Library Development in Nepal

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Abstract

The number of public libraries in Nepal per unit of population is amongst the lowest in the world. This is partly rooted in the country’s history. The Rana Prime Ministers, who ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951, considered literate, informed citizens a potential threat to their absolute power. When the Rana regime was ousted by a popular revolution in 1951, Nepal had less than a dozen high schools for a population of about nine million, and public libraries did not exist. Since then, Nepal's governing politics has vacillated between liberal democracy and dictatorship, and with it, the importance accorded to the access to education, expansion of literacy and establishment of public and school libraries. In general, liberal democratic governments supported literacy development; autocratic governments did not. Without the widespread availability of school and public libraries, Nepal will not be able to sufficiently increase the capacity of its human resources and realize its potential for economic prosperity. As yet, the Nepali governments' attitude towards libraries in general and school and public libraries, in particular, has been little more than lip service. The result is that the country of nearly 30 million people has few public libraries worthy of the name, and most government schools lack a library. Nepal also has no laws regulating and supporting funding of libraries. The government needs to legislate and enforce such laws as a matter of urgency to meet its economic and social development ambitions.

1. Introduction

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)\(^1\) defines a library as "an organization, or part of an organization, the main aim of which is to facilitate the use of such information resources, services and facilities as are required to meet the informational, research, educational, cultural or recreational needs of its users". Under that broad definition, the IFLA classifies libraries into
several types depending on their service point, the scope of their services, and the patrons they serve. Those which are relevant to this paper are:

“A National Library is a library that is responsible for acquiring and conserving copies of all relevant documents published in the country in which the library is located. This definition allows for more than one national library in a country.”

“Academic library is a library whose primary function is to cover the information needs of learning and research. This includes libraries of institutions of higher education and general research libraries”.

“Public library is a general library that is open to the public (even if its services are primarily intended for a particular part of the population to be served, such as children, visually impaired persons, or hospital patients) and that serves the whole population of a local or regional community and is usually financed, in whole or in part, from public funds. Its basic services are free of charge or available for a subsidized fee”.

“Community library is a library that is not part of an area’s statutory library provision and is not managed or fully funded by a local or national government authority. A community library provides library services to the population of a local or regional community and may be managed and funded by community groups, charities, NGOs and others. However, they may still receive some public funding from the local authority to provide library services based on different funding models”.

“School library is a library attached to all types of schools below the third (tertiary) level of education whose primary function is to serve the pupils and teachers of such a school, however it may also serve the general public.”

The UNESCO Human Development Report states that literacy “is the foundation for social, economic, and environmental progress in developing countries”. By far the three most important facilities for a nation's overall literacy enhancement, educational and – therefore - development perspectives are school libraries, public
libraries and community libraries. The standard and number of a country's public libraries and their use is widely accepted as an effective metric of the country's development potential.

This chapter looks at the history of library development in Nepal and discusses the status of public, community and school libraries in the country using the experience of the Nepal Library Foundation (NLF). It examines the role of the Nepali government in library development and concludes with recommendations for formulating the country's library policy.

Unless otherwise referred to, the words “public” and “community” libraries are used synonymously in this paper. Foreign mission libraries, such as the popularly known American Library, British Library or Indian Library are not included in the discussion.

2. History of Library Development

The Rana oligarchy ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951 with the King as the titular head. The Ranas were concerned that an informed, literate population would be a threat to their feudalistic, authoritarian regime. Until the middle of the 19th century schools were rarities in Nepal. Parajuli (2009) quotes a British Army surgeon in Britain’s Kathmandu Residency in 1877: "....to find schools and colleges in Nepal is like finding snakes in Ireland". The same applied to libraries. The Nepal National Education Planning Commission report (Education in Nepal, 1956) states that in 1948, there were only six high schools in Nepal; in 1954 the number increased to around 80. The percentage of school-aged children were attending school in 1954 was 3.5.

