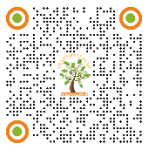


DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN RELATION TO THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PROGRESS OF SOCIETY SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Bengal emerged as a vibrant center for socio-cultural and religious reform movements, driven by its early exposure to secular and liberal Western education. The establishment of modern institutions of higher learning—initiated by colonial authorities, European missionaries, and forward-thinking social reformers—sparked an intellectual awakening among Bengal's educated classes. This era, often referred to as the Bengal Renaissance, profoundly influenced the evolution of Bengali literature and language.

Prominent social reformers of the period took the initiative to establish community libraries in their localities, creating accessible spaces for education and intellectual growth. Many of these historic libraries continue to serve communities today, providing valuable resources to youth, students, industrial workers, and lifelong learners.

This paper seeks to explore how the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance shaped the development of public libraries in India during British colonial rule, while also examining the impact of gradual social changes on the public libraries of West Bengal.

Keywords: Bengal Renaissance, Community Library, Public Library, West Bengal

1. INTRODUCTION

The 'Bengal Renaissance' refers to the socio-religious and cultural reform movement that swept through the undivided Bengal province of India during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially inspired by the secular Western education introduced by Christian missionaries, this renaissance later expanded under the influence of secular and nationalist organizations. While the European Renaissance had a broad impact on science, arts, culture, education, and democratic ideals, the

Bengal Renaissance primarily focused on transforming the socio-religious and cultural values of Bengali society through the integration of Western education. These progressive ideals eventually spread to other parts of Eastern India.

The Calcutta “Public Library”, established in 1836, marked the beginning of modern public libraries in South Asia. Its primary aim was to complement the secular Western education system in India and enrich the knowledge of educated youth and new literates. Similarly, the Uttarpara Jaykrishna “Public Library”, founded in 1859 by the prominent local figure Jaykrishna Mukherjee, was the first free “Public Library” in colonial India. Over time, numerous public libraries were established across Bengal, evolving into hubs for adult learning and non-formal education.

The early 20th century saw the rise of the Swadeshi movement, a nationalist campaign against British colonial rule, particularly in opposition to the partition of Bengal. Swadeshi activists promoted the boycott of Western goods in favor of domestic alternatives. Public libraries in Bengal often received significant support from Swadeshi movement activists and other contemporary reform initiatives (Das (2015)).

During the Bengal Renaissance, reformers created literature that championed socio cultural and religious change. To further these neo-liberal reform efforts, there was a pressing need for public spaces to engage communities in discussions and debates. Public libraries emerged as ideal venues for fostering dialogue and involving local populations in these transformative movements.

2. “PUBLIC LIBRARY” SYSTEM DURING THE BRITISH PERIOD

Bengal served as the administrative center for the British colonial government from the 17th century until the early 20th century. Many public libraries in the region were founded through grassroots efforts, often without direct support from colonial rulers. Some, however, received backing from regional authorities. Community-supported libraries generally flourished, becoming vital hubs for social events, intercultural dialogue, discussions on contemporary issues, and even as platforms for political resistance against colonial injustices (Das (2015)). British missionaries also significantly contributed to introducing modern education systems in Calcutta (Pradhan & Tripathi (2010)). Das (2015), referencing data from the West Bengal “Public Library” Network, notes that the majority of century-old libraries are located in Calcutta (28.7%) and nearby districts such as Hooghly (18.8%), Howrah (14.9%), and the undivided 24 Parganas District (21.8%), which also formed the nucleus of the Bengal Renaissance. Additional century-old libraries can be found in districts like Murshidabad, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, Cooch Behar, Malda, Nadia, East Medinipur, and West Medinipur (Das (2015)).

Figure 1

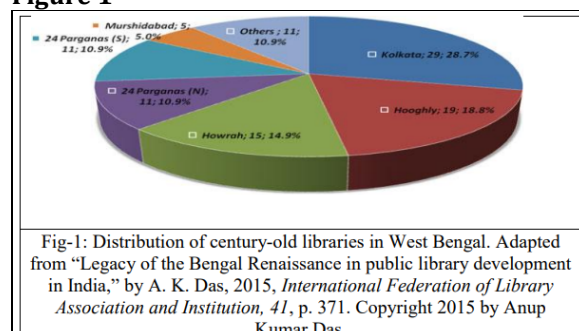
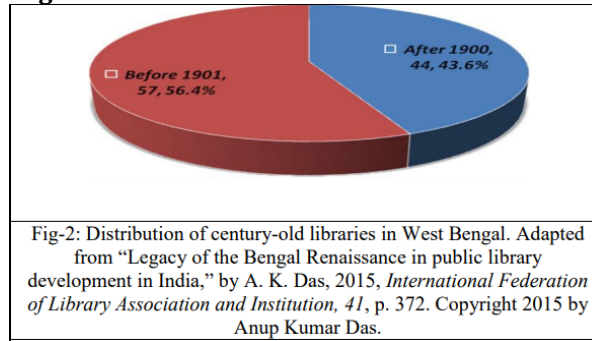


