

Importance of Partnerships for Development of Public Libraries in India

Bhuvaneshwari Ravi and Gayatri Vivek*

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM), Hyderabad
E-mail: rbhuvi@rediffmail.com

**Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM), Mumbai*
E-mail: gayatri.vivek@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the importance of public libraries in educating the masses and increasing the literacy rate and disseminating knowledge. It also describes the historical origin of ancient universities and centres of learning, including public libraries in India and their contribution to the society. The paper discusses the problems faced by the public libraries today and various options available for their improvement. The author proposes a new model of public-private partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public-sector undertakings (PSUs) for the growth and development of public libraries to enable them to serve the user community.

Keywords: Public libraries, knowledge society, public-private partnership

1. INTRODUCTION

“A library is not just a building stacked with books and manuals – it is a repository and source of information and ideas, a place for learning and enquiry and generation of thought and creation of new knowledge. Public libraries have the potential to bridge the gap between the ‘information poor’ and ‘information rich’ by ensuring that people from all sections of the society have easy access to knowledge they seek.”¹

In the case of public libraries in India, this seems to be a far-fetched dream. To begin with there are not enough number of libraries to cater to the whole population. Lack of resources is another major challenge, especially in the case of rural public libraries. There are infrastructural issues such as lack of proper buildings, reading room, storage facility, stock of reading material, etc. There is also a dearth of suitable reading material in regional languages. Other issues include low literacy levels, limited access to technology, and management of public libraries.

Although the current state of disorder of public libraries is a cause of concern, there are some success stories at the grass-root level that provide us with hope for the betterment of the situation. These cases show the importance of partnership with non-government actors for developing public libraries.

2. PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA

Libraries have existed in India since the ancient period. There are references that suggest that the ancient universities such as Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila had valuable collections of manuscripts in their libraries. During the medieval period, i.e., Moghul period, great contributions were made to the Indian culture and libraries by the Moghul rulers. It is considered the golden period of Indian history for its educational, literary, and library activities. During the British period, a number of libraries were set up such as the Andrews Library, Surat; Connemara Library, Madras; Government Library, Janagarh, etc.

Establishment of these libraries enlightened the community and may be regarded as the foundation of the concept of public libraries to the Indian people. Post-Independence, public libraries made a tremendous growth. The central and state governments took a number of steps to develop the nation with education as the focus and public libraries as an essential component of it.

The enactment of Madras Public Libraries Act, 1948 was the first concerted effort in India to institutionalise, structure, co-ordinate, and organise public library services. It was also the year in which the National Library was set-up. The Delhi Public Library was set-up in association with UNESCO in 1951.

The Raja Ram Mohan Roy Library Foundation, an autonomous body under the Department of Culture, Government of India, was established. The main objective of the Foundation was to spread library services all over the country in active co-operation with State Governments and Union Territory Administrations and voluntary organisations (NGOs) working in the field of library services, cultural activities, adult education, and the like. The foundation has done significant work with respect to supporting libraries with grants from various schemes.

The National Policy on Library and Information Systems was formulated during 1985-1986. Though the recommendations were not adopted as the official policy, it serves as suggestive model for the development of libraries as a whole.

The next development to the cause of public libraries was when the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) included public libraries in its agenda in 2005. 'National Mission on Libraries' was proposed for developing quality standards for libraries, help them acquire books, digitise content and mobilise community library movement. As recommended by the NKC, a national library census is to be carried out along with periodic surveys of user needs and reading habits. There is no information as to whether the recommendations submitted by the working group on libraries have been acted upon.

3. LIBRARY LEGISLATION

Dr S R. Ranganathan is considered the pioneer of library legislation in India. He was instrumental in the commencement of the Madras Public Libraries Act in 1948. He also inspired the development of library legislation in other states. Currently, out of the 35 states and union territories only 19 have formal library legislation. Within the states that have passed the legislation, there is no uniform pattern in terms of funding and operations. While some states charge a library cess, others do not. Based on the size, population, literacy rate, etc., different states have different approaches to the public library system.

