

## A fairy tale story in Arunachal

By | Jan 31, 2014

A typical rainy day... the kids of Apna Vidya Bhavan gather round me to hear the story of Peter Pan. Their faces are a treat for my eyes. As I expected them to, by the end of the story, they ask me, "How do we go to Neverland?" Before I could answer them they bombard me with their creative answers

"By climbing mountains."

"Making ropes out of clouds."

"By swinging to the moon."

I tell them, "You already are in Neverland!"



Wakro may seem like your usual picture post-card village – a remote, educationally and economically backward area in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh – the land of the Mishmi tribes. But what makes its orange orchards a perfect Neverland for the children and bibliophiles like me is the wonderful AWIC (Association of Writers and Illustrators) Apne library. A part of a network of children's libraries coordinated by the Vivekananda Trust, Apne Library is managed by Apna Vidya Bhavan, a school under the Anu Shiksha Seva Trust (ASSET) of Wakro.

(Children's story writer, Aroop Kumar Dutta)

With a whopping collection of 1000-odd books, contributed by the Om Prakash Foundation, USA, this modest but wholesome collection will put most of the libraries in the cities to shame.

The philosophy behind the library and the school itself is interesting. The motto of the Apna Vidya Bhavan, an innovative educational initiative inspired by Swami H.H. Anubhavananda, an eminent spiritual saint of our times, is 'Grow Wise'. The founders believe that education should be 'formative rather than informative'. Rashmi Krisikro, Bursar of Apna Vidya Bhavan says, "At school level, the imparting of subject knowledge isn't as important as kindling the spirit and the passion for the subject. The trick is to get the child to say 'I love maths' not just 'I know maths.'"

In the same way, a book is not something that should be forced upon a child. No one has ever heard of a child being taught to appreciate a flower, or the beauty of the night sky. If that were done, then a flower would be the most repulsive thing. Each child should discover the pleasure of reading for himself/herself. All we need to do is to expose them to books and let each child take his/her own time with them. That is why no student in Apna Vidya Bhavan is forced to read but only encouraged to be with the books. Feel the pages, relish the scent of old books and fresh print. "We are even allowed to just look at the pictures without reading them", says a relieved boy. Adds Ms. Neelima Bora, his teacher, "He will not even realise when he stops looking at the pictures and starts reading."

The books in the library are not at all like the ones that you normally expect in a rural school – shabby, dog eared, torn at the climax of the story. Neither are they cheap re-prints of classics by obscure publishers with tacky illustrations. The books here are as attractive as chocolates and sugar cubes. All the books are by high profile publishers like Bloomsbury, Walt Disney, Scholastic, Golden Books, Harper Collins, Puffin, Usborne, Lady Bird, etc.

There is a sizeable collection of books that have won International awards like the Phoenix Award, the H.C.Andersen Medal, the Caldecott Medal, the Carnegie Medal, etc.

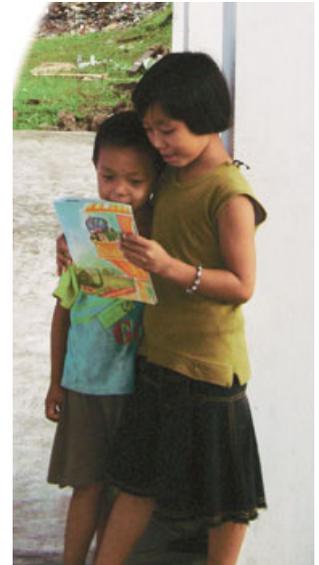
And what books for beginners! You have books that sing songs; books about animals where you just don't see the pictures but also get a feel of their skin textures.

What is commendable is the way these library books have been integrated with classroom learning. There is no separate library room. The books are divided into levels and are kept on open shelves in the corresponding classes. But the children can start reading at whatever level they feel comfortable. The readers themselves are in-charge of the maintenance of the books. No closed cupboards or locks! And the books are not meant just for the students of the school. Anyone from Wakro town can walk in on a weekend afternoon and sit there browsing the books and the magazines!