Figure 2

This statistics signifies that the development of public libraries was Calcutta centric during the British period. This is because the British established Calcutta as the new capital of India, and the first Governor-General, Warren Hastings, shifted all vital offices from Murshidabad district to Calcutta. Calcutta served as the capital of India until 1911, when King George V announced that the seat of the Government of India would be moved to Delhi. During British colonial rule, Calcutta's status as the capital of Bengal contributed significantly to its development as a hub for libraries and educational initiatives in the region (Nair (2004)). The city was chosen for British settlement in 1690 by Job Charnock, an employee and administrator of the East India Company, who selected it for its trade potential (Pradhan & Tripathi (2010)). Following their victory in the Battle of Plassey, the British established several prominent academic institutions and libraries in Calcutta (Das (2015)). In subsequent years, local zamindars (royal families) and social reformers worked to create numerous small libraries throughout the city. These libraries became important community spaces for social functions, intercultural interactions, and discussions on contemporary issues (Das (2015)).

Followings are some libraries established during the British period:

2.1. ASIATIC SOCIETY

In January 1784, Sir William Jones convened a meeting of select British residents in Calcutta to establish the Asiatic Society. The meeting, presided over by Sir Robert Chambers on January 15, 1784, defined the society's objectives. Initially, from 1784 to 1828, membership was restricted to Europeans, but starting in 1829, Indians began joining the society. In 1885, Rajendra Mitra became the first Indian to serve as the society's president.

The Asiatic Society inspired the creation of similar organizations in Calcutta, focusing on arts, sciences, and literature. Notable examples include the Delphian Society (1810), the Hindoo Literary Society (early 19th century), and the Calcutta Library Society (1818). While some of these societies had limited lifespans, others, such as the Bengal Sahitya Parishad, Mahabodhi Society Library, and Sadharan Brahma Samaj Library, founded later in the 19th century, made more enduring contributions. These initiatives underscore the Asiatic Society's influence in fostering intellectual and cultural development in Calcutta (Koner (1989)).

2.2. "CALCUTTA PUBLIC LIBRARY" (CPL)

The "Calcutta Public Library" (CPL), established in 1836, is recognized as the oldest "Public Library" in modern India. It was founded as a non-governmental initiative by colonial officers, Englishmen residing in Calcutta, and Western-

educated Indians, who collectively served as its initial proprietors. Membership operated on a proprietary basis, with the 1846 catalog listing 95 proprietors, including both Englishmen and notable Bengali figures (Calcutta "Public Library", 1846). Subscribers who paid Rs. 300 upfront or in three installments were granted proprietorship, a group that included both Indians and Europeans, with Dwarkanath Tagore being the first proprietor.

Although primarily serving its proprietors, CPL also allowed limited free access for poor students and others. The library was notable for its tidy and efficient operations, an uncommon feature even in 19th-century Europe ([National Library of India. \(n.d.\)](#)). However, after the 1857 uprising, European interest waned, leading to the library's decline. In 1903, its collection was purchased by Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of Bengal, and merged into the Imperial Library, which later became the National Library of India ([Nair \(2004\)](#)).

2.3. "THE IMPERIAL LIBRARY" AND ITS SUCCESSORS

In 1891, the Imperial Library was established by merging several Secretariat libraries. The most significant of these was the library of the Home Department, which contained many books previously belonging to the libraries of East India College, Fort William, and the East India Board in London. However, access to the Imperial Library was restricted only to senior government officials ([National Library of India, n.d.](#)).

In the early 1900s, Lord Curzon, the Governor-General of India, sought to open a "Public Library" in Calcutta. He found that the Imperial Library and the Calcutta "Public Library" (CPL) were underutilized due to their limited access and lack of amenities. This led him to combine the CPL's collection with the Imperial Library, subject to certain terms. The newly merged library, also called the Imperial Library, was officially opened to the public on January 30, 1903, at Metcalf Hall in Calcutta ([National Library of India. \(n.d.\)](#)).

After India's independence, the Government of India renamed the Imperial Library as the National Library through the enactment of The Imperial Library (Change of Name) Act, 1948 ([National Library of India. \(n.d.\)](#)).

3. IMPACT OF SOME CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND BENGAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

The term "Bengal Renaissance" refers to the influential reform movement that swept through Bengal from the mid-19th to early 20th century. This movement was grounded in the socio-religious and cultural aspects of the Bengal province. In its initial phase, the Bengal Renaissance was shaped by the secular Western education introduced first by Christian missionaries and later by nationalist agencies ([Das \(2015\)](#)). The liberal and enriching nature of this Western education soon made its mark on Bengali literature, art, and culture. Renowned poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore was a pioneering figure of the Bengal Renaissance. The proponents of modern, liberal education worked to disseminate the movement across Bengal by establishing scholarly societies, associations, and public libraries ([Das \(2015\)](#)).