Durbar High School, Nepal's oldest school, opened in 1854 and was meant exclusively for the education of Rana clan members. Ordinary Nepalis were allowed in the school only in 1901. Similarly, Tri Chandra College, opened in 1918, was beyond the reach of ordinary citizens until the Rana regime was overthrown in 1951. The library in Durbar School was Nepal's the first academic (school) library and the library in Tri-Chandra, the first college library.
The historical records of the development of public libraries in Nepal are very limited. Karki (2002) describes the beginning of the concept of a systemic storing place for government manuscripts during the Rana period; Prajuli (2019) analyses the "confictual relationship between the Nepali state and its citizens through the history of public libraries" in three different periods - the Rana period (1846-1951); the period after the advent of Democracy (1951-1960) and the Panchyat period, the period of the King's authoritarian rule (1960-1990). Niraula (2017) discusses the developments before and after the fall of the Panchayat dictatorship. Dali (2020) describes the role of International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) and Non-Government Organization (NGO) in Nepal's Library development.

In 1812, King Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shahdev initiated the collection and systematic management of "sacred manuscripts and texts on religion, philosophy, tantra, astrology, economics, Aruvidya, literature, etc" by affixing a royal seal on an enabling policy document (Parajuli, 2019; Dali, 2020; Karki, 2002). Ordinary citizens did not have access to this collection. Nevertheless, the day of the royal seal is considered as the beginning of the evolution of libraries and is celebrated as the “Library Day” in Nepal.

Until the mid-1990s, public or community libraries supported by the government did not exist. However, a number of libraries financed by local philanthropists and founded with community initiatives existed outside the Kathmandu Valley. Some of the Rana Prime Ministers seemed tolerant of libraries outside, but not in the Valley. Others objected the very idea of community libraries, irrespective of their location. Prime Minister Chandra Sumsher Rana (1901-1929) incarcerated any one suspect of holding books that he considered political (Parajuli, 2019). The fate of Nepal’s libraries thus depended upon the attitude of the Prime Minister of the day.

As far back as the 1740s, the "Pandit Pustakalaya", possibly a school library, existed in Pokhara (Parajuli (2019). In 1915, Shri Gorkha Sharada Bhavan Pustakalaya was established as a part of Chhandramanik Pathsala (a school) in the district of Shiraha. Although Chandramanik Pathasala was a school library, it was
open to the general public in the evenings, and therefore it may be called Nepal's first public library. Other libraries outside Kathmandu included Pashupati Pratap Library (founded in 1936) in Taulihawa, Kapilbastu and Dhaval Library (founded in 1947) in Tansen, Palpa and Pahilo Pustakalaya in Sarlahi. Prime Minister Bhim Sumsher Rana (1929-1932) closed Dhaval Library and Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher Rana (1948-1951) seized Pahilo Pustakalaya and imprisoned those involved (Parajuli, 2019).

In 1930, some young men, among them Laxmi Prashad Devkota, who was later recognized as Nepal's poet laureate, petitioned the government for permission to open "Saraswati Public Library* in Kathmandu. All of them were arrested, fined Rs. 100 each and released on the condition "not to be involved in any work of public welfare" (Parajuli, 2019); see also Dali (2020). The day of the arrest is remembered as "Library Parv" (Library Festival) in Nepal.

During the Rana period and after the fall of the Ranas, some bookish, educated Kathmandu elites built substantial private libraries. Noteworthy amongst them were the Kaiser Sumsher Rana's Library, the Dilli Raman Regmi's library and the Hem Raj Sharma Pandey's library.

The period of democracy between 1951 and 1960 saw a substantial growth in community libraries. In 1951 Nepal's literacy rate was less than 2% (Parajuli, 2019); or 5%, according to a US government country report5. Enhancement of literacy became the priority of the democratic Governments during the 1951-1960 period.

* Saraswati is Hindu’s goddess of wisdom
They encouraged the establishment of schools and libraries at the community level. As a result, numerous community libraries were established across the country. The government also started to financially support libraries although the support was ad-hoc and the funds allocated were modest. According to *His Majesty’s Government (HMG), Sarvangin Rastiya Shiksha Samito Report, Kathmandu Ministry of Education, HMG, 1961*, there were 122 (community) libraries in 1961, up from just a few in 1951 (cit. from Parajuli, 2019).