Library books are a part of the lessons in Apna Vidya Bhavan. So when they learn their lessons, say about Kalpana Chawla, the teacher immediately supplements it with a picture essay of astronauts in space. Science and Geography lessons make much more sense to children when they see the things they learn about. During my stint with the Apne library, my English classes would get longer because the kids would invariably unearth the unabridged glossy version of the lesson we would be doing. Even I would prefer that to the textbook.

Once, holding up her Roald Dahl, a student exclaimed, “I wish I had to read this book for tomorrow instead of that boring lesson”. Struck by her remark, I thought, “Why not!” Curriculum planning must involve people for whom it is meant. NCERT has clearly laid out the objectives and the skills to be fostered. Every teacher can creatively tweak the content. Certain stories that might be appropriate for children in the cities would fail to interest children from the tribal areas. So the children can themselves choose a book from the library and swap it with a lesson. They can select the pages or have the entire book. With the help of the teacher they could even make the questions and the exercises. This worked very well in our small 7<sup>th</sup> standard class.

I found how successful the library was when on a rainy night I saw a boy reading a book using his torchlight hiding under a blanket. On being asked, he explained – “You see, I like reading at night – it is scarier”. Wakro kids like the American books. The girls, for instance, love Barbie stories. They know her middle name as Millicent, but none of them has seen the doll in plastic. They can talk about Ernie and Elmo, characters from ‘fullhouse’ or how delicious pizza with pepperoni is, when even bread is a delicacy for them. However, these kids still identify themselves more with the Indian stories by the Childrens’ Book Trust or the National Book Trust, and our good old mythologies.



The Apne Library is open to the public on weekends. It also conducts regular book exhibitions, competitions like story-telling, book reading, etc. Such competitions have worked wonders with their self-confidence. They have not only participated but won competitions both at the district and state levels. It is remarkable to see that some of the kids are already turning into authors and poets themselves. Says Chowkianso, class 5, “When I grow up I want to be an author or a scientist. I love to write in Mishmi, my language. It is hard to do that because we can’t write Mishmi” (Most languages in Arunachal Pradesh have no script). His songs, which he composed himself, are a big hit in the school. Some children already have dreams of establishing libraries in their own villages when they grow up. Says Amonlu – a class four girl, “It is so boring in our village. It will be really nice to have a book for a friend.”

The library movement also encourages visits of distinguished literary personalities like Arup Kumar Dutta, the famous author of the ‘Kaziranga Trail’. Mrs. Surekha Panandikar, Head of the All India Children’s Library Movement of AWIC, has warm memories of her visit to Apna Vidya Bhavan. The National Book week is a festival for these kids.

AWIC Youth Library Network has 13 mini libraries in many villages across the Lohit region of eastern Arunachal. The Library Network stands as a unique partnership of a national organisation of writers, a state government agency and a network of grass-root level organisations and volunteer-groups involved in promoting good reading habits for the educational empowerment of rural tribal children. Conceived by the AWIC, New Delhi, and supported by the Lohit district administration and the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra, the Network is monitored by the Vivekananda Trust. The movement is making waves, cultivating a new generation of young book lovers. The network has won many accolades, and patronage from the locals, the government officials, the army, and most importantly from the children! The patrons’ sentiments were effectively summarised by Gen. (Retd) J J Singh, Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, “An excellent Library for the future leaders of our country. May God Bless you with knowledge and wisdom to make India proud.”



Inauguration of Wakro library by Lt Colonel V S Malhotra and Satyanarayanan Mundayoor

Of course the Library Network has been encountering the same problems that dog such movements across the country – lack of funds and dedicated volunteers, community lethargy, etc. Introducing reading to a community with a purely oral tradition is a special problem in tribal areas. All these problems are in addition to the fact that children are more readily drawn to the cable television and video games.

As I close my copy of *Peter Pan*, I wonder, "Is there a way to stop the art of reading from dying?" I look at the kids still enacting scenes from the book and smile. Maybe if we as teachers and parents continue to expose them to good books and think of ways of making reading an interesting activity, despite their initial reluctance, we will see them grow up reading books.

*This profile, first appeared in Teacher Plus, August 2009 and is a part of the "Interventions" series. The author P. Sreedevi is an M.Phil student of Linguistics in Hyderabad. She worked as a teacher for six months at the Apne Library, Wakro, Arunachal Pradesh in 2008.*

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