

Master of Library and Information Sciences Second Semester

Public Library System in India

Origin and Growth of Public Libraries in India

The Public Library system in India is the product of western impact. It came about through 185 years of British rule in India, from 1762 to 1947. The stages of development of public library, however, both in Britain and India, were identical though India took longer to move from one stage to another. For example, the first public library law was passed in Britain in 1850 against 1948 in India. The modern public library concept developed in Britain in 1945 against 1950 in India, when the Delhi Public Library was established. Library education at university level started in India and Britain about the same time during the First World War (1914-18).

Public Library: Basic Concepts As subscription library was the forerunner of the modern public, library in Britain, (1750) so was it in India (1850) also. The subscription libraries received impetus from the freedom struggle. It was estimated that at the time of independence in mid-1947, India had as many as 50,000 subscription libraries, but these were very small in size. No other developing country could boast of such a large number of public libraries.

The First Phase (1808-1900)

The first significant date in the development of libraries in India for the public is 1808. It was in this year that the then Bombay Presidency initiated a proposal to register libraries, which were to be given copies of books published from the "Funds for the Encouragement of Literature".

By the middle of the 19th century, all the three Presidency towns-Bombay, Calcutta and Madras-had their "public libraries" founded mostly with the active support and initiative of the Europeans in those towns. Indians with western education, then picked up the idea and established their own subscription libraries. Since subscription libraries were open only to their members who paid security deposit as well as annual subscription, they could not be called public libraries in actual sense of the term. Two conditions are necessary for a public library: First, it

should be open to all. Secondly, it should offer its services free of charge. A library out of public funds can offer services free of charge only if it is established out of public funds under a law by a public authority.

The Second Phase (1900-1937)

The second phase in the history of public library movement in India was from 1900 to 1937. During the first phase, the state governments were more active, while during the second phase, the intelligential took up the cause of public libraries. This phase began in 1900 when a reading room of the Calcutta Library, initially a subscription library established in 1832, was thrown open to the general public. The Calcutta library was taken over by Lord Curzon, the then Governor-General of India, in 1902 and named as the Imperial Library. Later, after independence, by an Act of Parliament in 1948, this library was named as National Library.

Baroda Movement

The pride of this period was, of course, the library movement in the princely state of Baroda. From 1906 to 1911, Sir Sayaji Rao In, the ruler of that state, set up an elaborate system of public libraries, composed of Central Library, Village Libraries and Traveling Libraries. The system served as a model for the rest of the country. The Maharaja had employed an American Librarian, Mr. Bowden, to organize the system.

Library Education

Mr. Bowden also established India's first Library School at Baroda in 1906 in which students were admitted from all over India. The Baroda library school continued for a number of years. The second library school was established at the Punjab University, Lahore (now in Pakistan) in 1915, by Mr. Asa Don Dickinson, another American Librarian, who was a contemporary of Melvil Dewey.

The first State Library Association was formed in Andhra in 1914, in Bengal in 1927 and the Indian Library Association (ILA) was formed at Calcutta in 1933. Asa Don Dickinson was the first in India to publish the Library Primer in 1916,

which was used as a textbook by his students. The Punjab Library Association was the first to publish the library journal in 1935, entitled "Modern Librarian" from Lahore.

The Third Phase (1937-1947)

The third phase of the library movement began in 1937 when the Indian National Congress Party came to power in many provinces. This phase was really a synthesis of the previous two phases. Being elected governments, they were more responsive to the demands of the people. During 1937 to 1942, as many as 13,000 village libraries were established by the state' governments on demand from the villagers. These libraries were the product of the Indian Adult Education movement, which swayed the country at that time.

An important landmark of this period was the Report of the Library Development Committee, Bombay (1939-40), headed by Professor A.A.A.Fyze. It put forth a scheme of developing public libraries in the province in six stages, comprising a Central Library and a Regional Library in each Revenue Division. The total cost of the scheme was estimated at Rs 15 lakhs, but the provincial government could not spare that amount..

The Fourth Phase (1947 TODATE)

The fourth phase started on August 15, 1947, when India attained independence. Its first milestone was passing of the Madras Public Libraries Act in 1948, the first of its kind in the history of the country. The second milestone was the establishment of the Delhi Public Library, a joint public library project of UNESCO and the Government of India.

Delhi Public Library

In 1949, UNESCO decided on its own to set up a public library pilot project to demonstrate the potential of a modern public library as cultural centre for the people. The project had to be based on the UNESCO Manifesto, defining the nature and scope of its services. The scheme was circulated to all the developing

countries of the world to invite UNESCO to establish the project in one of them. India was the first to invite UNESCO to do so.

The DPL had to be organized according to the UNESCO Manifesto adopted in 1948. The Delhi Public Library is reckoned as the first public library of the country satisfying all the criteria laid down in the UNESCO Manifesto. The salient features of the resources and services of the library are listed below:

- 1) The library is open to all, without any discrimination.
- 2) All its services are offered free of charge.
- 3) No cash security is to be deposited so long as the intending borrower can seek a recommendation from a responsible person, otherwise only a refundable deposit of Rs 20 is to be made.
- 4) All books are accessible on open shelves.
- 5) The library functions as a cultural center and its members are organized into cultural groups, such as Literature Group, Drama Group, Arts Group. Each group elects its own chairman and Secretary. Similar activities are to be organized for children (including story hours) and young adults.
- 6) A fleet of bookmobiles delivers books at several centers throughout the City.
- 7) A Braille section produces braille books and talking books for the blind and is delivered at their homes free of charge.
- 8) Music cassettes and gramophone records are provided free of charge.
- 9) The structural units are city central library, zonal libraries, social branches, and community centers located all over the city.
- 10) The library is termed as Asia's busiest public library with an enrolment of about 100,000 and lending about 10,000 books every day at one stage.

