources in Nepal, has suspended its 'Computer Room Redesign' program, citing lack of reliable infrastructure (e.g. electricity), lack of sustainability, and low skill levels.

As a condition of its support, NLF required the recipients of NLF donations (books and computers) to maintain a record of the library use before and after the support was provided and assess the benefits accrued from the support. Unfortunately this was not done. We were, however, advised by the authorities in all libraries we audited that the library usage had increased considerably since the receipt of the donations. Unfortunately there was no data to confirm this.

Prospects

Wherever we went, in villages or urban areas, we found communities, and particularly young people, anxious to learn and willing to contribute to have a functioning library in their schools and villages. Unfortunately, because of the lack of exposure and training they had little knowledge of how to use a library as a learning resource. On the advice of NLF, one of the libraries started a book club where members of the club meet every two weeks and critique a book they read over a period of one month. The members of this book club had also taken up the task of cleaning the village on a regular basis. They are also planning to start children's book reading sessions in their library soon. Thus the basic pre-condition for the future growth of libraries is already there. There are other indicators of reasonable prospects for future growth, but much work by the community and the major players in library development is required.

Nepal's National Planning Commission Three Year Interim Plan (2007/8-2009/10) includes the following statement: 'Libraries will gradually be established in community schools. Programs will be implemented to encourage local bodies and organizations to open and run libraries in different educational institutes in the backward regions.' This is a step in the right direction, but much robust action is required. Sadly, there is little evidence to show that even this programme has been implemented.

The Ministry of Education of the Government of Nepal is beginning to show an interest in enhancing the quality of education in Nepali schools through the use of Information and Communication technology. The vision is to provide an e-library in every high school in Nepal. About one million US dollars have been allocated for the current fiscal year to start a pilot programme. Pending the implementation of this programme on a national scale to serve the many communities demonstrating a strong willingness to support libraries, a policy might be developed to encourage local funding initiatives such as those that have worked well in the libraries developed by READ Nepal. A fund-matching program from the central or local government could build on these initiatives and give local ownership to community libraries. It could also be used to encourage best practices, support the standardisation of training and technology, promote cost savings through bulk purchases of equipment, and encourage the mobilisation of libraries to support educational reform. The issue of financial sustainability is paramount and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency by local

and central governments, library promoters and communities seeking assistance to create libraries. Without sustainability, any work completed to date towards developing libraries is almost certain to be of little use in the long term.

The need and demand for libraries in Nepal is far too big to be met by individual community initiatives and the efforts of INGOs alone. These demands are unlikely to be satisfied unless the Nepal government develops a national library policy enshrined in either legislation or the new constitution. The Government seems to have recognised this and has started taking an interest in this development. The INGOs and NGOs, and the community at large that is already involved in this field, could assist the government in a number of ways. For example, the training of librarians and teachers currently provided independently by INGOs (including Room to Read and Read Nepal) and local NGOs (including Help Nepal Net, Society for Kathmandu Valley Public Libraries, and NLF) could be combined to develop training modules for specific skill development and cost-effectively enhance the quality of training. The training programme could be standardised and offered within a framework leading to certification and scheduled to run in centres across the country. After our audit, NLF met all the major INGOs and NGOs involved in library development. There was a willingness expressed by all parties concerned to participate in a combined training programme. The consolidated training programme, when developed, could be a model for the government to adopt.

Considering the demand for computers and digital libraries and the government's interest in developing ICT based education and community digital information access, it will be critical to address problems such as the appropriateness of hardware and software and content development for favourable future growth in libraries. The issues of software and hardware are given little attention by library developers in Nepal, including the government. The hardware used in libraries is often unsuited to the conditions and power sources available. In one village we saw computers which had sat unused for over a year because of a lack of reliable power. Systems with minimal power consumption are needed that can operate on uninterrupted power sources (UPS) which can be charged either by alternative energy sources or when the grid is up and running. The use of commercial operating systems (OS) exposes any internet connected

computer to virus attack unless it is protected and updated regularly with protective software. Since the number of legal copies of any OS in Nepal is from our own observations very low, the updating provided to owners of legal copies of an OS to correct security flaws is unavailable, creating further risks of disruption.