In 1956 the Government of Nepal acquired the collection of the private library of Hem Raj Sharma Pandey, added to it the holdings in Central Secretariat Libraries and, in 1957, commissioned the combined collection as “Nepal's National Library (NNL)”. The holdings in the NNL were thus a random mix of collections from Private Libraries, government secretariat and manuscripts of historical and archaeological importance.

In 1960, when the King dissolved the democratically elected government and introduced the Panchyat System (a pseudo name for the King’s dictatorship), the library development suffered a serious setback. Libraries that did not explicitly support the King’s dictatorship were either closed under government orders or their financial support was suspended, and they consequently perished. Only libraries the government could use as propaganda platforms survived (see Parajuli, 2019).

In 1990, the absolute monarchy was overthrown and democracy restored. The successive governments, which came to power since then, made some policy decisions towards a nationwide development of public/community libraries, but these were hardly implemented. They have however been supportive of non-government initiatives towards library development. Since the early 1990s, several INGOs and NGOs have been active throughout the country. The most prominent amongst the INGOs are “Rural Education and Development (READ)”6 and “Room to Read”7. The NGOs are “Lions Manaram Foundation8” and “Nepal Library Foundation9”.

READ is a USA- based INGO which includes the development of community Libraries as a part of its community development program. Since the start of its activities in 1991 it has assisted in the establishment of 69 community libraries in 43
districts (Dali, 2020). “Room to Read” is another USA-based INGO. It assists in setting up libraries in elementary (public) schools and funds their operation for a period of three years. Afterwards, the libraries are expected to support themselves. The “Room to Read” started in Nepal in 2001 and by 2020, it had established around 4500 libraries across the country.

Lions Manaram Foundation “initiates libraries” as a part of its community support activities.

The Nepal Library Foundation, Canada (NLF-Canada) is dedicated to library development in Nepal and works through its Nepal based sister organization and NGO, Nepal Library Foundation, Nepal (NLF-Nepal). NLF’s work is further described below.

3. Nepal Library Foundation
The “NLF-Canada” is a Charity registered with the Federal Government of Canada. Its mission is to "enhance educational opportunities for Nepali people through the medium of public libraries". It assists proponents of libraries in setting up community or school libraries; providing books and computers; offering library staff training in library management; setting up reading clubs, supplying orientation training to school teachers in using the e-pustakalaya (described below); advocating for legislations to support the government’s library policies with the government of Nepal, and monitoring the performance of libraries it has established. [see also Adhikari, 2016; Shrestha, 2017; Dali, 2020).

The NLF-Canada functions entirely on volunteer support. The funds for setting up the libraries is provided largely by members of the Nepali diaspora (legally defined as “Non-Resident Nepali") in high-income countries, who wish to establish libraries in their home town and village schools, and by non-Nepalis wishing to help Nepal. The NLF-Nepal implements NLF-Canada projects and also initiates other library projects on its own. It is also largely volunteer supported, with the exception of one paid staff in charge of its Kathmandu office.
The NLF’s vision of public/community libraries is inspired by the UNESCO/IFLA Public/Community Library Manifesto of 1994 (ILFA, 2020 which defines a public/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” (Koirala and Bird, 2011). The NLF envisions a community library as not just a resource for knowledge, but also as an open community space where all matters related to the well-being of the community - from literary enhancement programs to adult education; from environment to community hygiene - are discussed. NLF recognizes libraries, which satisfy the above vision as "Model libraries".

An audit of the performance of some of NLF supported libraries conducted in 2009 identified several deficiencies that inhibit the use of libraries to their full potential: the libraries lacked trained librarians; library usage was less than expected; sustainability of libraries was uncertain; library holdings were not updated; and the computers were hardly being used for knowledge acquisition (Koirala and Bird, 2011). These deficiencies have prevailed and are discussed below.

**Lack of trained librarians:** The lack of financial resources makes it difficult to hire qualified librarians who would be able to address the unique demands of a community library in rural Nepal. This would require a multidisciplinary skillset, including skills in day-to-day library management; ability to inspire the community to read and to promote the use of the library as a knowledge resource and community center; ability to work with the community; basic information technology skills significant to maintain the computers’ functionality and full knowledge of the capacity of Nepal’s digital library (e-pustakalaya or e-library). Obviously the training module for such a librarian differs from that of a typical academic library management curriculum.

