

Library Services for Social Inclusion in Multicultural Communities In Birbhum, West Bengal, India

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Abstract:

The district of Birbhum in the state of West Bengal, India has a great diversity of cultures comprising of multilingual and multicultural communities including over 200,000 tribal people from about 10 tribes. Libraries in Birbhum have been providing services for helping in the social inclusion of the local multicultural population since 1925 with moving libraries. Since then the number of libraries have grown and library services have been extended to many more villages and enhanced to cover a broad spectrum with the major aims of promoting harmony and integration amongst the multicultural units in society, enabling the economic upliftment of all sections through education and also putting to use the wealth of their indigenous traditional knowledge. The effect of these programmes is overwhelming and results are encouraging. We also highlight the role of librarians in co-ordinating the similar efforts of other government and non-government organizations for synergy.

Keywords: Library Services, Social Inclusion, Multicultural Population

Background and Tradition of services

The district of Birbhum in the state of West Bengal, India has a population of more than 3.5 million spread over 4,500 sq. kilometres.[14] The total population comprises of multi lingual and multicultural communities. Besides the majority, who have Bengali as their mother tongue, there are over 200,000 tribal people from about 10 tribes, each with their own distinct cultures and mother tongues (e.g. Santali, Koda, Oraon) [9] and about another 100,000 non-tribal people with different mother tongues (e.g. Hindi, Telugu, etc.).[10] Birbhum is also the

home of many other cultural groups or sects like Bauls (Bauls sing spontaneously with one stringed instrument called 'ek-tara' mainly on social issues) and similar folk culture groups. All these cultures are vibrant and celebrate their traditions in numerous annual festivals held in Birbhum like Pous mela (fair held during winter marking the harvest season and popular for live folk music) and Kenduli mela (held in the village of Jaydev kenduli and popular as a Baul fair).[15] This reveals the great diversity of cultures and languages present in Birbhum. It can be considered as a rural district as the livelihood of about 75% of the population is dependent on agriculture.[14]

Libraries in Birbhum have a long tradition of providing innovative programs and services for helping in the social inclusion of the local multicultural population since 1925 when the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore started the 'Chalantika Library' (meaning Moving Library). He reasoned that if the villagers are not aware of library services then they will never come to the library. So the library services have to reach them and he focused on library extension programmes. Also to be able to sustain the services over a long period of time the villagers themselves have to be involved. So the secretary of the development centre of the village was given the responsibility to co-ordinate the library services as required by the village for its development.[20,21]

Services of Chalantika Library included providing books in different local languages to different villages by library workers. They used a variety of modes of transport depending on the distance and accessibility of the different villages. They walked, used bicycles, and even carts drawn by bullocks. They also conducted programmes to improve rural life and make the villagers independent; and provided outreach services through 'lantern lectures' (a term coined to denote lectures held by the light of lanterns in villages without electricity) on topics such as small pox eradication, making co-operatives, etc. These topics indicate the focus given to the health and economic welfare of the villagers from diverse cultures to further the aim of inclusive development. [20,21]

They started with two branches of these moving libraries, with 450 books and over 700 book issues in 1925. Within five years it grew to 15 branches, over 1000 books and about 2500 book issues in 1930. [20]

Current Scenario

Since then the number of libraries providing such outreach services have grown with the help of the Government of West Bengal, Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF), Visva Bharati University and others, including Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).

The village libraries under Rural Extension Centre of Institute of Rural Reconstruction (Palli Sangathan Bibhaga) of Visva Bharati University are working as village community centres and supporting education of neo literates and helping in the development of socio cultural activities of these areas. Keeping in mind the aim of the rural reconstruction theme of Rabindranath Tagore, Visva Bharati University with the help of RRRLF is still providing Rural Library Services to the nearby villagers through the Rural Extension Centre (REC) as extended services for the development of the village people.[20,21]

West Bengal public library system has four tiers of libraries with the State Central Library at its apex. The next tier consists of Government and government sponsored District libraries. The Town/Subdivisional Libraries form the third tier and the Rural/ Primary Unit Libraries

are at the lowest level of the system. Besides these libraries there are Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLIC) formed with the objective to provide services to the gram panchayat areas where there is no government and government sponsored libraries. These centres remain open 3 hours a day and for 5 days in a week. In Birbhum we are having 1 District Library; 10 Town/ subdivisional libraries and 114 Primary Unit/Rural libraries. There are also 14 Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLIC) in Birbhum and 5 more are to be established. [24.25,26] All these libraries provide the basic services like reading room, lending services, Text Book and career guidance services, services to children, Newspaper/periodical services, reference/bibliographic services, etc. In addition to the lending and reading facilities these CLICs are rendering service to rural people related to their life and livelihood.

