

A New Role for India's Public Libraries

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 02 May 2024

Accepted: 28 June 2024

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the implications of these recommendations, with a specific focus on India's public library system and the social development gains that are often associated with public libraries. The potential of India's public libraries to serve as community information centres (CICs) is highlighted, as well as the challenges that lie ahead in implementing a new vision for public library revitalization. The study serves as an invitation for concerted action, reflection, and dialogue with regard to this important and pressing issue.

Keywords: India, Public, Libraries, Knowledge, Commission etc.

A new role for India's public libraries:

In what follows, it will highlight the community information center model and its potential for revitalizing Indian public libraries. Challenges and structural barriers will be discussed, as well as new creative openings and possibilities, such as convergence with community information and technology projects, and possibilities for enhanced democratic activism and community involvement. I will also discuss a future research agenda around these issues and offer a call for more concerted action on various fronts to approach this vision.

Ultimately, any type of knowledge/information economy (however one defines it) depends on an educated and informed populace. Public libraries are particularly important in the Indian context, as they have the potential to make a dramatic difference in the empowerment of India's masses and in the development of a better educated and informed citizenry. While a largely underfunded and neglected institution, the Indian public library system is in a position to provide vital community and information resources for millions upon millions of Indians. An inspiring and inclusive vision is needed, as well as concerted action. The need for fundamental change and re-development of India's public libraries has been evident for decades; however, the current environment seems preternaturally conducive to transformative possibilities. Thus, despite the inherent political and administrative challenges that wide-scale public library revitalization will face, a sense of possibility persists. This article is sketching the contours of a potentially new social movement for reform and community empowerment, which will ultimately need the support of a wide range of actors and interested parties. With this collaborative spirit, hope that this work can spark new conversations and possibilities in the important area of Indian public library revitalization.

The modern concept of the public library in India has its origins in the British colonial period, with the development of public libraries in cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta in the early to mid-nineteenth century helping to pave the way for future library development (Bhattacharjee, 2002). While bearing the stamp of Western influences, however, libraries have existed in India since ancient times, serving as repositories of knowledge in the courts of rulers, temples, and universities (Patel and Kumar, 2001). The development of public libraries in the country gained momentum in the post-independence period, with the passage of the Madras Public Library Act in 1948, the first library

legislation in newly independent India for providing public library service (Bhattacharjee, 2002). S.R. Ranganathan, an Indian pioneer of library and information science (LIS), was a major figure in the passage of this legislation and inspired visions of public library development throughout the country. While known in the West largely for his substantial contributions to classification theory, Ranganathan also advocated for the development of effective public library systems to reach India's masses. Inspired by the ethic of spreading knowledge and providing "books for all" he had a vision, based on his Five Laws of Library Science, to spread knowledge far and wide through India's public libraries (Ranganathan, 1963). Despite Ranganathan's efforts, however, much of the vision that he presented remains unfulfilled. This gap between aspiration and reality should serve as a motivation to continue building upon the important legacy of Ranganathan.

Ranganathan also inspired the development of library legislation in other states in the following decades. Public libraries are under the jurisdiction of state governments but currently only 11 states in the country have formal library legislation (Bhattacharjee, 2002). While states manage public libraries, the Indian government also funds the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) to act as a coordinating agency for the development of public libraries, particularly in the rural areas (Dasgupta, 2000). RRRLF works in cooperation with state governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to extend the reach of public library services in underserved areas (Bhattacharjee, 2002). In addition, suggestions have been made to increase the effectiveness of public libraries by linking their services and goals to the larger National Literacy Mission (NLM) in India.

Despite some of the aforementioned developments, however, the Indian public library system is generally in a state of disrepair and does not provide meaningful services to the masses (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Indian public library development remains uneven throughout the country, with varying levels of quality both within and across states. India is an extremely diverse country, with great linguistic, cultural, and social variation — to speak of India as an abstract whole is beset with difficulties and unhelpful generalizations. In the same vein, it is not possible to talk about a unified Indian public library system, since it varies so much within and between different parts of the country. However, a certain basic set of observations can be made. For instance, the rural public library sector remains an area that is highly underdeveloped. In contrast, certain urban public library systems, in cities such as Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore, exhibit fairly well developed infrastructures. States in south India generally have higher levels of public library development, particularly the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka (Seth, 2006). Roughly speaking, the public library sector in India can be divided into four basic categories: 1) state central and regional libraries 2) city library systems; 3) district library systems; and, 4) other libraries —which include village libraries, slum libraries, informal information centres, etc. (Patel and Kumar, 2001). Within these different categories of libraries, great variations exist; however, city library systems in more affluent parts of the country with established state library legislation tend to be of better quality.