**Library Usage:** The consequence of Nepal’s long-standing low literacy rate is that Nepalis never developed a reading culture. Consequently, enhancing people’s reading habit is one of the challenges all libraries in Nepal face. Usually, NLF conducts a ‘book demand survey’ in the community before supplying books for the particular
community library. It provides indication of the community’s needs and interests and helps to ensure the library holdings include relevant books/information. The NLF also encourages the formation of reading clubs to enhance the library’s usage and to help develop the community’s reading habits.

Sustainability of Libraries: Sustainability is the key issue confronting library development in Nepal. In high-income countries, libraries are usually supported through a legislated tax base. In the UK, for example, the first library legislation was the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which allowed municipalities to raise capital through a tax base to build and sustain libraries. This legislation emerged from such movements as the Mechanics Institutes, which were formed in early 19th century to provide educational resource to workmen. Industrialists who realized the benefits of an educated working class had also joined the movement. Over the years, philanthropic funding was replaced by steady government funding. Public funding through a tax base would be the key to sustainability of libraries in Nepal.

Library Holdings not updated: None of the libraries visited during the audit had added to their holdings since the library was first established. This was primarily because of the lack of sustainable funding.

Computer usage: The audit found that the library computers were being used mostly for e-mails and for simple computations, but not as a resource for new knowledge. The reasons given were community members, students and teachers lack of proficiency in the English language, (at the time of auditing, there was no information/books in vernacular languages available in the digital media); school teacher’s limited experience in using digital resources as teaching and learning input and insufficient bandwidth making downloading internet information painfully time consuming. The lack of IT specialists to solve operational hitches in the computers and unreliable power supply also contributed to the limited use.

After the audit, the NLF collaborated with Open Learning Exchange Nepal (OLE) to alleviate some of the aforesaid difficulties. OLE, with NLF’s financial support,
developed Nepal’s first digital library (e-pustakalaya) in 2009 and has expanded it significantly since then. E-pustakalaya can be freely accessed online. Its holdings include thousands of books in Nepali and Nepal’s other languages as well as in English language. To address the difficulty of accessing the Internet in rural areas, the NLF supported OLE to develop a local server kit. By installing the server in a library, the e-pustakalaya can be accessed off-line simultaneously by up to 50 locally networked computers. E-pustakalaya is working well in most of the schools except for occasional technical problems, which takes time to resolve due to the remoteness of the libraries.

As of December 2020, the NLF had assisted in establishing 252 libraries across the country, 22 of which are conventional libraries, which include book holdings as well as e-pustakalaya, and 230 installations of e-pustakalaya in existing libraries. One of these libraries works as a knowledge resource as well as a community centre and has been recognized by NLF as a Model Library.

Still, significant challenges remain. Besides limited funding to continue its work, the foremost challenge NLF has faced is in inspiring people to read. The Reading Clubs have been successful where the librarians have leadership skills and are self-motivated to learn and share, but this is not the case everywhere. For several reasons the promotion of reading habits has been difficult:

Because of the historically quite low literacy rate, reading for pleasure or learning never became a part of Nepali culture. The literacy rate in 2018 still was just 60%11 , and reading culture still has to take root. Such cultural changes can be affected through dedicated government policy.

- The houses in rural Nepal are not well equipped for reading. In most of the rural houses, there is a lack of proper lighting. Children are expected to help their parents in household chores, and hence they have little spare time for reading.

- The teaching method in the schools is largely by memorizing; independent research, for which a library is needed, is not required.
- Teacher absentee in schools is rampant and the teachers do not encourage the students to read outside their curricula. The majority of the teachers themselves do not read for enhancement of their knowledge base or even for pleasure.

**Digital Vs Conventional Libraries:** The request from non-resident of Nepalis (NRNs), the major group funding libraries, has been overwhelmingly towards installing e-pustakalaya in their village schools, commonly called “establishing e-library”. Mainly two reasons are put forward for this: a) installing an e-library is significantly less expensive than establishing a conventional library b) the possession of computers gives a sense of pride to the villagers who, until now, only heard of computers, but did not have access to them. C) an e-library provides easy access to thousands of varied resources. The emphasis on an e-library has created several unforeseen difficulties. First, functionality of e-libraries relies on a stable power source, functioning hardware, and availability of computers to all who want to use it. Also, since the hardware has a limited life cycle, unless it can be replaced as required, the whole library dies when the hardware ceases to function.