Besides these we have libraries run by Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and school and college libraries. Also there are mobile libraries which are run with the help of government and non-government organizations.

To summarize we see that the services are being provided by the following types of libraries

- Public Library System
 - Government libraries
 - Government sponsored and Government aided libraries all forming part of the public library system
 - Community Libraries cum Information Centres (CLIC)
- Private libraries including those run by NGOs (notable examples are Suchana and Surul Centre for Services in Rural Area).
- School and college libraries
- Mobile libraries run by some of the above

Now there are about 250 libraries (including all of the above types) with about 200 in the rural areas in Birbhum.

Current Services

With the help of all the above libraries in Birbhum it has been possible to extend the services to many more villages and enhance to cover a broad spectrum of services. Their major goals are:

- promoting harmony and integration amongst the multicultural units in society
- enabling the economic upliftment of all sections through education
- putting to use the wealth of their indigenous traditional knowledge

Many of the tribal children are the first generation going to schools. As a result they find it difficult to cope with the demands of the examination oriented educational system especially as they are unable to get any guidance from their parents and unable to afford extra tuition from professional teachers.

This was resulting in about two thirds of the tribal students dropping out before reaching Class 10. Identifying this critical need of young tribal students some libraries (especially the mobile libraries) have started supplementary classes and learning groups for children. They are providing these services in even remote villages at least once a week. Their objective is to improve basic literacy and numeracy; increase the relevance of education for marginalised children; provide a holistic learning environment including creative writing, art, drama,

sports, music; promote first language resources; and pay particular attention to children with learning difficulties of various kinds.

Taking all the different libraries and different goals and objectives, the entire range of current services offered by libraries in Birbhum includes

- Cultural programmes
 - drama in tribal languages like Santali, Kora besides Bengali
 - various folk dances
 - folk songs
 - gymnastics
 - magic shows
 - celebration of important days (like Independence day, birth anniversaries of eminent personalities, etc.) through lectures, discussions and cultural programmes
- Educational programmes to supplement children's training from schools
 - science demonstrations
 - first language (Santali, Kora, etc.) creative writing courses
 - providing space for remedial coaching for weak students
 - computer courses
 - career counseling and guidance
- Health related programmes
 - to increase awareness about hygiene
 - teaching use of latrines
 - helping children cut nails
 - making pregnant mothers aware of their diet and nutrition
- Indigenous knowledge management activities
 - documentation of folk culture and art including audio-visual recording
 - promoting transfer of traditional knowledge orally from Teacher to Disciple (locally known as Guru-Shishya practice). Experts in different fields of traditional knowledge in different villages are identified as teachers
 - dissemination of indigenous knowledge
 - organizing fairs, festivals, cultural programmes
 - collection development in tribal languages
 - translation
 - programmes on TV, radio
- Local history collection
- Craft activities to enable tribal people to earn their livelihood using their traditional craft and art
 - Bamboo basket making, pottery, puppet making, working with wool, glass painting, etc.
- Story telling
- Discussions with readers
- Organizing book fairs
- Meeting with village people
 - providing government forms/circulars about various government schemes (like Kanyasree Prakalpa, etc.) are distributed to the local people from the libraries
- Wall magazines
- Special sections like

- children's corners which provide books for children and organize programmes like story-telling, debates, quizzes, spelling and painting contests, etc. for the overall development of the children
- women's corners which provide awareness services like health and nutrition related information, woman- health related information
- old-age corners which provide information to them about health and hold discussions on topics relevant to their village
- Programmes and discussions on
 - agriculture
 - health
 - sanitation
 - women empowerment
 - children development
 - adult education, etc.

For some of these purposes librarians of mobile libraries take with them health workers, teachers and experts in the moving library at times as required.