Given the lack of a uniform public library sector in India, it becomes difficult to define what exactly constitutes a public library. For instance, does a small room in an urban slum or a village with a few books make a library? Or does a library need to have a more formal organizational structure and service model? These questions are a major concern for Indian library leaders and one of the NKC recommendations is to conduct a countrywide census of libraries (National Knowledge Commission, 2007). Calls have been made for many years to have library legislation in all the states of India and many library leaders also would like to see a national body to oversee library development throughout the country (National Knowledge Commission, 2007). The development of a national public library infrastructure will need a certain level of top-down guidance, but awareness about the need for bottom-up and community-driven public library development is growing. For example, some village

libraries are run by NGOs and maintained by informal community organizations and grassroots support (Bhattacharjee, 2002). The devolution of power to *panchayats* (Indian village governance councils) has allowed certain libraries to be run and maintained locally.

The concept of the public library in India is still being articulated and no one definition or organizational structure will fit the diverse environments of India. The unique cultural and socio-economic diversity of India allows for potentially more empowering community-driven and grassroots service models and approaches that may not necessarily reflect Western notions of the public library, particularly with regard to top-down models of development. While Indian public library development may have the capacity to redefine how public libraries can be run and can serve their communities, several challenges lie ahead.

Namely, public library development in India still faces issues such as low literacy levels, limited access to technology and the sometimes-limited availability of linguistically relevant reading materials. Adult literacy, while showing gains over the last couple of decades, remains generally low in the country — the literacy rate according to the 2001 census stood at 61 percent (*CIA World Factbook*, 2008). In addition, even the most well-developed public library systems have low levels of computerization and automation, and are mainly viewed as repositories of books — only around one percent of all Indian public libraries is computerized (Seth, 2006). In addition to these issues, there is a dearth of suitable reading materials in regional languages, with English still a dominant language for professional education publications (Seth, 2006). The community information centre (CIC) model which has been discussed as a possible new incarnation for the Indian public library, thus has to take into account and address these issues in meaningful ways. The potential benefits of an improved public library system might include increases in print literacy, human capacity development, informal education gains, ICT literacy, and community information delivery. The next section explores the dimensions of the CIC model and possible new directions for Indian public libraries in more depth.

Calls for transformation in Indian public library services have some precedent. For instance, prominent library leaders in India have discussed the need for libraries to transform from collection-oriented institutions to service-based institutions (Dasgupta, 2000). In addition, the awareness that public libraries can serve as community information centres has existed for the last several years. 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 (India Department of Culture, 1986). Despite the prescience and sound pronouncements of NAPLIS, these recommendations never became implemented at the national level, due to a host of political and bureaucratic reasons. Will the same fate affect the NKC recommendations? One cannot say for sure if and how these recommendations may ultimately get implemented; however, understanding at a deeper level what constitutes a CIC remains an important task. Commissions come and go but the challenges and transformative possibilities for Indian public libraries will remain. While potential exists for the CIC model, public libraries in India generally are still viewed as repositories of books and other print materials and are not seen as major providers of community information (Patel and Kumar, 2001; Ghosh, 2005; Seth, 2006).

The topic of community information services has been gaining in importance within the field of library and information studies (LIS) and has been suggested as an important area for library service models in developing countries (Martin, 1984; Kempson, 1986; Alemna, 1995). Community information has been defined as survival information, a type of information necessary for participation as a full and equal member of society (Martin, 1984). Additionally, community information services aim to assist individuals and groups with participation in the democratic process and daily problem solving with

issues such as housing, employment, education, welfare rights and civil rights (Library Association, 1980). Community information services have been linked with information and referral services for marginalized populations (Metoyer–Duran, 1994). Public libraries, mainly in the United States, began networking with government, community and social services agencies in the 1970s to create information and referral services to inform citizens about resources and programs for individual and community empowerment (Durrance and Pettigrew, 2000).

This type of community information service model has also been enhanced by the presence of the Internet in many U.S. and Western public libraries, as various electronic community information networks have been created (Durrance and Pettigrew, 2000). Community information service models can thus be based on access to ICTs (Pettigrew, *et al.*, 1999; Ghosh, 2005) but can also involve simply providing relevant information for communities (Alemna, 1995). Successful community information projects often involve providing solutions derived from local populations themselves and not imposed from the outside (Alemna, 1995).

Beyond the provision of community information, however, the CIC model can position the library as an important cultural and community centre. Part of this cultural centre model can include providing space for local artisans to display their works, hosting itinerant storytellers, and the general promotion of local folk traditions. Thus, by being sensitive to community needs and values (Alemna, 1995) public libraries can be spaces for cultural promotion and preservation. India, a country with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, has a huge untapped resource in the public library system to reinvigorate local cultural practices. Enhanced cultural roles that public libraries may take will inevitably need to be in sync with indigenous norms and practices.

Conclusion:

A momentum around the public library issue is developing in the country and the time is ripe for enlightened action; if proper action is not taken, this moment may slip away, as others have in the past. National governments, ruling coalitions and elected officials come and go and the National Knowledge Commission may in fact not live up to its potential. However, the library movement in India has received some much-needed momentum which will need to be sustained.

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