

“Public” Libraries in Southern India

A visit to southern India enabled me to look at a range of libraries of varying sizes and how they were used by members of diverse communities. Initially I had hoped to observe how people in various communities gained access to information, but by visiting public libraries I began to focus on what “public” meant in this context. My vision of public means “access to all,” which is an American viewpoint (Alice, 2007), but clearly in India the public libraries were only accessible to an elite few. “The public library system in India is condemned to remain peripheral to the actual information needs of the masses... [as it] serves as little more than a warehouse of recreational reading materials, a majority of which are in regional languages” (Ghosh, 2005).

At one end of the spectrum the country can boast of a highly specialized information retrieval system, but at the other end stands the common man who has no access even to basic reading material or advice because of the lack of a public library network spread throughout the length and breadth of this vast country. While there is an “information flood” in some places, there is an “information drought” in many others (Banarjee, 1996).

Thus, my research evolved into not only visiting libraries and questioning librarians, but also delving into such questions as who uses the library, membership requirements, collection decisions, staffing, computer access and cataloging, literacy rates, and served populations. Further, I questioned each of our ten local guides about education, literacy, and library usage in each of the seven states that we visited. What I learned is that the Indian government supports both access to education and provides local and regional libraries (Rao, 2001). However, widespread usage of the public libraries was lacking, due in part to restrictive membership requirements. In addition, production of literate library users is inhibited by a tiered education system that is complicated by the multifaceted social/caste system in India.

Further research needs to be conducted surrounding usage of government funds for libraries and schools; computer education and access; and library membership, usage, education, and access (Rao, 2001).

This paper focuses on the public libraries in southern India and the true meaning of the word “public” in this context. What is meant by the word “public?” In different cultures it means different things. In the United States the culture is stratified economically, in the former Soviet Union culture was stratified politically, and in India one sees a strong social stratification. Our concept of public libraries in the United States connotes “accessible to all people.” At another extreme, “public” in Russia meant some people had access to certain types of information. For minimal access to Russian libraries, one had to apply and wait six months for permission to do library research (Wixman, 2007). In India, only those with money (albeit minimal) and sponsorship have access to “public” libraries. In 1994 the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto defined a public library as:

“the local gateway to knowledge, [and] provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.” In this vision of public libraries, they are seen as people-oriented institutions which should service the widest population possible (Ghosh, 2005).

My goal was to observe public libraries at multiple levels: a small local library in Kerala, two district central libraries in Madurai and Thanjavur, a state central library in Goa, and national libraries in Chennai and Kolkata, to see how they are serving the public in southern India. My study sites included small coastal villages, large cities, and several libraries in between. I also questioned our local guides in each village or city that we visited, to determine local library use, as well as library membership requirements.

When considering India’s public library system, one must first take into account the population and social context. India’s population is over one billion (CIA World Factbook, 2007) and it is anticipated to become the most populated country in the world, overtaking China, by the year 2050 (BBC News, 2004). A multifaceted social and religious caste system creates a complex hierarchy within the society. India consists of over 4500 separate communities and four distinct racial groupings (Kim Saunders, 2007). Estimates range from hundreds to over 1500 different languages (Maps-india.com, 2007; Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2007), fourteen of them official dialects; and at least

seven important religions (Hindu 80.5%, Muslim 13.4%, Christian 2.3%, Sikhism 1.9%, Buddhism 0.7%+, Jainism 0.5%+, Zoroastrians and others 0.4%+, according to the 2001 census)(CIA World Factbook, 2007; Kim Saunders, 2007). Although modernization has reached India with the introduction of computer technology, producing a new economic resource through outsourcing, things have not changed for many in the population, particularly within a social context.

Technology is expanding in India. As outsourcing increases, it affects the Indian economy (Singh, 2005). How is this influx of technology changing information access? Apparently, this growth is increasing class divisions as wealthy individuals further educate themselves and obtain better jobs, which enable them to increase their wealth (Parvathamma, 2003). Meanwhile, is technology helping the lower classes obtain information, or is it out of their reach, further separating them from the more affluent?

Libraries Visited	Type of Library	State	Number of Districts	State Population	Literacy Rate (2001)
Kochi Library	Local District	Kerala	14	320 million	91%
Madurai Central Library	District Central	Tamil Nadu	30	62 million	73.47%
Thanjuvar Central Library	District Central	Tamil Nadu	30	62 million	73.47%
Goa Central Library	State Central	Goa	2	1.34 million	82.33%
Chennai Central Library	National Central	Tamil Nadu	30	62 million	73.47%
Kolkata Central Library	National Central	West Bengal	19	80+ million	69.22%

India is divided into 28 states and four territories; each one is divided into smaller districts. Although the literacy rate for each state is different, all of my guides were proud of the increased literacy rate in each state. We visited the states of Maharashtra (Mumbai), Goa, Karnataka (Mangalore), Kerala (Kochi/Cochin), Tamil Nadu (Chennai,

