Which Way for Public Libraries in India?

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The public library has a significant role to play in the development of intellectual and political well-being of a democracy, but is poorly equipped to play a transformative role as it has been neglected by the state governments. Now that there is willingness to invest significant funds in building public libraries, it is important to revisit seemingly taken-for-granted assumptions of how we are to invest in this important institutional pillar of nation building.

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Public libraries, a long forgotten subject in the national imagination, have in recent times received some significant attention from the State.

In what was perhaps a first time mention by the head of government, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in his inaugural speech for the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) in August 2005, acknowledged that public libraries are an "extremely important element of the foundation of a knowledge economy". In pursuance of the NKC's recommendations, the centre had in fact set up a high powered committee called the National Mission on Libraries (NML) to take its agenda forward.

The NML has taken some decisive steps towards improvement in the so far badly neglected library sector, including a national census of libraries, content creation and setting up of community information centres, upgradation of existing public libraries, school and college libraries, use of school libraries as community libraries, improvement in library and information science, education training and research facilities, and so on. Most significant, the centre has now decided to digitally link nearly 9,000 libraries across the country under the NML. A proposal to spend nearly Rs 1,000 crore on this project is pending before the Planning Commission for its approval.[1]

Fundamental Purpose

Constitutionally the responsibility of different states in India[2] and funded by invariably stretched education budgets,[3] public libraries have received relatively scant and random attention over the last several decades. In this context, it is a matter of no small cheer that we are now able and willing to invest significantly in them. It is at the same time, perhaps an opportune moment to ask the related question of how we are to then invest in this important institutional pillar of nation building. As we go ahead now, with significantly larger monies at our disposal, the critical question at hand for our policymakers will be one of function versus purpose.

Should we aim to "develop" our public libraries, as the prime minister put it, as an important foundational element of our

knowledge economy: an ancillary function that will provide information support, be resource equipped, efficient, up to date? Or, are we looking to build institutions with a larger public purpose beyond strengthening India's knowledge economy?

Envisaged as a national institution, the public library was originally created to serve the masses, to build capacities for and contribute to both formal education, and lifelong learning. Universalisation of elementary education and eradication of illiteracy (the literacy rate in 1941 was 16%) were the primary aims of the education policy of a newborn nation, and public libraries were seen as integral to realisation of these aims. Is all of this germane, 65 years later, to India's (arguably) thriving "knowledge economy"?

A careful distinction between what is possible, and what is important is perhaps still pertinent in a "knowledge economy" where roughly 30% of the population still lives below an officially mandated "poverty line" (membership criteria to be included in which are so frugal, it could well be termed the hunger line). For instance it may be legitimate to ask, how does spending Rs 1,000 crore on digitising and connecting public libraries make sense in a context where a third of the country's population does not have access to electricity? Power connectivity and supply, as is well known, is much worse in our rural interiors – regions where public libraries are in the most dire need.[4]

To state the obvious, a massive investment in public libraries is doubtlessly needed, not so much to (re-)develop resource centres for the already privileged, as to grow institutions that can effectively service the needs of those students who as of now have very little access to modern sources of knowledge. While digitisation of our public libraries is doubtless an efficient futuristic step, we must be careful to ensure the money spent on it is indeed the best possible utilisation of resources to effectively address the immediate needs of those in desperate need of better resources for learning.

Public Sphere and Censorship

It is important at this juncture to also re-link the public library in a fundamental way to the larger purpose it is uniquely positioned to fulfil – a purpose that goes beyond questions of efficient transmission of data. In times where our educational spaces are increasingly owned and managed by private (economic and political) interests, public libraries may be amongst the last few remaining institutional bastions positioned to nurture ideological difference, or subversive thought. An institution that, in its ideal typical form, embodies much of what lies at the heart of Habermas' concept of the (uncolonised) public sphere[5] should, at the least, be empowered to be able to provide relatively unfettered spaces for learning, sharing, and most importantly, critique. The ability to provide spaces such as this have always been and continue to be linked to the related question of state censorship of public libraries.

Though in our current political climate in India, when we think "censorship", we reflexively think restriction, coercion, even physical violence, the truth is that the purposes of censorship work best, not when it is forced on us, but when alternate knowledges are rendered absent, or irrelevant. Margaret F Stieg, in an interesting study on libraries and librarianship in Nazi Germany documents, for instance, how the public library was central to the dissemination of culture and knowledge at the time: "In its fully developed form the Nazi public library defines the political public library" (Stieg 1992: 2). German public libraries ranged in size from the huge depositories of major cities like Berlin to the tiny collections in rural villages.