The establishment of the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 marked the first phase of religious reform in Bengal, laying the foundation for the Bengal Renaissance. Under the joint leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore, the Brahmo Samaj advocated for equality and liberalism. The organization founded several

educational institutions, particularly for women, such as City College (1881), City School (1879), and Brahmo Balika Shikshalay (1890). In 1895, the Brahmo Samaj established a library in Calcutta that housed a vast collection of rare books and periodicals, which later became a "Public Library" accessible to all (Munshi & Ansari (2021)).

In the late 19th century, the Ramakrishna Movement emerged as a significant religious and social reform in Bengal. Swami Vivekananda, the pioneering figure of this movement, founded the Ramakrishna Mission and Ramakrishna Math to provide multifaceted services to society. These organizations established various educational institutions and public libraries across the country to disseminate the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Currently, the Ramakrishna Mission operates around 269 libraries, including 140 public libraries and 129 school/college libraries, in different branch centers (Munshi & Ansari (2021)).

The Bengal Library Association (BLA) was formed in 1925 in Calcutta, with Rabindranath Tagore as the president and Sushil Kumar Ghosh as the secretary. The BLA played a crucial role in the development of the "Public Library" movement in West Bengal. It organized training programs for library staff, published a bilingual bulletin, and conducted conferences and workshops on librarianship. The BLA's efforts were instrumental in the West Bengal Assembly's passing of the "Public Library" Act in 1979. The association currently maintains two libraries: the "Library for LIS Professionals" and the "Bengal Library Association "Public Library"" (Munshi & Ansari (2021)).

4. REMARKABLE DEVELOPMENT AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The state government has taken over the responsibility of running century-old libraries through sponsorship and by including library personnel on the government payroll. This provides sustainable career options for library staff in government-sponsored libraries, while still allowing autonomy in library management.

In contrast, privately managed libraries are run by volunteers and community members without any state government funding or integration of personnel into the government payroll.

The West Bengal Public Libraries Act of 1979 stands as a landmark in the development of public libraries in West Bengal. Though a bill for public libraries had been drafted as early as 1931 by Kumar Munindra Deb Roy and Dr. S.R. Ranganathan, and the Bengal Library Association had made continuous efforts to introduce a "Public Library" Bill, it took 32 years after India's independence before the West Bengal Assembly finally passed the Act. Since its initial enactment, the Act has been amended several times, in 1982, 1985, 1993, 1994, 1998, and 2003. The Act provides detailed provisions to establish new public libraries, as well as to regulate, guide, control, and supervise existing libraries in order to deliver comprehensive rural and urban library and information services across the state of West Bengal.

5. POLITICAL CHANGES AND IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

West Bengal's political landscape underwent significant changes in the decades following independence, with leftist ideologies gaining prominence. The Left Front government, which ruled the state from 1977 to 2011, saw public libraries as instruments of social change and education for the working class. Libraries were seen as tools for spreading progressive ideas, promoting social equality, and

educating the masses about the struggles of workers, peasants, and marginalized groups.

During the Left Front rule, there was an emphasis on promoting libraries in rural areas to democratize access to education and information. Many of these libraries, although often underfunded and lacking resources, became spaces for political education, where people could access literature on socialism, Marxism, and other political ideologies. The focus was on creating a politically aware and educated populace.

However, this period also saw criticism of the politicization of libraries, with some arguing that certain types of literature and ideas were given precedence over others, leading to ideological biases in library collections. ([Saha \(2020\)](#))

6. CURRENT SCENARIO

As per the information available at the website of West Bengal “Public Library” Network (WBPLN), presently there are 2480 Public Libraries in West Bengal out of which, there is 13 Govt. Public Libraries, 2460 Govt. Sponsored Public Libraries and 7 Govt. Aided Public Libraries. Out of 2473 Govt. and Govt. sponsored Libraries there are 1 State Central Library, 1 Special Library (i.e. Uttarpara Jaikrishna “Public Library”), 26 District Libraries, 236 Town / Sub division Libraries and 2209 Rural/ Area/ Primary Unit Libraries. The Department is in the process of improving Library Services through different traditional and innovative activities.

The Directorate of Library Services has undertaken the following initiatives to keep pace with the changing needs of society:

6.1. INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Directorate has focused on improving library infrastructure by providing grants for construction, repair, and renovation of government and government-sponsored public libraries. Funds have also been allocated for purchasing books, furniture, and providing drinking water facilities. Special emphasis has been placed on developing public libraries in the Jungle Mahal, SC/ST-dominated areas, minority areas, and economically backward regions of West Bengal.