What or who can really make a difference? When we look at the big picture, it seems difficult to overcome the issues related to public libraries. However, there are some success stories at the grassroots level that provide us with hope for the betterment of the situation.

4. PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY

The idea that public libraries serve as community information centres has existed for many years now. The National Policy on Library and Information System (NAPLIS) Report of 1986 specifically recommended that village libraries should serve as local information centres, bringing areas such as public health, adult education, and local self-government under the

same umbrella. But it was never implemented due to a host of political and bureaucratic reasons. One of the key recommendations by the NKC-Working Group on Libraries is also to encourage community participation in library management. The following case gives an excellent example of community 'partnership' and not just 'participation.'

'Rural Education and Development (READ) Global' is an organisation that is using libraries as a means of empowering rural communities. 'READ Global' brings together education, enterprise and community development to create lasting social change in rural South Asia. They essentially partner with villages to build community library and resource centres (READ Centres) that include a fully stocked library and computer room, as well as programmes on topics ranging from literacy and women's empowerment to livelihood skills and health education. Each READ centre is paired with a for-profit enterprise that generates income to sustain the centre in the long-run.

It was started in 2008 in India and is currently operating in Haryana, Rajasthan, Manipur, and West Bengal. Six centres have been set up that reach out to 97470 rural villagers. Ten for-profit enterprises are functioning from a gooseberry processing facility that produces iron-rich juices and candies that reduce anaemia, to sewing and weaving businesses where women can earn an income to support their families.

'READ Global' provides the capital to build and equip the library and also provides seed money to start an associated business. The profits from the business are used to support the library and cover its expenses. Additional revenue is funnelled back into the community for other social needs such as health clinics or infrastructure. In this way, 'READ' is affecting a community's educational, economic, and social development and is ensuring the long term use and care for the library.

READ's model for building its community libraries is revolutionary because of its heavy focus on sustainability and community involvement.

5. PARTNERSHIP WITH NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) sector in India is growing at a fast pace, addressing a number of issues such as poverty, education, health, environment, etc. The sector has been successful in reaching the most remote areas in the country. The NGOs, thus can function as intermediaries between government and general public in the delivery of services. Many NGOs, especially at the village level, are running libraries. The following case describes how an organisation has developed partnerships with various NGOs to establish school libraries.

'Room to Read' is a global organisation dedicated to promoting and enabling education through programmes focused on literacy and gender equality in education. 'Room to Read' India was launched in 2003 with focus on establishing libraries and building the capacity of teachers and volunteers to encourage the habit and joy of reading. They also publish high-quality, illustrated reading materials for young readers to respond to the dearth of appropriate children's literature, especially in rural India.

Most of the interventions are concentrated in government public schools and non-profit alternative educational centres, but they also support some local community centres. They work in partnership with the state governments as well as local NGOs to implement and monitor the work and promote long-term sustainability. Currently, they are working in the following regions: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand. Around 4970 school libraries have been established and 113 local language titles have been published so far.

6. PARTNERSHIP WITH CORPORATE/ FOUNDATIONS

To rope in corporate support for the cause of public libraries, we need to understand the motivation and expectations of various corporate entities. corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities are usually centred around creating a positive impact on the stakeholders, environment and the communities in which the company operates. Many companies use the mode of philanthropy to achieve their CSR goals; for example donating money to a library that exists near its establishment.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supports the cause of public libraries in the US and other developing countries. They are trying to bridge the digital divide by incorporating computers, internet connectivity and technology training to public libraries. The Access to Learning Award recognises the innovative efforts of public libraries or similar organisations to connect people to information through free-access to computers and internet.

A similar approach by Indian corporate houses could boost the development of public libraries.

Another approach is public-private partnership (PPP) where in a private sector company offers the library services through a contract.