One of the book's most interesting chapters describes the National Socialist "Library Development Program", which Stieg says, attempted to bring the characteristic Nazi mix of Bildung[6] and ideological indoctrination to the most remote corners of the German countryside. Stieg notes that in 1934, Germany had 9,494 public libraries, a number that grew to 13,236 by 1940, a majority of these new libraries were opened in rural communities. Deliberating on how the Nazi regime transformed library collections through a simultaneous process of purging and collection development, she estimates that in Essen, for example, 69% of the contents of the collection present in 1934 had been removed by 1938, including several books that had been amongst the most frequently circulated during the Weimar Republic. Stieg describes the participation of German librarians – most of who followed the official blacklists – as "spiritual suicide" (ibid: 99-107).

Powerful Possibilities

Quite in contrast to the "spiritual suicide" of librarians in Nazi Germany was the more recent case of the American Library Association's response to the publishing industry's (allegedly state-influenced) unwillingness to release Michael Moore's controversial book *Stupid White Men… and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*! The book was due for release in the US on 2 October 2001 but after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in America, the publisher (ReganBooks/HarperCollins) asked for substantial revisions – such as renaming, removal of chapters, rewriting large portions, changes to terminology used and including the publisher's (moderating) opinion.[7] The author declined, and HarperCollins refused to publish the book.

It was a librarian, Ann Sparanese, who informed others in her profession of Moore's situation through discussion lists of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) and the Progressive Librarians Guild, a forum formed in New York City in 1990 by a group of librarians concerned with the profession's dubious alliances with business and the information industry, and its complacent acceptance of service to an unquestioned political, economic and cultural status quo. The result was that an unknown number of librarians put pressure on the publisher to release the book and four months later, the book was released and went on to become a bestseller in the US and the UK.

What arise from these examples are glimpses into the powerful possibilities of the kind of role the public librarian can play in facilitating or mediating, not just access to mainstream information, but to marginalised or "absent" discourses, or alternate knowledges. Thereof arises the subsequent question of how empowered the public librarian in India is and particularly the public librarian in rural

or small-town India, to actually do this; not just in terms of pay structures or job security, but also in terms of the social and cultural wherewithal, or cultural capital if you like, to face and fight the negative sanctions – both symbolic and material – that accrue to public servants who attempt to actually do their job? Will they locate and stack material which adds value to our understanding of histories and societies, but may not be aligned with establishment interests? Most critically, will the public librarian be actually empowered to autonomously take the decision of what to subscribe, and what not to subscribe to?

Public Libraries in India

Finally, and more so in the context that the NML/DELNET (Developing Library Network) is also looking at revival of community libraries and reading rooms, it is also important to reiterate how critical the role of the public librarian will be to enable the community library to function as an emancipatory space with transformative potential, and not just as a technical function. As of today, most of even the few states that have enacted a Library Act lack basic library facilities. Let me cite the example of Sardarpura, a small village in Gujarat (a state that does have a Public Library Act) that saw unprecedented violence against Muslims in 2002,[8] to illustrate what this deficit may mean in real terms.

Over the course of my own anthropological fieldwork in this village in the wake of the 2002 riots,[9] I encountered time and again – over interactions with both the Hindu Patels and the Muslim Pathans – discourses of resentment over a "community library" in the village. I was to discover that while the Pathans and Patels had for years ostensibly been in conflict over the village/district library (the Sheikhs who actually bore the brunt of the 2002 violence had been too impoverished to bother), both communities only wanted possession over the land on which the (fairly pathetic) structure stood. The Pathans wished to construct a prayer room or a madrasa on the land, while the Patels simply wanted the (highly valued) land. At the time that I was there, the "library" did not have a single book.

Would the course of history in Sardarpura have been different if it had had a long thriving public library? For me, living in a village at the time effectively colonised by Sangh Parivar ideology and literature, it was impossible to not regret its absence. While the transformative potential of the book or other written text in isolation may be arguable, the prior circulation of a diverse spectrum of ideas may well have broken the monopoly of ideas, the implacable certainty of the Sangh world view in the village. In this sense, in Sardarpura and in other such insulated spaces, the public library poses a likely significant contribution towards the development of intellectual and political counterpublics essential to the growth and well being of democracy.

