



**“Come to your Library”: BLA Project for Promotion of Reading in West Bengal, India**

**Ratna Bandyopadhyay**

Department of Library and Information Science  
University of Calcutta,  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

**K.P. Majumder**

Department of Library and Information Science  
Jadavpur University  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

**Bithi Bose**

BLA  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

**Papri Sengupta**

BLA  
Kolkata, West Bengal India

**Meeting:**

**133. Literacy and Reading with Library Services to Multicultural Populations**

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WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY  
10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden  
<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

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**Abstract**

*The state of West Bengal in India has a multilingual and multicultural population of more than 80 million spread over 19 districts. The state also has a well structured public library system. This paper discusses the activities of a few public libraries in the districts of Howrah, Kolkata and South 24 Parganas for promotion of reading and use of library. This is a project of Bengal Library Association with financial assistance from Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation. It also analyses the problems and needs of the user groups, addresses some of them through their programmes, discusses the impact of these activities and proposes future programmes covering more libraries.*

## **Background**

The state of West Bengal in India has a population of more than 80 million [5] spread over 19 districts. The population is multilingual and multicultural comprising of more than 50 distinct communities. These include about 4.5 million tribal people comprising about 40 different tribes [7,3]. About 120 languages are the mother tongue of these 80 million people in West Bengal. Besides the majority, who have Bengali as their mother tongue (about 68 million), there are about 12 million people with different mother tongues (e.g. Hindi (about 5.7 million), Nepali (about 1million), Oriya (about 0.19 million), Telugu (about 0.21 million), Urdu (about 1.6 million), etc.) [5].This reveals the great diversity of cultures and languages present in West Bengal.

The public library system in West Bengal is one of the most well developed systems in India. There are over 2800 government, government sponsored and government aided libraries and community library cum information centres (CLICs). These libraries form a four level structure. The State Central Library situated in Kolkata is at the apex. At the second level there are 26 government and government sponsored district libraries. At the third level there are about 240 government, government sponsored and government aided sub-divisional/ town libraries. At the lowest level there are about 330 primary unit libraries, 1890 rural libraries and 340 CLICs. Apart from these, there are over 2200 registered non-government and non-sponsored libraries. Bengal Library Association (BLA) was established in 1925 for organizing the library movement and creating library awareness. The first president of BLA was the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. BLA is still playing an important role by developing policies for managing libraries in the state. It is also helping West Bengal government's Directorate of Library Services to implement policies for public libraries in the state. The Public Library Act in West Bengal was enacted in 1979.

All public libraries are playing an important role by providing educational and cultural support to the target population. This is especially important in a developing country where the literacy rate is below 70% and the percentage of people living below the poverty line (BPL) is almost 30%. [4]

## Background of West Bengal

- Total Population: more than 80 million
- Number of Districts: 19
- Multilingual Population (about 120 languages)
  - Bengali mother-tongue about 68 million
  - Hindi “ “ about 5.7 million
  - Nepali “ “ about 1.0 million
  - Urdu “ “ about 1.6 million
- Over 40 different tribes with population about 4.5 million

### Scope of Project

At present it is observed that reading is losing popularity. The Directorate of Library Services, Government of West Bengal as well as Bengal Library Association (BLA) are concerned about it. So to address these issues, an action plan was submitted (as mentioned in [1]) to BLA. Subsequently BLA took up the project “Come to your Library” with financial assistance from the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), a Government of India organization and this project was implemented by the authors. The aim of the project was to bring both users and non members of all ages and of all communities to the library and encourage reading. In its first phase, public libraries were selected from 3 districts viz. Howrah, Kolkata and South 24 Parganas. Considering the literacy rate and linguistic composition of the local communities we took up programmes to attract all sections.