Further issue is that normally the donors pay for about five computers. Thus, even in a situation where all of the five computers are fully functional, only five people can use the e-library at a time.

NLF considers a traditional library with a minimum of five computers to be the best model for rural Nepal. Some of the advantages of a traditional library over a digital library are that the readers can borrow books from the library and read at home; the library does not suffer from breakdown of computers and also books have a longer shelf life than computers.

**3. Government’s Role in Library Development**

Niraula (2017) traces the evolution of Government laws/regulations/policies and directives from the year 1812 to the modern times. In 1812, a Royal decree started the concept of records collection. The Education Commission formed after the
advent of democracy in 1950, mandated libraries in all schools and envisaged using academic libraries as Public Libraries as well. However, there is no evidence this policy was actually carried out, and most of Nepal’s schools do not have a functioning library. In the 1950s, the Nepal National Library and the Tribhuvan University Central Library were established by the government’s initiative.

The National Planning Commission’s (NPC) recommendations in successive five-year plans (from 1960 to 2008) and several three-year plans (from 2008 to 2020) and the Ministry of Education’s other library-related policies also recommended the provision of academic libraries. But just a few, if any, of the NPC’s recommendations have been carried out.

Niraula concludes that although the governments’ education policies refer to the development of libraries in general, their actual emphasis appears to be on promoting and regulating academic libraries. There is very little in these laws/policies to support public/community libraries. ” A careful analysis of the government documents prepared for Nepal’s systematic development show the government actions for promotion and support of public libraries are inadequate as long as the development of public libraries is not tied at the policy level with the overall development of the country, the development of public library system will remain a daydream in Nepal.”

In 2007 the Government of Nepal approved the first “Library and Information Policy, 2007” (Shrestha and Pokhrel, 2017) which recognizes a library as an integral part of education. It envisions local bodies to fund the establishment and management of community libraries through a tax system. But Shrestha and Pokhrel complain that the policy is not implemented due to the lack of Library Law.

Shrestha and Pokhrel estimated that in 2017 there were about 800 public/community libraries scattered all over Nepal. These libraries have limited holdings, including books donated by international agencies with little regard for local culture and needs. They are not updated and the libraries themselves lack even the essential infrastructure facilities such as toilets or a reliable power source. According to a
survey carried out by the NLA, "more than 90 percent of community libraries are not in a position to support specific needs of the community. The limited collection of books, newspapers are not sufficient to provide library services in a real sense to the rural community as envisaged by UNESCO".

The majority of the public/community libraries that Shrestha and Pokhrel mention were established with the assistance of INGO/NGOs, referred earlier. The government operates some old private Libraries (bequeathed to them by their owners upon their death) as public Libraries. They are partially or fully funded by the Government. The most notable amongst them are Kaiser Pustakalaya\textsuperscript{14} and Dilliraman-Kalyani Regmi Memorial Library\textsuperscript{15} and Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya\textsuperscript{16}, one of the most systematically managed libraries in Nepal. It is partially supported by the government. Public access to the library is restricted.

A notable academic library operated by the Government is Tribhuvan University Central Library, which is the biggest library in Nepal and includes over 500 handwritten books, including one with golden scripts.

The April 2015 earthquake destroyed many of afore mentioned libraries. Only some of them have been partially rebuilt and limited service restored. At the time of the earthquake, the NNL was housed in an old Rana palace in Harihar Bhawan in Lalitpur. It had a holding of over 150,000 books and significant collection of archival documents. The earthquake severely damaged the part of the palace and buried the library’s holdings under fallen debris. The collection was safely retrieved and ‘temporarily’ stored in 50,000 burlap bags in a safe location. One of the main functions of the NNL was to provide library services to the general public throughout the country and coordinate the operation of its branches. Since the earthquake it has not been in service.