In Conclusion

As it is managed today, the public library in India is poorly equipped to fulfil a transformative mandate. Dependent as it is on the efficiencies, interests and ideological inclinations of (state) governments in power,[10] it is in fact not positioned to fulfil a mandate of purpose. While it may seem somewhat of a paradox to insist that an important national institution be delinked from state control, this delinking from political vagaries may go a long way to build what Eric Fromm (1977: 339) had called the unique social character of a people, or nation.[11] The kind of concerns that surface repeatedly on the matter of Prasar Bharati being more or less run by the government of the day are in fact the kind of questions we need to ask in relation to management of public libraries.

Meanwhile, a small step in the right direction would be to begin with an acknowledgement that there is an intellectual freedom ideal in the library profession. This ideal will be doubtless difficult to implement in our current public library system in India, but it is still worthy of working towards. To quote from the nicely worded statement of purpose on the website of the Progressive Librarians Guild: "A progressive librarianship demands the recognition of the idea that libraries for the people has been one of the principal anchors of an extended free public sphere which makes an independent democratic civil society possible, something which must be defended and extended. This is partisanship, not neutrality…"[12]

NOTES

1 See "Rs 1,000 Crore Plan to Link 9,000 Libraries in India", *The Hindu,* 19 November 2012, available at: http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rs-1000-crore-plan-to-link-9000-libraries-in-india/article4112216.ece, accessed on 19 February 2013.

2 The central government has jurisdiction only over those libraries it has set up, or declared nationally important. For a comprehensive review of early policy and financial outlay, see Jambhekar (1995).

3 For a newly-formed nation in 1947, universalisation of primary education and eradication of illiteracy were urgent imperatives of the Indian government's education policy. Extension services, continuing education, social education, part-time education, refresher courses, non-formal education, adult education, etc, formed part of a spectrum of programmes proposed towards this goal. Funding for public libraries was also subsumed within one of these heads –social education.

4 According to the 2011 Census, 67.2% of the country's total population has electricity. The figures are much lower in rural regions of the country, where the percentage of households with electricity is 55.3%. See http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/intelligent-energy/in-dias-other-power-failure-and-its-opportunity/18229, accessed on 21 February 2013.

5 See Buschman (2005) for a cogent analysis of how libraries in their collective existence in democracies embody and enact much of Habermas's classical definition of the public sphere. For instance: Libraries house and further rational discourse through the organisation of collections coupled with the principle of unfettered information access. The field enacts the principle of critique and rational argumentation through the commitment to balanced collections, preserving them over time, and furthering inclusion through active attempts to make collections and resources reflect historical and current intellectual diversity. By their very existence libraries potentially verify (or refute) claims to authority in making current and retrospective organised resources available to check the bases of a thesis, law, book, article, policy, etc, continuing the process of debate which lies at the heart of the public sphere and democracy.

6 The closest approximation of the German term "Bildung" in the English language is probably "education". The word though has dimensions that "education" or even "liberal education" do not encompass. It refers to a process of spiritual formation; of encountering the world; the learning of not only knowledge and skills, but also values, ethos, personality, authenticity and humanity.

7 In response to the 11 September terror attacks in 2001, the US government framed and passed the Patriot Act to help fight terrorism. Although the Act itself does not enforce censorship, it substantially weakens the privacy of individuals and their right to intellectual freedom.

8 Fifty-nine Muslims were electrocuted to death in Sardarpura in March 2002 by a marauding Hindu mob. Many of those killed were women and children.

9 My work in Sardarpura was part of a larger study comparing actors of left extremist and communal violence in India. For a detailed analysis of the background and context to the 2002 violence against Muslims in Sardarpura, and the psychosocial histories of its pepetrators.

10 Public libraries in India have been developed on the basis of a hierarchical network, with the national central library at the apex, followed by state central libraries, district libraries, block (sub-district) libraries and panchayat (village) libraries.

11 The concept of "social character" is described by Fromm as based on the consideration that societies, or social classes, need to use human energy in the specific manner necessary for the functioning of that particular society. Its members must want to do what they have to do if the society is to function. The process of transforming general psychic energy into psycho-social energy is mediated by the construction of a "social character". The means by which social character is constructed are always cultural (Fromm 1977: 339; also see Fromm and Maccoby 1970: 16-23).

12 See the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) at http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/ accessed on 24 October 2013.

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