

LIBRARY, DEMOCRACY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA

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Abstract:Free and open libraries are vital to the success of democracy. Public libraries do play an important role in our society. Libraries collect organize, preserve and provide access to knowledge and information. The public library system is perhaps one institution that can be readily associated with the social function of providing a reservoir of the true reflection of the diversity of human knowledge. They preserve valuable record of culture that can be passed down to succeeding generations. They provide people with access to information they need to work, play, learn and govern. It is an essential part of sustainable development. Strategies for sustainable development must include the democratization process. They help to bring people into the democratic process and keep them informed as citizens about the actions of their representatives.

The democratic order is therefore tasked with the empowerment of individuals and communities in order to create a climate conducive to sustainable development. The public library system is envisaged as a sure means of achieving these noble objectives—the citizenry must be provided with a continuous access to information which will guide them through and where necessary to translate that information into action. This paper recognizes the central role played by the public library system in most democracies and advocated that the status of the public library system should be upgrading to a national agency. The plight of the public library system is that there are no clear and committed legislation on the part of the federal government in respect of its establishment and funding. It is this one singular predicament that has blighted the progress and contribution of the public library system to sustainable development. This paper looks at the role public libraries play in promoting democracy through providing free and open libraries, literacy and reading promotion, information and intellectual freedom.

Keyword:Democracy, Public Library, Freedom of Information, Right to Information, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION:

Democracy is a form of government, a way of life, a goal or ideal and a political philosophy. It comes from Greek words *demos* meaning people and *Kratos* meaning power. Abraham Lincoln United States President described such self-government as “government of the people, by the people, for the people”

The citizens of a democracy take part in government either directly or indirectly. In direct democracy also called pure democracy, the people meet in one place to make laws for their community. Such democracy was practiced in the ancient Greek city state of Athens, and exists today in the New England town meeting. Most modern democracy is representative democracy. It is impossible to have people meet as a group in one place in large cities, states, provinces or countries. Instead, they elect a certain member of their fellow citizens to represent them in making decisions about laws and other matters. An assembly of representatives may be called a council, a legislature, a parliament, or a congress.

Government by the people through their freely elected representative is sometimes called a republican government or a democratic republic. Most voting decisions

in democracies are based on majority rule. Most important aspects of the democratic way of life have been the principles of individual equality and freedom. Citizens in a democracy should be entitled to equal protection of their persons, possessions and rights; have equal opportunity to pursue their lives and careers; and have equal rights of political participation, freedom from undue interference and domination by government. They should be free within the framework of the law to believe, behave and express themselves as they wish. In addition democratic societies seek to guarantee their citizens certain freedoms, including freedom of expression, articulation of views, freedom to conceive ideas, freedom of association, freedom to think, freedom to work and live where they choose, freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. In a nation where people cannot express an opinion for or against a government or dogma or select a government of their choice ceases to be a democracy.

The library is a social institution because one of its fundamental roles is to preserve information and knowledge for the succeeding generation of users. Thus libraries reflect and shape the society. They are easily accessible at their physical location. Libraries do therefore provide the strong

social support required for developing democracies and freedom of access to knowledge. The public library system is perhaps one institution that can be readily associated with the social function of providing a reservoir of the true reflection of the diversity of human knowledge.

The democratic order is an essential part of sustainable development because it facilitates the protection of human rights, informed participation, and public sector accountability. As prescribed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), strategies for sustainable development must include the democratization process. Activities in all core areas of sustainable development are inextricably related to democratization and good governance. The democratic order is therefore tasked with the empowerment of individuals and communities in order to create a climate conducive to sustainable development.

According to Davis (2007) democratization process among others will include (i) free movement of information flow; (ii) quick and easy access to information; and (iii) wide use of updated information for the needs of education, science, culture and economics. To achieve the objectives of a democratic order, Uhegbu (2001) have argued that people will have to be provided with a continuous access to information which will guide them through and where necessary to translate that information into action.

The public library system is essentially democratic because its central goal is the improvement of society by helping the individual to understand his person and the environment surrounding him i.e. the world of which he or she is a part of. Thus the public library system could be seen as the machinery for the sustainability of the democratic order.

Libraries have an important role in ensuring that all sections of society are brought into the democratic process. Indeed, in 1990, the American Library Association adopted a policy entitled 'Library Services for the Poor' which stated: ...it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies.