## Scope of Project

- Reading is losing popularity
- Government, Bengal Library Association (BLA), others concerned
- Aim of this project is to bring both users and non members of all ages and of all communities to the library and encourage reading
- 3 districts selected – Howrah, Kolkata and South 24 Parganas
- 2 libraries in each district selected

## Scenario of 3 Districts

	Howrah	Kolkata	South 24 Parganas
Area (sq km)	1467	185	9960
Population (mil.)	4.27	4.57	6.91
Literacy rate	68	74	59
Total Languages	98	117	101
%age with mother tongue			
Bengali	84.4%	62.0%	97.9%
Hindi	10.8%	20.9%	1.5%
Urdu	3.2%	13.6%	0.3%

### Selected Libraries

Howrah district is spread over 1467 square kilometers and has a population of 4.27 million with a literacy rate of 68%. 98 languages are the mother tongue of the people in Howrah district. Of

these about 3.6 million have Bengali, 0.46 million have Hindi and 0.14 million have Urdu as their mother tongue.[5] From Howrah district we selected Shibpur Public Library, a non-government and non-sponsored library established in 1874 and The Friends Club Library, a government sponsored Town library established in 1901.

Shibpur Public Library is collecting money from donations, subscriptions, and rent of their Hall to others for organizing various programmes. It has a total collection of more than 40000 books and subscribes to 4 journals and 7 newspapers. All the staff members are working on voluntary basis.

The Friends Club Library has a total collection of about 13000 books and subscribes to 27 journals and 4 newspapers.

Kolkata district is spread over 185 square kilometers and has a population of 4.57 million with a literacy rate of 74%. 117 languages are the mother tongue of the people in Kolkata district. Of these about 2.8 million have Bengali, 0.95 million have Hindi, 0.62 million have Urdu as their mother tongue.[5] From the district of Kolkata we selected Granthasree library and Vivekananda Pathagar.

Granthasree library, established in 1951, is a government sponsored primary unit library. It has a total collection of more than 9000 books and subscribes to 3 journals and 2 newspapers.

Vivekananda Pathagar was established in 1952. It is a government sponsored town library. It has a total collection of about 14000 books and subscribes to 12 journals and 4 newspapers.

South 24 Parganas district is spread over 9960 square kilometers and has a population of 6.91 million with a literacy rate of 59%. 101 languages are the mother tongue of the people in South 24 Parganas district. Of these about 6.8 million have Bengali and 0.11 million have Hindi as their mother tongue.[5] From the district of South 24 Parganas we selected Barisha Sahitya Parishad Library and Behala Town Library.

Barisha Sahitya Parishad Library, established in 1918, is a government sponsored Primary Unit library. It has a total collection of about 10000 books and subscribes to 7 journals and 2 newspapers.

Behala Town Library, established in 1903, is also government sponsored library. It has a total collection of more than 20000 books and subscribes to 8 journals and 6 newspapers.

These libraries have children sections, young adult sections, reference sections, reading room sections, newspaper sections, circulation sections and Career guidance sections. They are providing services to children, senior citizens, young adults, students, professionals, homemakers, physically disadvantaged and others. Most of them are also bringing out wall magazines with articles, poems, stories, etc. contributed by the library members.

The Shibpur public library has additionally a collection of manuscripts and rare books. Of these six libraries only the Friend's Club library has a computer but does not have any access to Internet.

## Selected Libraries

- Howrah
  - Shibpur Public Library
  - Friends Club Library
- Kolkata
  - Granthasree Library
  - Vivekananda Pathagar
- South 24 Parganas
  - Barisha Sahitya Parishad Library
  - Behala Town Library

### Activities of Project

The following activities were conducted: Recitation competition, Extempore story telling, Quiz programmes, Readers' meet, Literary discussions, Discussions with doctors, Counselling for career guidance, Health related programmes, Plays, Dance dramas, Drawing competition, Felicitation of distinguished users of the library who are using the library most, Book fair with books in many languages, Science awareness programmes, Science Exhibitions, Preparation of multimedia documents, etc.

Meet the Readers programmes were held in all these libraries and were very popular. In these programmes both the members and non members residing in the particular localities were invited. Their feedback helped us to identify the following causes of decline in the usage of libraries:



- Due to conversion of many old residential houses to multi-storied apartment buildings and subsequent changing population, many are unaware of the existence of the libraries in the localities
- Present semester based education system and regular school examination are acting as a deterrent to students to come to the library on a regular basis
- School hours, tuition hours and library hours are not matching
- Many are not aware of different library services available
- Need for more non print media in public libraries; especially computerized databases, internet facilities, audio-materials
- Existing library resources are not catering to the needs of visually impaired users, neo literates
- Catalogue of library resources should be computerized and easily accessible by local users
- Career guidance section should organize discussions by professionals to answer the questions of users not covered by the books
- Group discussion, quiz programmes, recitation competition, debates are needed to be organized by the library to attract the young adults and children
- Important old books unused by members should be exhibited from time to time to make people aware of their importance
- New copies of old classics are to be procured to meet the demands of aged users
- All Public libraries should have open access system
- Representatives from regular users should be co-opted in different library committees and should be given responsibilities to organize different programmes