Inclusive development for tribal people and other deprived sections of society

Although the Indian economy is growing rapidly its benefits are not reaching all sections of people. In order to remove the inequities in society so that all individuals may be included in the main stream the Prime Minister of India said " *The time has come to create a second wave of institution building, and of excellence in the fields of education, research and capacity building*" [18] and created the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) to address these issues. The National Knowledge Commission has expressed the following in one of its reports: " *Libraries have a recognized social function in making knowledge publicly available to all. They serve as local centres of information and learning, and are local gateways to national and global knowledge.*" [17] Again, "National Knowledge Commission has emphasised the importance of an inclusive society as the foundation for a knowledge society."(NKC Recommendations 2006). The National Knowledge Commission has envisaged a key role for Libraries to play in ushering in both the inclusive society and the knowledge society. For the inclusive society it is necessary to advocate good health. This means creating awareness about hygiene, nutrition, sanitation, diseases and their prevention etc. We have already mentioned a number of services provided by libraries in Birbhum for developing the community.

"National Digital Literacy Mission programme is a dynamic and integrated platform of digital literacy awareness, education and capacity programmes that will help rural communities to take lead in the global digital economy and help them in maintaining the competitiveness and also shape a technologically empowered society." [16] Computers and internet connections have already been introduced into many libraries in Birbhum who are offering services in imparting computer literacy skills. So Libraries are playing an important role in increasing the level of Information literacy and also removing the 'digital divide'.

With these objectives in mind, the libraries in Birbhum also have focused on empowering all members in their multi-cultural society to be able to participate in the benefits of the main stream economy. So their main objectives are to promote equality – social, economic and

gender as well as make each individual an informed citizen participating in a knowledge society without any digital divide.

In multicultural societies it is important for minority communities and tribes to preserve their indigenous cultures, knowledge and traditions and also at the same time not to be deprived of the economic benefits of modernization and globalization. These are apparently contradictory at the logical level but a balance can be struck at the human or individual level. To achieve this balance it is very important to encourage independent and rational thinking so that the individual is able to judge for himself the best balance between preserving tradition and adopting modern practices.

It is also important in multicultural societies to disseminate information on the indigenous knowledge and traditions of all groups to other groups to promote harmony in society. This role is being played by libraries by organizing fairs, festivals, cultural programmes etc. as already mentioned.

To help in this endeavour libraries are increasingly involved in preserving traditional knowledge and showing ways to use traditional knowledge for earning a livelihood. We have already mentioned these activities in the previous section – educational programmes, craft activities and creating awareness and conducting training in modern day skills (computers etc.). Many libraries are equipped with computers and internet connection. Gradually all libraries will have these facilities.

Benefits

The main purpose of increasing the awareness of library services and then availing of library services has been achieved successfully. For instance children of all ages from different tribes are getting benefits.

Sabita of the Kora tribe living in Ringdanga village (mother of 10 year old Dipali) tells us “*ami jani amar chhele boi nei. Er age jantaamna ei boi-er katha. Ekhon gari ase, anek chhele-meyera boi nei.*” (I know my child takes books. I did not know before this about books. Nowadays the mobile library comes and many children take books from there.)

Again Dipika of the Santal tribe in Bandholdanga village is a student of class IX. Dipika is also a member of mobile library. She also wants to take help of the coaching from Suchana. She said with a great smile “*amra apeksha kore thaki kabe boi-er gari asbe*” (We wait for the time when the book car will come.)

Sumi of the Santal tribe (mother of 6 year old Rakhi) also shrugged her shoulder and said with a smile that Rakhi also takes books from the “boi-gari” (book car) and “Somenath dada asen anek boi niye” (Somenath brother comes bringing many books.)

In Daspara village Rakhi (a 3+ year old from the Kora tribe), a pre school student of Suchana, was playing in the field and asked “boi esechhe?” (Have the books come?)

We march on

The effect of these programmes is overwhelming and results are encouraging. The growth of the literacy rate in Birbhum (increased to 70.68% in 2011 from 61.5% in 2001) is higher than

the state of West Bengal (increased to 76.26% in 2011 from 68.6% in 2001). [7,9,12] The work participation rate of Birbhum (37.4%) is higher than that of the state (36.8%).[7] These are also indicators of the effectiveness of the library programmes.

However, much more needs to be done to raise the standard of all the multi cultural sections of the population in Birbhum. Along with libraries, relevant government departments (of the state of West Bengal and India), and non-government organizations (NGOs) are all working with the objective of achieving inclusive growth with development for all sections of society. [6] Now much of the work is uncoordinated. However libraries are suited to perform the role of coordinators because they have an extensive physical network covering most of the villages and towns and have access to different levels. We, librarians, should now take up this lead role and provide synergy to the activities of all organizations in achieving inclusive development.

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