Former US President, Franklin D Roosevelt, also underlined the importance of public libraries in a democratic society, describing them as the great symbols of the freedom of the mind....essential to the functioning of a democratic society.

Democracy in India

India is the seventh largest (by area) and the second most populous country in the world, with roughly one-sixth of its population, of about a billion and a quarter. It is the world's largest democracy. It is one of the world's oldest civilizations yet, a very young nation. Elections to its Parliament are held once every 5 years. Currently, Prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh is the head of the government, enjoying a majority in the Parliament, while President Pranab Mukherjee, is the head of state. India is a constitutional republic governed under the world's longest written constitution, federally consisting of 28 states and seven centrally administered union territories, with New Delhi as the nation's capital. The country has four main

national parties: the Indian National Congress (INC), Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). The Indian National Congress has governed the country for 3/4th's of the time since independence from Britain in 1947, under the de facto one party system and now, under the Dominant-party system. At the level of its states, many regional parties stand for elections to state legislatures, every five years.

The Concept of Freedom of Information

The concept of 'freedom of information' was attributed to the declaration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was convinced with the idea that the only path to a lasting peace in the world order was through "enlightenment and knowledge" of a people. Freedom of information then connotes "the freedom to give and supply information; and the right to be informed and to find out how matters stand." This amounts to getting reliable and objective knowledge about other people. In effect, understanding other people's cultures and lifestyle should promote a lasting peace in a global democratic order.

The Government of India resolved that in order to ensure greater and more effective access to information, it is required that the Freedom of Information Act, 2002 must be made more progressive, participatory and meaningful. On this issue National Advisory Council suggested certain important changes to be incorporated in the said Act to ensure smoother and greater access to information. After examining the suggestions of the National Advisory Council and others the Government decided to make number of changes in the law. In view of the significant changes proposed by the National Advisory Council and others, it was decided to repeal the Freedom of Information Act, 2002 and enact another law for providing an effective framework for effectuating the right of information recognized under Article 19 of the Constitution of India. To achieve this object, the Right to Information Bill was introduced in the Parliament.

The Right to Information Bill, 2005 was passed by the Lok Sabha on 11th May, 2005 and by the Rajya Sabha on 12th May, 2005 and it received the assent on 15th June, 2005. It came on the Statute Book as THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT, 2005.

Karen posits that libraries are of primary importance as social institutions that safeguard the freedom of information, they are invariably involved with providing services to private individuals who seek information. This is a view point that is acceptable to the majority of democracies in the world. The main task of libraries in a democratic order today is to endorse and support the democratic and social structure of the society. Anyone irrespective of financial circumstances and geographical location shall have right to access information.

Sustainability, Democracy and Role of Public Libraries

Sustainable development is the incorporation of economic, social and political development in a society. It revolves around these three points of view—economic, social and political development. The public library as the

local centre of information has a fundamental role to play in promoting sustainable development in the society. According to Wikipedia (2007) public libraries exist in most nations of the world and are often considered as essential part of promoting an educated and literate population.

In promoting informal education, public libraries serve as lending libraries allowing users to take books and other information materials off the premises; they also provide sitting arrangement for the purpose of accommodating readership. Popular materials such as newspapers, fiction, as well as educational nonfiction materials of interest to the general public are invariably acquired and preserved. The public library philosophy has been built upon the age-old axiomatic believe of “free access.”

The promotion of the concept of democracy in the society remains as one of the focal point of the public library system. The 1990s have seen a major institutional revolution taking place in many parts of the developing world. It is concerned with the ideals of democratic decentralization—social cohesion, economic empowerment, gender equality, universal primary education, rural telephony, etc.

The objective of democratic decentralization is to institute legitimacy, transparency, and accountability within the political systems. Decentralization can be used to induce higher levels of democratic behavior. It therefore follows that democratic decentralization can promote reciprocal relationships between central and local governments and between local governments and citizens. It also addresses the devolution of powers to develop and implement policy, the extension of democratic processes to lower levels of government, and measures to ensure that democracy is sustainable. Barnett et al. (1997)

In this new situation of decentralization, information sources cannot remain centralized. The underlying implication is that ordinary people or the public must have access to the information on which to base their decisions and with which to support their development activities. Correa, et al (1994).

An open democratic decentralization of government will only work if it is accompanied by a high-quality public information support system. Sustainability of the democratic order through information services provided by the public library system can be clearly appreciated by briefly discussing the following concepts.

Civic Responsibilities of the citizen

To boost the level of civic responsibility in the society, the public library is identified with the following fundamental roles.