Thanjavur, Madurai), Andhra Pradesh (Visakhapatnam/Vizag), and West Bengal (Kolkata). The government has instituted various policies to educate all students in order to increase the literacy rate. But literacy statistics are highly variable. Southern India has some of the highest literacy rates in the country – 60-70% in Tamil Nadu, to almost 100% in Kerala, the lowest rate being Bihar, in northern India, at just over 40%. (The 2003 estimate shows an overall literacy in India of 59.5%; CIA World Factbook, 2007). “On average 18.2% of rural, and 36.9% of the urban population have completed at least ten years of schooling, are able to read and write English, and hence are capable of using information and communications technologies” (Parvathamma, 2003). Probing deeper, I found that my guides defined literacy as the ability to write one’s name (in any language). This is a shocking contrast to the definition in the 2007 CIA World Factbook: those aged 15 and over who can read and write. A literate person as partially defined by UNESCO is:

one who has acquired all the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and whose attaining in reading, writing and numeracy make it possible to use these skills towards his own and his community's development (Wikipedia, 2007).

In some areas “literacy” also includes the ability to do simple addition and subtraction. This devalues the term literacy. Other caveats for reporting literacy statistics are the rapidly expanding population, infrequent censusing, and vast numbers of homeless or transient who are often neither censused nor literate. For instance, 25% of the population live below the poverty line (2002 estimate, CIA Factbook, 2007), and 30% of urban populations live in shanty towns (Kim Saunders, 2007).

The government of India has taken great strides in the past few years to increase the literacy rate by introducing incentives such as offering free lunches for all students. In some states such as Goa, the literacy rate of females is significantly lower than males. To encourage girls to attend school the state offers girls bicycles upon their graduation from the 8th grade to encourage them to commute to school for higher education. Unfortunately, education is still subjugated by a strong cultural influence that girls need to learn how to cook and do domestic chores well, so that they are prepared to become

good wives. 95% of Indian marriages are still arranged by parents or families (Kim Saunders, 2007). Only 48.3% of females are literate, compared to 70.2% of the males (CIA World Factbook, 2007).

These figures prompted me to ask if libraries in India help promote education and access to information. Have libraries realized that information must to be accessible to all classes and castes? Is the government supporting this goal? (Rao, 2001). "...We the information professionals need to come forward and study the present system of operation and find a better solution to transform straightforward reading rooms into an information/knowledge centre where people, weighed down by illiteracy or limited education, find value" (Ghosh, 2005)

My research showed that each state appears to have three school divisions: 1) Small state-supported district schools for grades 1-4 that teach only in local dialects and are free; 2) Government-supported state schools that charge a minimal amount for books, uniforms, etc. (fees vary by state) and teach in both local and state dialects after grade 4; and 3) Private schools that charge tuition and include English in their curriculum. Computer training is provided in private schools as a separate class but computer learning is not generally offered in government schools.

I was interested to see how libraries supported the lower income communities, and if innovations such as computers and information kiosks were available. In the regions that I visited, schools and libraries utilize computers on a very limited basis. Computer classes are taught only in private schools. The largest national libraries use computers, but the public has extremely limited access to the computerized catalog, which is available only in the large national libraries.

Without direct access to computer resources, where are people getting information? When asked, my guides said that "everyone" had TVs in India and most people got their information (and recreation) from the television rather than reading books (2004 statistics show an 80% television penetration; Nikam et al, 2004). Smaller district libraries showed very little usage of their collections aside from the free Reading Rooms, where newspapers were popular (and, I observed, read only by men). The smallest "village" library that I visited, in a city with a population of 100,000 people, had about 150 visitors per day who came to the reading room to get the news, even though

there were only five or six newspapers sitting on several tables. Although the libraries can be commended for having free access to newspapers, a discouraging aspect of all Indian “public” libraries is a membership fee. One is not allowed to check out books, and in most cases the public can not access the stacks, without becoming a member. Although annual membership fees are minimal (30-200 rupees/0.70-4.50 US dollars), there is an added burden. To become a member one has to fill out forms and be “recommended” by another member or the state government. In addition, many libraries charge fees (deposits) in order to check out books, which can be as high as R100 (\$2.25), or in Kolkata, where the deposit is the value of the book!

Membership charges and “recommendation” requirements for membership led me to wonder how a “public” library can serve the public. All public libraries are supported by individual state governments (Banarjee, 1996), and although states are vested with the responsibility to set up libraries at different levels within each state, only eleven states have passed library legislation to provide public library systems (Ghosh, 2005). Where are public funds spent? New books are regularly acquired at only four “Central” libraries, (Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai). This is not due to a sagacious purchasing policy, instead, passage of the Delivery of Books and Newspapers (Public Libraries) Act in 1954 entitles each central library to receive one copy of all publications published in India (Banarjee, 1996). After the books arrive, they often sit in unshelved piles, and a great majority of those books on the shelves were outdated, worn out, and mildewed. Another surprise was the acquisition policy. In Chennai, the most utilized library that I visited, state government committees choose which books will go to which libraries. They purchase 1,000 copies of a particular book, and distribute it to a certain number of district libraries. The problem is that user needs are not considered in any detail, if at all.