We organized the following programmes, some of them being based on the suggestions received during the Readers' meet:

- ✓ Meet the doctors: The discussion focused on the prevention aspects - how to maintain healthy environment, how to prevent diseases, why regular check up is necessary after a certain age, how to avoid tension and be calm in this fast moving society, importance of yoga, meditation, relaxation, physical and mental exercises, importance of knowledge in first aid in different situations, development of scientific attitude, awareness to combat different diseases, what is a balanced diet, etc. The doctors suggested that women should be aware of all these and should take a lead role in spreading the awareness and that health related training camps are needed.
- ✓ Meet the authors: Literary discussion about the writings of eminent fiction writers and poets were held in presence of the respective authors and poets. Questions were raised by participants - both users and non users of the libraries.
- ✓ Literary discussions on female characters of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, an eminent literateur, and on Ashapura Devi, an important female writer of West Bengal as a mark of her centenary celebration attracted many participants - mainly female participants.

- ✓ Quiz programmes were conducted by the senior members of the libraries. Children and young adults (both users and non users) from the localities participated.



- ✓ Debates on important issues like importance of books in digital environment, Is reading habit losing popularity because of non-print media, etc. were organized



- ✓ Extempore speech competition on topics like ‘your aim in life’, ‘superstitions’, ‘missed calls’, ‘pens’, ‘bald heads’, etc. attracted many participants from the localities.

- ✓ Recitation competition, vocal music competitions, drama – these cultural programmes were held at different times in these 6 libraries.



- ✓ Spelling competition for children were also organized

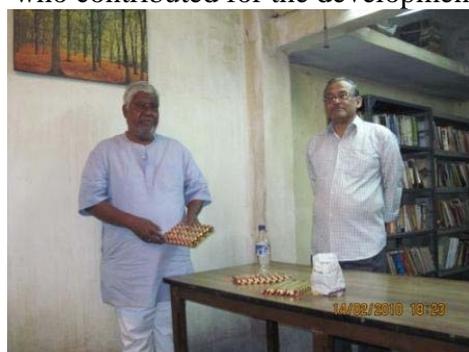


- ✓ Sit and draw competitions for different age groups were also organized. The number of participants varied between 40 and 90.



- ✓ International Mother Tongue Day was also observed in these libraries. Eminent teachers from different schools, colleges, universities, and the Deputy Director of Directorate of Library Services were invited to explain the purpose of this day. Many students of the locality participated to know about the significance of the day.

- ✓ Felicitation to the senior members as well as those who use the library most and who contributed for the development of these libraries were organized



- ✓ A book fair was also organized where children of all ages along with their parents attended. It continued for 10 days. Many cultural programmes were also

organized during the book fair to give the children of the localities an opportunity to take part and show their talents.

- ✓ Prize giving ceremonies were also held to honour the rank holders of all the competitions.



- ✓ Discussions on local history like History of Howrah district, History of Barisha were also held.
- ✓ Science exhibition was held on Oersted's Experiment on the effect of electricity on magnetism; Organic substitute for litmus paper - a flower extract was used and it showed the same effect as litmus paper; Instant water heater; Water level indicator; Magic Ink; Endurance test; Force vibration test, etc. School children of class VII to X took part in the exhibition.
- ✓ Paintings, handicrafts exhibitions were also held to show the talents of the growing children of the localities.
- ✓ Celebration of birthday of Swami Vivekananda with the discussion on Vivekananda's philosophy.
- ✓ Day of Worship of Saraswati, Goddess of Learning, was observed by the libraries. Both the members and non members of the libraries took part in the festivals. This programme was followed by cultural events and distribution of sweets and fruits.
- ✓ Recording of audio book for the distribution in public libraries for the visually impaired users. This includes short stories by Rabindranath Tagore, Luna Ghosh and Jayshree Bose.