(a) The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access to all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. A good public library system should provide specific services to the handicapped that cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials. Parts of those seen as handicapped in the society are minority groups, people with linguistic barriers, and people with disabilities, prisoners and patients in the hospitals. The ideology behind public library services should be democratic enough to provide a wide umbrella for

accommodating all and sundry. Collection and services should not be subjected to any form of ideological, political, religious, and commercial or any other kind of censorship.

(b) In addition to printed books and periodicals, most public libraries today should have a wide array of other media resources including music CDs, computer software's, movies on video tapes, and DVDs, as well as facilities to access the Internet. Digital books are becoming very available today but only through the electronic system.

(c) Public libraries ideally should provide other services such as community meeting rooms, programmes for children, families and toddlers. They should also promote after-school programmes to improve literacy among the population.

(d) Education has been defined as a complex of social processes for acquiring knowledge and experience, formally or otherwise. Adult education is the informal opportunities extended to school drop outs to improve on their education. Ogunshye (1981) stated that the purpose of adult education is to continue the education of the adult so that: (i) a state of literacy may be attained and maintained; (ii) the adult may continuously improve his knowledge and skills; (iii) the individual is enabled to adjust to existing social, political and economic systems; (iv) the adult may be made aware of the common citizenship, cultural heritage and social values, and thus adapt to changing roles in the adult life; and (v) the individual may develop his personality and full potential, widening the range of his perception, interest and skills.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Public libraries contribute to local economic development. In this era of economic transformation, the business of public libraries is being restructured; and public libraries today are addressing urban and rural issues on literacy, workforce training, small-business vitality and quality of community life. In some parts of the world business corners are set up as reference desks for aspiring entrepreneurs to source information about local and international businesses. Therefore public libraries are expanding beyond their traditional services and engaging in high-impact strategies with community partners. Such services are a sure step in guaranteeing an enduring democratic order in the society through sustainable development.

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Public libraries in the ideal situation are frequented by the literate users. However, the non-literate users should be encouraged to visit the library for its oral tradition of transmitting knowledge. According to Omojuwa (1993) the public library enables the individual to obtain spiritual, inspirational, and recreational activity through reading, and also the opportunity of interacting with the society's wealth of accumulated knowledge.

According to UNESCO Public Library Manifesto it is of importance that the following key missions which relate to information, literacy, education and culture should be at the core of every public library services.

(a) Creating and strengthening reading habits in children at an early age;

- (b) Supporting both individual and self conducted education as well as formal education at all levels;
- (c) Providing opportunities for personal creative development;
- (d) Stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and the young people;
- (e) Providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts;
- (f) Fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favouring cultural diversity;
- (g) Supporting the oral tradition;
- (h) Ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information;
- (i) Providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups;
- (j) Facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills;
- (k) Supporting and participating in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary.

Grassroots Democratic Engagement and Public libraries in India

In countries such as India, we can also think of a lack of social capital at the level of governance. Particularly, corruption remains pervasive at various levels of government. The lack of trust between large segments of Indian society and the state weakens the effectiveness of public programs and initiatives (Warschauer, 2003). The poor record that the Indian government has in meeting basic social development needs often leads to a general lack of faith and trust in government services. Great challenges exist in Indian democracy, with disillusionment among the marginalized segments of society in the effectiveness of top-down models of governance (Kothari, 2005). In response, a range of new social movements with regard to the deprived and disenfranchised classes have taken hold (Kothari, 2005; Shiva, 2005). These social movements are often mediated by NGOs, which can advocate for the needs of citizens to have a larger voice in democratic governance (Madon and Sahay, 2002; Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, n.d.). These NGOs can serve in information delivery capacities to marginalized citizens, partnering with government organizations to effectively advocate for the needs of urban poor communities and slum dwellers (Madon and Sahay, 2002).

The NGO sector, while not without its own problems of governance and accountability, can often serve as an effective intermediary between the state and citizens in the delivery of services. The encouragement of “public-private partnerships in development of library and information services” is also one of the recommendations of the NKC library working group. These types of partnerships can include working with community information and technology NGOs, NGOs concerned with grassroots democracy and citizen activism issues, as well as library-focused NGOs. For instance, Rural Education and Development (READ) Global (<http://www.readglobal.org/>), an NGO which originally started in Nepal but is now becoming established in India, could be a model for partnerships with local groups and governments. In this form

of development assistance, a library community centre is developed to serve as a model project, after which further expansion occurs based on this model. In addition, numerous other domestic and international NGOs exist which are concerned with public library development. These examples highlight the various potential opportunities that could exist for partnership between state-funded public libraries and NGO-supported libraries and information centres.