'Just Books' CLC is a new generation community library chain that provides access to a network of neighbourhood libraries. It was started in 2008 and currently, has 55 outlets in various cities in India. The business model is a franchisee system, with a 50:50 ownership pattern. The franchisee looks after the procurement of space and day-to-day operations, while 'Just Books' owns and operates the software. Each of the outlets provides a perfect

ambience for reading along with technological inputs (RFID) for self-service. Each 'Just Books' library has approximately 10,000 books and is approximately 1,200-1,400 square feet. The demand for these libraries is growing by the day. The franchise model of 'Just Books' CLC can be adopted to open new public libraries.

7. CHALLENGES TO BUILD SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

While it is easy to mention about the value of partnership and its role in the development of public libraries, it is not as simple to put it in practice. There are a number of challenges that need to be considered, to come up with a realistic plan. Partnering with the community requires dedication, imagination, initiative and resourcefulness on the part of the librarians/authorities to make library an ideal public service institution. To replace the existing apathy and inertia among librarians, the service conditions of the library professionals needs to be improved. Also, concerted efforts by the government to employ organisation development inputs will provide the librarians with role clarity and a roadmap for development.

No real links between public libraries and NGOs exist currently. To reach out to people especially in remote areas where access to libraries is impossible, NGOs can play a vital role. Libraries can also partner with NGOs to conduct adult literacy programmes, health related programmes, etc. But any initiative with regard to public libraries needs to be implemented through the State Government. Not all states have library legislation, the process of implementation will be uneven between different states. It may dissolve further due to bureaucracy, political pressures, and corruption.

With corporate partnership, the major challenge will be to maintain the expectations of the corporate, i.e., the impact of the investment. This can be considered a boon in disguise as it will prompt the library staff to improve the services and make it a dynamic organisation. The PPP model for libraries may draw criticism from various sections of the society as it will entail a paid service.

8. CONCLUSIONS

A library cannot remain a storehouse of books and publications. It needs to become a dynamic organisation that caters to the information needs and also offers services that are relevant for the community. Thus, the role of libraries and librarians needs to undergo an enormous change.

The problems relating to public libraries cannot be tackled by a single agency as there are diverse issues in different parts of the country. But partnership with the community, NGOs, and corporate will certainly help in the improvement of public libraries.

REFERENCES

1. National Knowledge Commission. Libraries: Gateways to knowledge. 2007.
2. Bhattacharjee, R. Public library services in India: Systems and deficiencies. Public Libraries Section—Country Report: India. IFLA, 2002.
3. Pyati, Ajit K. Public library revitalisation in India: Hopes, challenges and new visions. 2009.
4. Ngurtinkhuma, R.K. Public library scenario in India. 2010.
5. Das, A.K. Library advocacy in India in the light of education for sustainable development –Perspectives of an emerging economy. 2010.
6. Singh, Neena & Murthy, Narayana. Library legislation & development of library and information centers: An Indian scenario some challenges and opportunities. 2011.
7. Wani, Zahid Ashraf. Development of public libraries in India. 2008.
8. www.readglobal.org
9. www.roomtoread.org
10. www.gatesfoundation.org
11. www.justbooksclc.com
12. <http://franchiseinindia.blogspot.se/2010/07/just-books-library-franchise-founder.html>

About the Authors

Mrs. Bhuvaneshwari Ravi is currently an independent consultant working in the areas of EHS management systems, embedding EHS culture in organisations, training and development, and sustainability reporting. She holds a masters degree in Chemical Engineering and a Diploma in Learning & Development and Managing Organizational Knowledge, CIPD, UK. She is trained in ISO-14001 systems; and is a qualified executive coach accredited by Results Coaching Systems, Australia. She has experience in project engineering, corporate planning, corporate EHS, corporate social responsibility, learning & development, and talent/performance management. She is co-founder of Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) which is a learning centre for prospective social entrepreneurs.

Ms Gayatri Vivek has worked as Lecturer, SIES College of Management Studies, Navi Mumbai coordinating the course Post Graduate Program in Social Enterprise Management. She was earlier working with Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM), Hyderabad as coordinator and trainer.