### **Impact of Project**

The effect of these programmes is overwhelming. Reading room attendance in the libraries has increased along with enrollment. Records of enrollment show that during these 6 month experimental initiative about 15% of new members have joined the libraries. Regular attendance has been increased by 17%. Different sections are responding; eg. A patient with a psychological disorder asked for bibliotherapy help to cure herself, a woman, about 75 years old, recited her own poems, many patients participated in the discussion programmes with doctors, participants have requested for organizing these programmes regularly and extend library hours. Cancer patients suffering from depression came forward, disclosed their feelings and asked for relief.



Children from the families of low income groups of the localities who were feeling shy to enter the library, took part in these programmes, expressed their feelings, read out stories written by themselves, took part in recitation, spelling competitions, quiz programmes, story telling, etc. and thus gradually they overcame their shyness and took membership of the libraries. Teachers of local schools came with their students to join the programmes, teachers themselves took part in debates, organized quiz programmes, spelling competitions, extempore speech competition. Students who were not members took membership. To organize these programmes we sent notifications to local schools and took the help of local TV cable operators to advertise our events in between their programmes. We are encouraging local library users and non-members to organize most of the programmes in their own languages so that these programmes to improve reading can be sustained with their involvement. Now the members decide what will be the important topic for discussion in the context of present situation and they themselves organize the programmes with the assistance from the Librarian.

## Impact of Project

- ❑ Enrollment of new members increased by about 15% during this 6 month experimental initiative/pilot project
- ❑ Regular attendance has been increased by 17%
- ❑ Different sections of people are responding
- ❑ A patient with a psychological disorder asked for bibliotherapy help to cure herself
- ❑ A woman, about 75 years old, recited her own poems

## **We march on**

The effect of these programmes is quite impressive. Still we need to do more. So there is no “conclusion” but only the way forward to the future and we need to march on.

The library committees including librarians have said that though some similar activities were organized by these libraries earlier, they were not done on a regular basis and this initiative of BLA has added a new impetus and given them new energy and force. Local people are also happy as some of their recommendations like change of hours for children’s section , a glow-sign for the library, incorporation of local people in the programme committees, open access system for all the sections of all the libraries, preparation of list of newly added books in printed/book form, etc were readily accepted.

Some of the important recommendations – use of computers, availability of e-resources, access to online resources could not be readily implemented as this requires additional funds. The West Bengal government is providing computers to public libraries in phases. The State Central Library and the District libraries have already started working with computers. In the next phases the other libraries in the public library system will get the benefit of computers.

We hope that the government and government sponsored public libraries can extend their outreach activities to a greater level taking help of the local people and NGOs. Some NGOs are searching for and finding school dropouts, mainly from families below poverty line, and analysing the causes. They have felt the need for providing free coaching to these students so that they can rejoin schools. ‘Adhyayan’ is such an NGO in South 24 Parganas, established in 1963, and it opened another branch in 1988.[1] It is running free coaching centres and supporting academic activities by distributing free text books and other books for the full academic year, from their text book library to needy children. Public libraries need to offer similar services to reach the masses. Radio and Television programmes do include educational programmes at certain times. We are also trying to make arrangements for viewing and hearing these programmes by all the interested persons at the library premises. We are trying to organize, from time to time, discussions on important topics from the academic syllabus and current affairs by academicians from the locality. Because of the examination based education system and distance education programmes, library activities on academic support services will have a considerable impact on promotion of reading and usage of library.



Because of low literacy level audio-visual materials are required. For visually disadvantaged people audio documents are needed. Government departments, NGOs are preparing audio-visual materials, audio documents in this state. Public libraries through its large physical network can play here a dynamic role by coordinating these materials available in various forms and can help in "...combining of resources for maximum effect and an overall improvement in community services." [8] Thus public libraries "... can use promotional techniques to bring its variety and range to the attention of its users" [8] and can thus help in promotion of reading.

Through this pilot project we have identified the local needs regarding health care, information for livelihood, education (availability of study materials), employment, recreation, maintenance of traditional, indigenous culture, etc. These localized needs require library services in local languages. The aim is to make these programmes a part of regular library services and then spread these best practices to all libraries.

## We march on

- Impact has been very positive
- BLA can provide activity based refresher courses to librarians of public libraries
- Continue and work with other agencies/ organizations involved in spread of reading and education
- Extend this work in phases to all other public libraries

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