On a related note, the role of the public library in citizen activism and democratic engagement is yet to be defined in the Indian context. Public libraries are largely part of the state apparatus in India and this might affect their perception of effectiveness for the general public. Middle class and upper middle class Indians often are not sensitive to the needs of the lower socio-economic strata of Indian society (Varma, 2007) and this indifference can manifest itself in a lack of concern for services such as public libraries. In this scenario, those with money and resources are often able to provide their own private libraries and information centres. In other words, a broader concept of the public good (of which public libraries are a part) still needs to be more firmly established in the Indian political psyche. In the case of public libraries, one can argue that those without means to have their own private libraries are at the mercy of an often inefficient and unresponsive state to meet their information needs. One way to move beyond this model is to envision the public library as an institution with deep roots in local community and grassroots ownership and accountability. The movement towards greater local control and accountability is beginning to take shape in more decentralized models of governance. The CIC model thus has the potential to enhance social capital, provide valuable survival information, increase community input, and further participatory democracy.

Along with partnerships with NGOs and community-based advocacy, recent decentralization efforts in rural governance might hold potential for enhanced development of public libraries. Local self-government at the village level, also known as panchayati raj, has had mixed levels of success but in certain respects has emancipated Indian villages politically (Das, 2002). The immense bureaucracy of the Indian state can be stifling and efforts towards decentralization such as panchayati raj have allowed more decision-making at the local level. Village assemblies elect representatives to serve on the village panchayat for five-year terms. In terms of local self-government and accountability, panchayats have begun to decide, for example, whether to build water tanks, schoolhouses, and village roads. These were decisions that the state bureaucracy previously would make with little knowledge about what actually was needed and required by these village communities (Das, 2002). Panchayati raj has also allowed for greater representation of traditionally marginalized groups (such as women and low caste populations) in the governance structures of villages. While not a governance system that is without problems and power inequities, panchayati raj holds hope for a more effective decentralized form of governance. Community and public libraries are related to this phenomenon of panchayati raj, since these local village councils could have the power to fund and

maintain these types of institutions. Potential exists to create community-based libraries that are responsive to the needs of local populations, free from the top-down control of state authorities and with more power to make local purchasing and management decisions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

“The key element in a democracy is an informed citizenry; and that is the task of libraries” said Robert Cronenberger. The role of public libraries in any society is fundamental to its sustainability of development and the upholding of the democratic order. Public library services have sufficiently been highlighted to provide enough reasons why they will continue to be a very necessary catalyst to development in the society. However, this noble role which ought to be supported by the presence of a strong and functional public library system is completely neglected by the public sectors.

A coordinated and consistent approach is needed to improve upon the existing public library system in the country. In order to reach the goal of creating a knowledge society, the majority of the people of India must be helped to overcome 'information poverty.' The knowledge deprived have to be given access to relevant and timely information and knowledge to address the roles they should play in the developmental process. It is critical that the Library and Information Services sector is given the necessary fillip to ensure that people from all walks of life and all parts of India have easy access to knowledge relevant to their needs and aspirations.

In this new situation, libraries in India need to make a paradigm shift from their present strategy of collection or acquisition of knowledge to a strategy of knowledge access. Libraries and librarians have to recognize their social functions and their critical role in creating a knowledge society. The library and information sector is committed to support the creation of a knowledge society by providing equitable, high quality, cost-effective access to information and knowledge resources and services to meet the informational, educational, recreational and cultural needs of the community through a range of national, institutional and public libraries.

Keeping in mind the fact that the stakeholders of all the focus areas of the NKC mandate will need well-organized and systematic library and information services to support all their activities, it was felt that the existing institutions and services are ready for significant change. The Commission has therefore made the following recommendations to ensure sustained attention to development of libraries:

- Set up a National Mission on Libraries
- Prepare a National Census of all Libraries
- Revamp Library and Information Science education, training and research facilities:
- Re-assess staffing of libraries
- Set up a Central Library Fund
- Modernize library management
- Encourage greater community participation in library management

Promote Information Communication Technology (ICT) applications in all libraries
Facilitate donation and maintenance of private collections
Encourage public- private partnerships in development of library and information services:

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