Kolkata built a new library in 1989, and the entire collection was moved to the new building. When I visited in 2007, the library Public Relations director said that they were planning to turn the old library building into a “book museum.” Although lots of the books were used for reference, many were in poor condition and deteriorating. The new building was enormous, held 2,270,954 volumes (National Library of India, 2007), but less than 5,000 of the books were accessible to members. A great plus for this library

was air conditioning, which helps to preserve the collection. In order to use books from the stacks, members need to utilize the card catalogs or use one of two computers with electronic access to the collection, but these were only available on weekdays. Once you put in a request librarians will pull the reference(s) from the closed stacks. Library access in Kolkata was very uninviting, and thus quite unlike the popularly-used Chennai Central library, which I also visited on a Saturday afternoon. In Kolkata one had to sign in at the main gate (time of arrival, membership number, reason for visit, and signature), then find the main library with very little direction given (just a reference map), walk a quarter mile to an unlabeled new building, sign in again, finally gaining access to the library. Although this was a “new” central library, the facility was not well lit and access was to a single room, with rows and rows of card catalogs, the request desk, tables for using the books, and a small periodical area with comfortable chairs for waiting while books were be retrieved from the stacks.

The choosing of books for any library in India is particularly complicated by the number of dialects used throughout the country. There are fifteen major dialects used, which does not include English, nor any of the local tribal languages. The fifteen languages listed in the constitution include: Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Assamese, Sindi, Oriya, Sanskrit, and Kashmiri. All classes above the high school level are taught in English. Hindi was declared to be the official (national) Indian language by the Constitution of India, but English is the additional sanctioned language of India for official purposes. (Languages in India, 2007). None-the-less I spoke with several librarians with master’s degrees in Library and Information Sciences, who spoke very little English. Further, not every district library has a trained librarian. Even the Chennai Central State Library had no more than six librarians with master’s degrees.

Most of the public libraries are merely reading rooms without a large supply of books, adequate infrastructure, nor trained staff ...with a lack of sufficient sanctioned post forcing most services to be operated by voluntary non-professional staff, which damages information organization and services (Ghosh, 2005).

Conclusion

Where does this lead us in terms of the “public” and educating them to use computers with access for all? “As a consequence of making education a fundamental right, free, unhindered, easy access to books and libraries also becomes essential and should be ensured” (Ghosh, 2005). Clearly this is not a priority for the government of India, although a commendable base has been established with universal access to education (although not compulsory), strides towards increased literacy, and a system of regional and district libraries. Resources and trained library professionals were insufficient. Books do not get processed. Membership charges exclude potential users and do not generate significant income for individual libraries. Only the major state libraries have computerized catalogs. Only some of the largest repository libraries offer computer access to the internet (in Chennai, but not in Kolkata), and for a fee.

Where is the computer training to come from once a student steps out of school, if they get it at all? After visiting a variety of schools, it was clear the government does not support computer training in its schools; only private schools can afford this luxury. This creates a further divide as illiteracy exacerbates poverty (Nikam et al, 2004). Only people who can afford private education learn to use computers, and as computer usage becomes more prevalent worldwide, the poor become poorer and less informed, while the wealthier are trained and often leave their impoverished countries to find technology jobs in more affluent and technologically advanced countries (Parishwad, 2002).

We are fooled into believing that technology has penetrated into Indian society by the large access we have to outsourced information (Singh, 2005). Clearly the poor remain so, and the middle class is divided by lack of access to information. It is encouraging to note that the Indian government is supporting schooling and teaching children to learn to write their names (in hopes that they will eventually have access to libraries?), but the social stratification that is required by membership referrals discourages access to libraries, where information resources are abundant. Much progress can be seen in available resources for the academic and research communities, but progress needs to be made “from technology that supports the library staff to technology that empowers the library user” (Rao, 2001).

In a more equitable world, resources could be directed towards more uniform access to information by making libraries more inviting and accessible, and developing local content in a language that the poor can understand (Nikam et al, 2004). This ambition is inhibited by a firmly ingrained social class system, thus the government needs to lead the way by truly making the libraries accessible to all.

These goals could be achieved by changing the mindset at the policy-making level and focusing on education. In the twenty-first century, India should look upon education as a key infrastructure for economic development... What remains to be seen is how establishing these facilities will benefit and improve the socio-economic conditions of India's citizens, allowing the nation to emerge as an economic superpower in the next century (Rao, 2001).

The public library in India is considered to be a living force for education, culture, and information and seen as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women... The library movement in India is now eighty-five years old; yet in spite of that duration, except for ten states, library is not in operation to provide "free book service for all (Banarjee, 1996).

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