

Initiative - Light in the mountains

- SREEDEVI P.



The Kalam visit: A special audience listens in. Photo: Special Arrangement

The Youth Library Network in Arunachal Pradesh has won national acclaim for its efforts in empowering rural children.

“What is more important in a library than anything else — than everything else — is the fact that it exists”.
(Archibald MacLeish)

It is that time of the year! In a little school in Kaho — the last Indian village in the Indo-China border — seven-year-old Sonam Meyor can hardly sit still. Today was special. The “book people” were coming to hold an exhibition. And after a long year’s wait, he will finally get to buy two new story-books. He smiles at his luck! And it is for the sake of this smile that a certain 60-year library volunteer travelled for two days up and down the mountains, to the middle of nowhere, in a crowded rickety Sumo with bundles of books.

In another village in Lohit district, 12-year-old Animai is luckier than Sonam. She goes to a boarding school in the nearest town. But now it is the summer vacation. And for Animai, that means work. She walks miles into the jungle to collect firewood and does all the cooking and cleaning, while her mother goes out to the fields. But in the afternoon she has a much more serious responsibility. She is a proud library volunteer in-charge of a box full of books, and the “library-in-the-box” opens from 3 pm till the sun goes down. Her school-mates also run such box-libraries in other villages.

Welcome to Arunachal Pradesh. A paradise tucked far away from the eyes and mind of the national media, that we sometimes need China to remind us of its existence on our map! Although the State has undergone a massive economic facelift in the past 40 years, the quality of human development still remains as uneven as its terrain. Eighty per cent of the population, which depends on subsistence agriculture, still lives in isolated pockets with no road or electrical connectivity and hardly any access to basic health and education.

The school drop-out rates are considerably high, especially among girls. The difficult terrains, differences in culture, language, and institutions among its 26 major and 110 minor tribal communities is a big challenge for educators and policy-makers. Prashant Lokhande, the former Deputy Commissioner and a pioneer of several innovative efforts in Lohit district, observes, “Being primarily oral cultures, written word is not that popular. Even though schools are tolerated as a necessary evil, the liberating potential of reading is hardly recognised. Books to them are text books, bitter medicines to be gulped. And we felt this must change.”

Library movement

It is with this mission that VT-AWIC Youth Library Network came into force. Since 2007, the movement has dedicated itself to the educational empowerment of the rural tribal youth. Conceived by the Association of Writers and Illustrators (AWIC), New Delhi, the Network is monitored by the Vivekananda Trust, Mysore, with active support from local organisations, Lohit and Anjaw district administration and the Border Roads and para-military forces. Its headquarters, the Bamboosa Library, Tezu, is the first youth library in the State. “Ever since its inception, the library has been open every single day,” exclaims the proud librarian, Etalo Mega, a young tribal graduate. Many publications, book-lovers and organisations like the Omprakash Foundation, USA, have helped in building a world class collection that would put most libraries in cities to shame. Says Abhinav Dwivedi, an avid reader-activist, “I wish school was as fun as libraries. The books here are so irresistible.” On Sundays, the library turns into a bustling beehive, with giggling children, story-telling and skit-enacting sessions.

Seeing the futility of the library being confined to a single venue when its potential readers are scattered across, the library spread out into a string of 13 weekend libraries across the Lohit and Anjaw districts, to be managed by local volunteers. One such library is the APNE library in Wakro, which is supported by ASSET, a trust which runs the Apna Vidya Bhavan School and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KG.BV). The girls of KG.BV, Wakro, are active library volunteers, who during vacations, run holiday-libraries in their villages. “We teach the children stories, rhymes, and even play-acting. And they never miss a day!” says Helena, a girl from remote Tumba, near Namdapha forests.

For the last two years, the Library Network has been on a Reading crusade, led by the young reading-activists themselves. They go to schools armed with their books, songs, skits and presentations, recruiting more and more children into their army of book-lovers. “Most of us are scared of books. We want to show our friends how books can be fun,” says 13-year-old Kesilu Tayang, smiling at her friend Arpita Dwivedi, both Library-Activist Award winners. The campaign has already covered 60 schools. Their skits on lesser known personalities like Baby Halder, Dr. Kamala Sohoni and Dr. Usha Mehta are a big hit.

Apart from this, National Book Week is celebrated every year by taking quality and low-priced books to several remote, thinly populated villages.

Promoting native languages

The library movement has also diversified its efforts to promote the native languages which do not have a script. Says Bajai Pul, patron of Totochan Library, Hawaii, “Since language is the repository of a community's knowledge system, the mother tongue has to have a place in our education system.” The children have started collecting and recording folk-tales and memoirs valuable for building up local history. They are now regular contributors to children's magazines like *Children's World* and *Chakmak*.

Today the movement is getting much visibility, winning appreciation from someone no less than Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. Many writers, and volunteers from both India and abroad are contributing whole-heartedly to the cause. Behind all these efforts lies a simple yet profound philosophy. Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor, a.k.a “Uncle Moosa”, the co-ordinator of Vivekananda Trust, who is the true soul and spirit behind the movement, explains it thus: “Every child is blessed with a faculty of wonder and imagination. Books foster and nourish this faculty. But instead of allowing the child to discover the joy of reading, we use books just to unload information suffocating the child's spirit. Hence ours is a campaign to reclaim their right to imagination, the right to indulge in fantasy, the right to remain children. All we want is to help children fall in love with books. And once they recognise books as their soul-mates, our job here is done.”