The library was evaluated in 1956 by UNESCO and was declared as UNESCO's most successful project. An Asian seminar was organized the same year at the library to demonstrate its services to librarians from all over Asia. UNESCO also published a book on the library entitled "The Delhi Public Library".

Central Government Aided Public Library Projects

The Ministry of Education, Government of India started giving grants in 1952-53 to the states for the establishment of public libraries and later this scheme was

incorporated in the First Five Year Plan (1951-56) under which provision was made for the establishment of state central libraries, district central library's with branches in all habitats of the districts. About Rs 1 crore was spent on these libraries of which two-thirds of the amount was provided by the Central Government. In 1952, the Government of India launched Community Development programme in which social education was assigned an important role and it gave a fillip to rural libraries.

In 1954, the Central Government adopted the Delivery of Books Act under which a publisher is required to deposit a copy of the book to each of the four Public Libraries around the country. The Act was amended in 1956 to include newspapers as well. The four libraries are: the National Library, Calcutta; the Cinerama Public Library, Madras; the Sachivalaya Central Library, Bombay and the Delhi Public Library.

Growth of Public Library after Independence

Public library service under the Indian Constitution is exclusively a state subject and the Central Government cannot legislate on it. Education is on the Concurrent List, which means that both State and Central Governments can legislate, but the Central laws will supersede the state laws on the subject.

The provision of public library service world over rests in the local governments, both in the urban and rural areas. There is one exception however to this universal practice. In the former British colonies in Africa, the statutory national library boards provide public library service. The local governments were considered to be unsuitable to undertake this responsibility. During 185 years of British rule in India the British Government never passed any public library legislation of the kind it passed in its own country in 1850, nor did it appoint any committee or commission to report on the status of public library services in the country. Instead, it vested public libraries in the local governments, both in urban and rural areas under the Local Self-Government Act of 1882, but it was not made incumbent on them to do so. Consequently hardly one-third of the local governments cared to provide modicum of public library service due to for lack of resources and interest. Nor did the public ask for the service.

In 1948 when the Madras Public Library Act was passed by the state legislature, a number of options were available to India based on the experience of some of the developed countries.

The Government of India appointed a committee in 1959 to report on the status of public libraries in the country, called the Sinha Committee, named after its Chairman, the late P.K. Sinha, Director of Public Instructions, Bihar. The Committee found the situation as dismal. The public libraries, which existed, were dubbed as "stagnant pools of books". Over 90% of the public libraries were subscription libraries.

Their number was estimated at 60,000. The resources of each library were poor. But it is remarkable that the middle class in India could establish such a large number of libraries out of voluntary efforts. No other country among the developing countries could boast of such a large number of subscription libraries. India for reasons of its own bypassed the local governments and constituted statutory Local Library Authorities (LLAs) at the district and city levels under the Madras Public Library Act, the first of its kind ever passed in the country. There was a feeling that the local government administration in India was weak and lacked financial resources. The experience of the U.K. and Sweden proved right in case of India. Both the countries had to reduce the number of local governments drastically to make them viable.

Since the Local Library Authorities could not be given the constitutional status of local governments with a right to levy library cess, the cess had to be collected through the local governments and passed on to the LLAs. The local governments being short for funds all the time, used the library cess collections on meeting their budget deficits and delayed for too long the transfer of cess proceeds to the LLAs. Even today millions of rupees are clue from the local governments.

Further, an element of election was introduced in the formation of the LLAs, which caused delays in constituting them. Too many checks and balances were imposed on the LLAs in the preparation of their development plans. The real power vested in the Directorate of Public Libraries and the State Government. The LLAs were never allowed a free hand in running their affairs.

District Magistrates replaced the elected chairmen of LLAs as they were accused of abusing their power. The employees of LLAs were declared government employees, which immensely increased the financial burden of the LLAs. Later, state governments took the responsibility to pay salaries of the staff working under the LLAs. Over 85% of the total funds went into paying salaries of the staff, leaving very little money for the purchase of books and acquisition of other sundry items. Later, the financial burden on the LLAs was reduced and the cess proceeds were allowed to be used for purchase of books. But, books to be purchased by the LLAs had to be from the list approved by the government. Sometimes, because of the procedural wrangles, books are not purchased for years.

By 2002, only 12 states out of 26 had legislated on public libraries. Of the 12 states, Haryana and Mizoram despite passing the Acts have not cared to enforce them. In Haryana, local bodies are empowered to levy library cess. But, by 2002, none had done so. In Mizoram, no cess has been levied. The Act has not been enforced since 1993. Maharashtra, West Bengal, Manipur, Mizoram, Gujarat and Orissa have not imposed any cess. Only Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Goa have levied library cess on house tax varying from 5% in Kerala to 10% in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Goa levies a surcharge on liquor and @ of 50 paise per liter. In addition, it is mandatory to spend at least 1% to the state's education budget on libraries. The same Mandatory clause applies in Kerala.

The second Five-Year Plan laid down the structure of public library system for the country-a State Central Library in the capital city of each state, a District Central Library in the headquarters of each District and branches in towns and a central library at the Development Block level of about 90 to 100 villages with a branch in every village.

The Central Government contributed a certain percentage of expenditure on these libraries. Unfortunately, the scheme was discontinued from the Third Five-Year Plan. Instead of sharing the expenditure with the state governments, the Planning Commission made lump sum grants to the states. With the result that the funds provided for public libraries were sometimes diverted to other more pressing demands for expenditure.