



LAKSHMAN ANAND

Dr Antonia Neubauer

READ gets Nepal reading

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New Delhi

IN 1988 Dr Antonia Neubauer, an educationist and social worker from Philadelphia, founded Myths and Mountains, a cultural adventure travel company for the socially conscious tourist who wanted to understand different cultures and people.

One day she was trekking up a mountain slope in Nepal. On an impulse she asked her guide, "Dormi, if you could do anything in your village, what would it be?" He replied, "I'd like a library."

Dr Neubauer was elated. "Light bulbs went on for me," she says. A library could become the focal point of an entire community of readers – teachers, students, women and the elderly. And so she founded READ, (Rural Education and Development) the non-profit branch of Myths and Mountains.

In 1991 eight porters carried 900 books and a card catalogue into the tiny village of Junbesi, crossing the 11,800 ft high Lamajura Pass. It was a historic moment. READ had started its first library.

In a mountainous country where the literacy rate is nothing to boast about READ has built 40 libraries. Each has books, periodicals, educational toys, women's books and computers. More than half a million children and adults use the libraries.

Right from the start, Dr Neubauer did not want READ libraries to depend on foreign aid. She developed a sustainable model and the libraries have flourished through Nepal's difficult years as 'Zones of Peace'.

"I personally believe that people can't really depend upon governments. You've got to take control of your own lives. And a lot of the problems of cities are because of migration from villages. If you make villages sustainable, happy places you can alleviate a lot of burden. A village needs four things at an absolute minimum – roads, education, medical care and irrigation," says Dr Neubauer.

The READ model uses a three-pronged system to be sustainable. The library spreads not only education, but economic and social development as well.

"If you built a library in a village with a secondary school, surrounded by elementary schools you can

reach out to a lot of people," says Dr Neubauer.

READ does not seek out communities to build its libraries. Instead the community must approach READ with a proposal which includes a budget, a timeline and a Library Management Committee. Villages also have to come up with a project that will earn enough money to support the library after it is built. In this way, infrastructure and jobs get created in the village.

The community contributes land and around 15 to 20 per cent of the library's construction cost. "The land has to be separate from the school so

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that everyone can use it during hours that reflect the need of the community, with a librarian from the community," says Dr Neubauer.

"The initial funds for the library, about 85 per cent, are usually generated from outside – with the trekking company that we have. We have done a lot of touring and people who have travelled through us are some of our donors," she explains.

Once the business of making the library starts, the village sets up its own NGO. It opens a bank account and has committees to manage the library, its finances and educational programmes. According to Dr Neubauer, multiple management committees make for transparency. "If you try to

steal something everyone in the village will get to know and they will hang you by your toes," she says.

Villagers have come up with business ideas to support the library. Tukche village started a furniture factory. It now makes Rs 15,000 per month. Renting the ground floor of the library to shops has been lucrative and is a popular option. Some villages choose multiple projects.

In Jhuwani the community opted for an ambulance to provide transport for medical emergencies. An ambulance can net anywhere between Rs 18,000 and Rs 26,000 a month, while it costs just Rs 9,000 to support a library. The extra money goes back into the village.

READ partners NGOs to deliver services like literacy classes, health clinics, a preschool, micro-finance or livestock training. It also trains schoolchildren, teachers or interested villagers on how to publish a wall newspaper. Every library has one.

"Mothers tell us, 'For the first time my kid is not playing in the dirt. He's in the library.' Or that their teenagers are not taking drugs but watching a film in the library," says Dr Neubauer. "It has changed lives and we are so proud!"

Villagers travel from miles to take a look at the books, she says.

"It's contagious even within the village. The school looks and says, 'Hey, the library's getting all the money. If they've got a sustaining project, I'm going to try

the same thing.' So they start their own project."

Library membership is free. Each user is issued a card. The only thing libraries charge for is use of the internet or fax. READ trains library staff to do decimal filing, maintain a card catalogue and look after readers.

READ organises a national reading day and a national writing contest. It brings librarians and management committees together from different areas to interact with each other. READ tracks membership circulation. One of their projects this year is to upgrade some of their early libraries.

"We've also started mobile libraries in several villages. Some have a bigger collection of books to reach out to small communities around. This is something that really needs to be expanded," says Dr Neubauer.

In Nepal, the Nepali language strings together 50 ethnic groups. So each library has 3,000 to 5,000 core books in Nepali. The English books consist of a complete set of world book encyclopedias and school books.

"There's latitude for villagers," says Dr Neubauer. "The library might be in a Tibetan area where people want some Tibetan books. We've had people in the Terai region say they want Hindi books."

One of the biggest spin-offs from the READ project is that it has created a market for books, especially children's books in Nepal. "By building 40 lending libraries serving about half a million people, you have created half a million readers. And if you buy the books from Nepal, you're giving business to Nepali publishers. We've also tapped into some publishers in India," explains Dr Neubauer.

The best impact READ has had is getting children to read. "Tukche never had a graduate and children always failed to pass school, but suddenly it has students clearing their exams and finishing school. The entire Terai region had zero education. Now suddenly books are circulating and people are reading. A generation that never went to school currently attends literacy classes," says Dr Neubauer.

The International Reading Association has only recently done an evaluation.

Undoubtedly, READ will get high marks. Book lovers always top the class.