6.2. MODERNIZATION PROGRAMME

The Directorate has undertaken a project to modernize public libraries in the state by networking them through a Wide Area Network (WAN) that links the State Central Library and 25 District Libraries via a web portal. Under this program, 796 libraries have been computerized, and librarians have been trained. Additionally, 35,416 rare and old books have been digitized and made available in the digital archives of the portal (www.wbpublibnet.gov.in).

6.3. IMPLEMENTATION OF MATCHING SCHEMES

The state government has collaborated with the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) to implement matching schemes that are jointly funded by the state and central governments. These schemes include constructing library buildings, setting up storage and display facilities, purchasing books, providing mobile library services, organizing workshops/seminars, and book fairs, as well as computerizing the State Central Library, District Libraries, and other public libraries.

6.4. OTHER INITIATIVES

The Directorate organizes annual book fairs in the districts. Career Guidance Centers have been established in the State Central Library, 26 government and government-sponsored District Libraries, and 232 Town/Sub-divisional Libraries to assist unemployed youth. Financial assistance is also provided to non-government and non-sponsored libraries, including those run by minority communities.

The Directorate has also established 319 Community Library cum Information Centers (CLICs) in Gram Panchayats without government or government-sponsored libraries, and the honorarium for CLIC organizers has been increased. Additionally, the Directorate has undertaken the purchase of books in languages other than English and Bengali, such as Nepali, Santhali, Urdu, and Hindi, for public libraries.

7. SOME MEASURES CAN BE ADOPTED TO IMPROVE THE “PUBLIC LIBRARY” SERVICES

To strengthen the role and impact of public libraries in West Bengal amidst ongoing societal changes, the following strategies can be adopted:

- **Digital Transformation:**

Invest in robust digital infrastructure to provide online access to diverse resources, such as e-books, journals, and educational materials. This will enable libraries to serve a wider audience, including individuals unable to visit physically.

- **Community Engagement Programs:**

Organize programs and events that address the varied needs of the community, such as literacy workshops, career counseling sessions, and cultural activities. This approach will position libraries as dynamic community hubs, rather than just book-lending spaces.

- **Collaborative Partnerships:**

Build partnerships with educational institutions, local authorities, and non-profit organizations to facilitate resource sharing and collaborative program development. Such partnerships can amplify the libraries' impact on communities.

- **Professional Development:**

Offer continuous training and professional development opportunities for library staff, ensuring they stay updated with current trends, technologies, and best practices in library science.

- **Inclusive Policies:**

Develop inclusive library policies that address the needs of all individuals, including differently-abled people, senior citizens, and non-native speakers. Providing materials in multiple languages and formats will enhance accessibility for diverse audiences.

- **Marketing and Awareness:**

Launch effective marketing campaigns to promote library services and programs. Utilizing social media platforms, community outreach, and local media can help increase awareness and participation.

- **Sustainability Initiatives:**

Integrate eco-friendly practices into library operations, such as using energy-efficient infrastructure, initiating recycling programs, and promoting digital resources to minimize paper usage.

- **User Feedback Systems:**

Develop mechanisms for gathering feedback from library users to ensure continuous improvement of services and address the evolving needs of the community.

- **Innovation Hubs:**

Create dedicated spaces within libraries to encourage innovation and creativity, including makerspaces, technology labs, and co-working areas. These hubs can foster an environment of learning, collaboration, and entrepreneurship. Even a space can be dedicated for the kids to do their project works. In rural libraries, incorporating simple tools like sewing machines can empower local communities, particularly women, by fostering skill development and entrepreneurship.

By implementing these strategies, public libraries in West Bengal can adapt, evolve, and continue to serve as essential centers for education, culture, and community engagement in the face of changing societal dynamics.

8. CONCLUSION

Since independence, the public libraries of West Bengal have undergone significant transformation, evolving in response to the shifting social, political, and technological landscape. Initially focused on promoting literacy and education, particularly in rural areas, these libraries have grown into vibrant hubs of cultural and intellectual activity. Despite challenges such as underfunding, ideological influences, and the persistent digital divide, concerted efforts have been made to modernize and democratize access to information and resources. As West Bengal progresses into the 21st century, its public libraries continue to adapt, striving to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and dynamic society while safeguarding the region's rich literary and cultural heritage.

The future of Bengal's public libraries lies in further embracing technology and fostering community engagement. Initiatives such as mobile libraries, digital literacy programs, and partnerships with educational institutions will play a pivotal role in ensuring that public libraries remain vital centers of knowledge and community support.

From their colonial origins to their present role as modern knowledge hubs, the public libraries of West Bengal have come a long way. They remain indispensable resources for the community, evolving to address changing societal needs while continuing to inspire learning and growth.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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