Efforts to produce a native language Open Source OS have not as yet been realised despite significant investment by aid agencies. Although 'free' software is an attractive proposition, the reality of constant maintenance and updates comes at a cost. In the case of the Nepali native language Linux version, Nepalinux, the business model for its development did not accommodate the costs of the development cycle once the initial funding had run out in 2008. When pirated software is freely available, the question of whether the Nepali computer-using community is willing to support the costs of development and adopt a new product is moot. This question is perhaps answered by the fact that we were unable to locate any other installations of Nepalinux in an institutional setting apart from the ones we supported. However a coordinated effort to make use of the existing localised resources within a sustainable context is currently underway (April 2011) with significant government interest being shown.

Thus a set of standards needs to be generated to guide the installation of computers in libraries. This might include the development of low power-consuming, shared computing networks which are virtually maintenance free and largely immune to virus attacks. Lacking dependency on workstation hard drive and operating system, a shared computing workstation or 'seat' offers full interactive functionality of a conventional OS (such as Windows) driven workstation. These are institutional solutions to a common problem. If a standard could be developed for libraries and schools by government and NGOs, it would go a long way towards addressing the many issues of hardware deployment. We suggest that a dedicated non-profit organisation providing a for-fee service should be created to address this. In order for this to work, a significant commitment would have to be made to create a viable market. Sustainability plans are of paramount importance in any deployment, however. These should include hardware replacement and continual training programmes to ensure that there is sufficient locally-based knowledge to run and maintain the resources. We would suggest that a national strategy is developed, in collaboration with government and NGOs, to ensure a degree of standardisation which allows

for economies of scale in purchasing, coordinated training and content development.

Nepal already has a highly competent NGO, the Open Learning Exchange, Nepal (OLE), involved in digital content development. The NLF has been working with OLE and has supported it in developing an e-library (electronic library) with Nepali language content which is now available on line. This work needs to be continued and expanded. Local server-based educationally relevant digital content is now also available at a moderate cost to any library with basic computers but without internet access.

Conclusions

The development of libraries in Nepal is in its infancy. In the last twenty years, some library development work has been done by community initiatives and by international agencies such as the NLF. These include opening of new community/school libraries in rural areas and the provision of children's books to hundreds of elementary schools. The NLF recently completed an audit of a number of libraries it has supported. The purpose of the audit was to assess whether the libraries contributed to the learning needs of the community and whether the libraries were sustainable in the long term. The audit identified a number of problems. These include consistent definition of the purpose, scope, kind and level of service a library is expected to provide; lack of training in library management; lack of government legislation to support libraries; lack of reliable long term financial support; undeveloped reading habits in the country; lack of understanding of the workings of a computer and absence of contents in the Nepali language.

The audit team also considered the prospects for the future growth of libraries in the country. Despite the disappointing audit findings there were a number of indicators which seem to suggest that the growth of libraries will probably accelerate, provided the government of Nepal and other players in library development recognise the problems identified in this paper and collectively take steps to address them. It was evident from the audit that for long-term sustainability, besides the provision of books and ITC resources, Nepal needs a coordinated approach towards teacher and librarian training; classification of libraries; and a clear commitment from the government, supported by appropriate legislation, to support libraries across the nation and provide long term funding. The most hopeful sign for

future growth is that the government has started to show an interest in the development of libraries across the nation and in ICT based education. It has already allocated money to commence a pilot programme in the current Nepali fiscal year (2010-2011). The players in the library movement in Nepal recognise the benefits of working collectively and wish to participate in such a programme. This needs to be coordinated and put into action.

Given the history of popular access to books it is hardly surprising that Nepal does not have a culture of reading for pleasure and learning. Books are a rare and expensive resource. To remedy this, libraries need to be designed and marketed to meet local needs, and teachers need to be shown how a library can be used to support classroom learning. Outreach programmes need to be instituted to canvass people on the resources they want and to show how a library can be of benefit to them. They must also serve the needs of the pre-literate, offering means by which the non-reader can access information and gain access to full literacy.

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