After intense lobbying by library enthusiasts, in late 2020, when the design of a new NNL building was in progress, the government ordered, without any explanation, that all works related to the library to be immediately stopped (Koirala, 2020). Dali (2020) reports the books and valuable manuscripts are rapidly deteriorating under attack by
paper-eating insects. The government appears to be in no hurry to remedy the situation.

The government of Nepal has no system to classify libraries and no inventory of the type, status, and category of the libraries in the country.

4. Recommendations

Nepal's dream of economic prosperity will not be realized in this highly competitive knowledge-based global economy without a significant increase in the quality of its human resources through enhancement of literacy and of the quality of education. The provision of well-stocked, well-run libraries must be an essential part of this literacy enhancement program. The program should be closely tied to the country's infrastructures development projects. This will require serious commitment at the highest levels of the Government.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) could be taken as a role model. In the 1960s, it was one of the least developed countries, and then turned itself around with a determined program to improve overall literacy and the quality of education. The provision of well-stocked, well-managed public libraries was an integral part of this program. In 1945, ROK's literacy rate was 22%; its per capita GDP in 1961 was $94. In 2020, its literacy rate was 98%, and its GDP per capita more than $30,000. Korean students routinely perform better than students in OECD countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests.

The ROK provides a model Nepal could follow to develop its literacy/knowledge capacity (see Adolphus, 2021; Lee and Joe, 2006). Based on ROK’s experience and the current state of public libraries in Nepal, the following immediate actions are recommended to improve literacy and the status of Nepal's public libraries. The Government should immediately

- Form a commission at the highest level to investigate Nepal's reading culture and recommend a literacy enhancement and public/community libraries/reading habit development program and implement it with urgency.
• Enact the Reading Promotion Culture Act, such as in ROK. ROK’s policies devised by this Act “cover reading programs and movements, creating a desirable reading environment in homes, kindergartens, schools and communities, particular help for those with special needs such as senior citizens, prisoners, the disabled, or families from other cultures, and finally, improvement in the infrastructure of libraries, as described above.”(Adolphus (2021)

• Commit itself to support libraries through public funding and enact appropriate laws to mandate a national integrated library system.

• Develop a library classification system and carry out the status survey of existing libraries.

• Form a high-level commission to study the viability of a digital central library with a mandate to recommend a phased program to develop such a library and the recommendations to execute it. Although Nepal may not be ready for a digital national library yet, there is little doubt there will be a demand for such a library in the future, particularly for international connectivity.

• Develop plans to digitally connect all of Nepal’s libraries to a central government operated library like the National Library.

5. Summary and Conclusion
Nepal's dismally low literacy rate until 1951 was the consequence of past rulers’ active discouragement of public education and concomitant neglect of library development. The democratic governments between 1951-1960 enhanced literacy as their primary agenda, and supported the opening of schools and community libraries. This period saw an upsurge in the opening of schools and community libraries across the nation. The libraries were established entirely with community effort, and the government provided modest financial support to them.
The enthusiasm to open new libraries died after the King dissolved the democratically elected government in 1960. Under him only libraries supporting his agenda were fostered and allowed operation. This period lasted until 1990 when democracy was restored by a popular revolt.

The Governments after 1990 discussed the need to review and develop national library policies, but did not do anything of substance. But they opened the doors to NGOs and INGOs to assist in the establishment of community and school libraries. As a result, most of the community libraries that exist in rural Nepal today were established with financial and technical assistance from NGO/INGOs.

The literacy rate in Nepal in 2018 was 68 percent (male 78.6 and female 59.7)\(^7\) (UNESCO 2021), less than in many developing countries. Nepalis’ aspirations for economic prosperity in today’s highly competitive knowledge-based global economy will not be realized until it rapidly develops the human capacity to support such an economy. A speedy expansion of its literacy is a prerequisite for such capacity enhancement.

One of the major challenges the country faces is to boost the people’s reading habit. This requires a sustained effort at the highest level. Hence, a government-supported literacy policy integrated with economic policy, enabled by appropriate laws, including a ‘Library Law’ is urgently required. The provision for government supported public libraries and reading enhancement programs should be a part of the Library Law. The ROK provides a tested model for such a law. Nepal should follow suit without delay.

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